

Excerpt from Matriarch of the Mayflower: Mary Brewster  
by Kathryn Brewster Haueisen

Cooking improved immensely once we built homes and had fireplaces. The men easily keep me supplied with fowl, rabbits, squirrels, and occasionally a deer. The few supplies on the *Fortune* included an oven. It was a traditional small, portable clay oven like many others I once saw in England and Holland. Though, with the conveniences I once had at Scrooby Manor and even in Leyden, I had not used one before.

Our first few loaves went to the goats, and even they seemed to prefer kicking them about the field rather than eating them. We got much better with a little practice, for which everyone was grateful. The supplies aboard the *Fortune* were a colossal disappointment in many ways, but the ship did bring us a clay oven, a barrel of butter, a few chickens, and a couple of goats.

We placed the clay oven on top of large stones we set on a table in the corner of the pasture. This we did both to preserve our backs as we worked with it, and to discourage the goats. Baking bread soon became a social event for the women. It took all day to make the few loaves. Some of the men easily consumed a pound or more of bread every day.

First, we removed the detachable over door and set it aside. Then someone started a fire in it. We tasked one of the older children with adding kindling as needed to keep the fire going.

Meanwhile, someone else was grinding oats, rye, and corn into flour. They kept grinding while a couple of us took the flour, and added a few eggs and a little of the precious butter, and just a smidgeon of the yeast we brought with us. Eventually we could make more yeast, but that came later. If we had any milk that day, we mixed that in as well. Otherwise, we sent the children to the brook to bring back water to moisten the dough. Occasionally we mixed in rice, lentils, chestnuts and acorns, after they were ground into powder. We found this added a bit of flavor and increased how much bread we could make in a day.

Everyone not otherwise occupied, took a lump of dough and began working it, kneading, punching, pulling, and rolling it on top of a table covered with extra flour. In warm weather, we set the dough out on another table, covered with a towel, to rise in the sunshine. On less pleasant days we placed the table with the dough as close as possible to the fire inside someone's cottage. Either place, it fell to the children to keep animals away from the rising dough.

We then punched it down, kneaded it more, and this time let it rise under a damp towel. When it looked like it was as large as it would get, it was time to prepare the oven. This involved putting out the fire and, using a rag mop, cleaning out all the ashes. While someone was cleaning the oven, someone else scored the dough with a long knife in several places. That kept the bread from coming apart while baking. When the oven was clean, we slipped as many loaves as we could fit inside, using a long wooden paddle. We put the door back in place, and turned to other duties for about an hour.

With no church bells ringing every quarter hour, I learned to read the height of the sun in the sky to tell time. I actually got pretty good at gauging time that way. The bread generally took an hour to come out nicely browned, with a nice hard crust that sounded hollow when I tapped it with my finger nails. We placed the loaves in baskets and took them straight away to someone's cottage to cool. If we didn't do that, the goats had a grand time tearing all our hard work to bits in minutes.