

The Real Reason We Call It Chicken Booyah in Wisconsin

October 17, 2013 By Ashley Steinbrinck



Chicken Booyah – that hearty concoction of scrumptious broth, tender veggies and shredded chicken has been a Wisconsin favorite for more than a century.

But have you ever wondered how booyah got its name? Where the recipe came from? Or why it's such a popular dish, especially in Northeast Wisconsin?

I started looking into it, and discovered an interesting story about how a simple mistake played a big part in this tasty tradition.

I soon learned that I'm definitely not the only person to ever try and uncover the story of how booyah came to be! A librarian in the genealogy department at the Brown County Library got a little annoyed when I told her I was on a mission to find the origin of Chicken booyah.

She snappily said, "Do you know how many people a month call to tell me their relatives are the ones who created the original booyah recipe?"

Knowing that it's such a big deal to so many people only got me more excited to solve this mystery! The truth is – it really would be impossible to find the first booyah recipe. That would be like finding the original pot of chili. It seems there are as many "original" booyah recipes on the web as there are people claiming their family invented it.

I learned that people have been trying to figure out where this soup came from for years!

But there is one story that sticks out, and it has a direct connection to Green Bay and the longstanding tradition of serving booyah at big events like fundraisers and church picnics...

Booyah & the Finger Road School Teacher

My initial research started where it does for a lot of people – Wikipedia. The entry on booyah mentioned a Press Gazette article that may explain why we’ve been calling it booyah for all these years.

The story goes like this...

In 1906, a man named Andrew Rentmeester took over as the teacher at the Finger Road School in Green Bay. When he got to the school, there were no books for the kids – so he decided to organize a fundraiser to raise some money for much needed school supplies.

He went around town collecting chickens from the school children’s families. Then he went to the Green Bay Gazette to put an ad in the paper in hopes of raising some publicity for the fundraiser. When the reporter asked him what they’d be serving at the event, Andrew told him “bouillon,” which is the french word meaning “to boil” or “soup”.



Lester’s cast iron booyah kettle

When the reporter asked him how to spell it, Andrew said “B-O-O-Y-A-H.” It probably seems a little strange that a teacher wouldn’t know how to spell bouillon correctly. He had a valid reason though – as I found out later.

But, it was printed that way in the paper and the soup was called “booyah” at every fundraiser after that, including the annual fundraiser Andrew started at Holy Martyrs of Gorcum church the following year.

How I Met Lester Rentmeester



As my search for the source of booyah continued, I came across an article on the blog, [Mona Faye's Kitchen](#), which claimed that "Great Gramma Meyers' version is the authentic Booyah."

In the comments section, a man named Dan Rentmeester mentioned his grandfather, Andrew Rentmeester's booyah recipe. He called himself "the grandson of the Father of Booyah." This piqued my interest!

I was able to find Dan Rentmeester in the White Pages (after calling the wrong Dan Rentmeester first). He told me that the person I really needed to talk to was his 94 year-old uncle, Lester – who is the son of the schoolteacher Andrew Rentmeester.

In fact, Dan said he was just over at ol' Uncle Lester's house for Chicken Booyah a few days before I called!

Lester Rentmeester is well-known among local history buffs. He and his wife Jeanne wrote a book called *The Flemish in Wisconsin*.

In most of the articles I've read, Booyah has a Belgian background. Supposedly the Flemish or Walloon immigrants (both from different parts of Belgium) brought this style of stew-like soup to us when they settled in America.

Dan gave me Lester's phone number, and I called to ask if I could stop over for a visit. Lester told me his home is the second oldest house in the state of Wisconsin, and it also contains a small museum full of photos and artifacts with a local connection.



Angeline Champeau Rioux House of 1826 – 2nd oldest House in Wisconsin

Lester's home was built in 1826 by his wife's great grandfather and fur-trader, Joseph Roy, the same man who built the oldest house, Tank Cottage that now sits at Heritage Hill. Lester's famous Wisconsin home is known as the Angeline Champeau Rioux House and is listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

I got to Lester's house hoping to get the full history of Chicken Booyah. But he was all set to give me a tour of his historic home and the Angeline Champeau Rioux House Museum. I got to hear stories of everything from the history of Duck Creek, to the rock quarries and the Menominee Indians who once inhabited the area.

Les joked that he was giving me the \$2 tour, but I hope he wasn't serious – I did see a little jar for donations inside the museum! Oops. I do know the Belgians are supposed to be pretty frugal!

Lester is such a sweet man. He didn't sit down once the entire hour I was there – even when I did! He kept telling me how he loved the name Ashley. That it reminded him of *Gone with the Wind*.



Lester Rentmeester – B-17 pilot over Europe in World War II

I found out Lester had earned his B.S., M.B.A., M.P.A, and D.P.A. degrees. He's had a 31-year Air Force career, including 30 combat missions as a B-17 pilot over Europe in World War II, and was chiefly involved in research and development programs.

