



Richmond River Historical Society Inc.

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Rebecca Rishworth and Christmas

These days we go to the supermarket and buy a great many delicacies for Christmas, most of which are either given away to others, thrown out because they went stale before they could be consumed or were not as nice as they appeared, or they are eaten in great quantities which either increase our obesity or make us ill. Why does this happen?

Perhaps it has something to do with not having enough in past times, or having too bland a “feast” in previous celebrations. Many of us come from a background of scarcity, rationing, even perhaps starvation and neglect. Our forebears came from countries which were poor, where people were in need every day of their lives, perhaps where wars and tyrants played a large role.



Rebecca Rishworth in later years

Countries like Australia were seen as providing a fresh start where people could be healthy, where there was freedom and food could be grown in plenty. However, those who pushed out into the bush and took up selections found that much hard work was required before success was achieved, and food, though often plentiful, had little variety. Because of this people learnt to pull together, to exchange produce, to help each other. This built a sense of Australian Mateship as much as anything else in our history.

Francois and Rebecca Rishworth came to live at Wollongbar in 1873. Much of the routine of their daily life has been left to us in Rebecca’s diary. As well as raising a large family she tells us of their everyday activities, especially her own household chores. Like all good housewives she grew vegetables and kept poultry. She was particularly interested in her hens and kept a running tally of the number of eggs she collected each day.

Poultry were prized not only for their eggs and meat but also because they could be exchanged for other food items. They were usually allowed to run wild during the day but would be locked up at night. At Christmas-time they were a major part of the festivities. Corn and pumpkins were the other mainstays of diet. Potatoes were more difficult to cultivate. Sweet potatoes were more successful but vines were hard to find. If a potato was obtained the choice had to be made as to whether it would be cooked or set aside for planting!

Rebecca tells us that in 1875 they had a feast for Christmas. The dinner consisted of a fowl served with pumpkin, followed by a plum pudding. She does not tell us how she made the plum pudding but she seems to have had a gift for varying dishes to give variety. At other times she talks of pumpkin pie, both sweet and savoury, of corned meat pudding, sour milk cake, of rice pudding and stewed raspberries. Possibly wild raspberries were part of the “plum” pudding!

Apart from the occasional bartering all of the food eaten in the Rishworth home was raised, grown, or caught on the property. This must have given the family a huge sense of achievement, but it must sometimes have brought a desire for change, especially for some delicacy or luxury. This desire has no doubt been passed down the generations in many Australian families and today we pay for it!

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