Lester taught graduate courses after he got out of the military, he has written eight books (7 with his wife, Jeanne) and dozens of articles in journals like American Heritage. He was even a painter when he lived in Germany.

This man has credentials! He's big into local history and very proud of his Flemish heritage. He told me, "I'm Royal Flemish and you don't see that much anymore."

As far as booyah goes, he confirmed the whole story about his father, Andrew, the schoolteacher. I asked Lester why he thought his dad wouldn't know how to spell bullion correctly. He told me his dad was a lumberjack before he became a teacher at age 21. He also didn't speak or read French. He was a very smart man though. He taught all nine of his own kids – including Lester.

Andrew's mother, Mary (Watermolen) Rentmeester, actually came from Belgium and she spoke French. It was also his mother's soup recipe that was used for the Finger Road school fundraiser.

I even got to see Lester's cast iron kettle he had in his backyard! (Pictured Above)

And – can you guess what he was having for dinner that afternoon?

Yep – leftover Chicken Booyah from the weekend before. I should of asked him for a taste! Ha.



The Chicken Booyah Recipe

From what I read about Belgian soup, it was more of a clear broth with celery, onion, salt and pepper.

The Belgians were very frugal and this soup was a great way to feed their large families for a small cost.

According to Lester, Mary Ann Defnet is the leading genealogist in Green Bay who is respected for her research on the Belgian-Walloon culture. In a letter to a professor at UWGB on the topic of Chicken Booyah she wrote –

“From the Walloon point of view, the original “Booyah” was bouillon– a broth made from boiling a chicken with onion and celery, salt and pepper. The chicken was taken from the pot when sufficiently cooked and used as the main course of the meal, and the broth served in individual bowls.

An additional bowl of rice was put on the table with each person adding what he wanted, if any, to the broth. This was related to me by a woman of Belgian descent, born in Kewaunee County in 1895, who lived to be 95 years old. As a young person, she had never seen the style of “booyah” as we know it today. With the Belgians’ penchant for frugality, nothing was wasted.

Bits of leftover vegetables gradually were added to the chicken broth– and later, the chicken, too – to make a more flavorful soup, almost a one-dish meal.

Yes, there are as many booyah recipes as there are cooks. Some even add canned pork and beans, canned tomatoes, and canned tomato juice, in the hopes of improving the flavor. Those things certainly wouldn’t have been available to the “old” Belgian settlers.”

So – when it comes to the recipe, I’m not sure we’ll ever find the one that started it all.



But as for the name “booyah”, I do think a simple misspelled word is what helped it turn into a cultural phenomenon! I believe in the Finger Road Schoolteacher story. I think it makes a lot of sense for how it got its name and the reason it’s traditionally served at many fundraisers and church events.

Either way, let’s just be glad we’ve got super tasty soup to enjoy as well as a fun Wisconsin tradition... thanks to our great blend of family backgrounds and cultures!

If you’re interested in the recipes by the Rentmeesters, here they are!

Chicken Booyah Recipe from The Flemish in Wisconsin

Boil (covered) until tender four pounds of chicken and one cup of diced beef with salt.

Skim off the scum.

Add one half cup of pork and cook.

Dice one bunch of carrots, four stalks of celery, one-and-one half quarts of potatoes, one-half medium cabbage and three large onions.

Add two-thirds package of split peas and cook until tender.

Add one can of tomatoes, one can of pork and beans and one can of tomato juice.

Cook about one hour.

Add one-fourth pound of butter and the juice of one lemon.

Add Salt and pepper to taste.

Makes about 11 quarts.

Dan Rentmeester’s Recipe (Grandson of the ‘Father of Booyah’)

He even uses an ox tail to flavor the broth!

20 Gallon Booyah Recipe

Put 10 gallons of water into Booyah kettle

Start a fire until the water boils

Add 30 Lbs. chicken (5 or 6 stewing chickens)

Add 5 Lbs. beef cut up

Add ox tail or soup bone

Add 2 heads of cabbage cut up

Add 6 Lbs. yellow onions cut up

Add 1 small package of split peas

Add 2 – 16OZ cans northern beans

Add 1 large can of tomato juice

Boil and simmer for 2 hours until chicken is tender

Take chicken, bean, ox tail and soup bone out and de-bone chicken (take meat off of the soup bone)

Add 10 Lbs. carrots cut up

Add 6 bunches of celery cut up

Simmer 45 minutes until carrots are tender

Add 30-35 Lbs. potatoes cut up

Add de-boned chicken and beef back into the kettle

Simmer until potatoes are done

Add 4 – 16OZ cans of peas

Add 1 cups salt and 4 tablespoons pepper

Add lemon juice to taste

Do you have a good booyah recipe or an argument for why your family created the original? Let's hear it!

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