

Chess Pie

Tale of a Tart

Steve Tomashefsky

I started collecting cookbooks to find out how my mother learned to cook. She always says she knew nothing about cooking when she married my father, yet by the time I was conscious of what was for dinner, she had developed a repertoire of wonderful dishes that I still love today. She bought the *Betty Crocker's Picture Cook Book* and the *Better Homes and Gardens Cook Book* and followed the recipes meticulously. At some point she acquired Mary Margaret McBride's *Harvest of American Cooking* and added to her repertoire. In the early 1960s she subscribed to the *Time-Life Foods of the World* series and learned several wonderful Italian specialties.

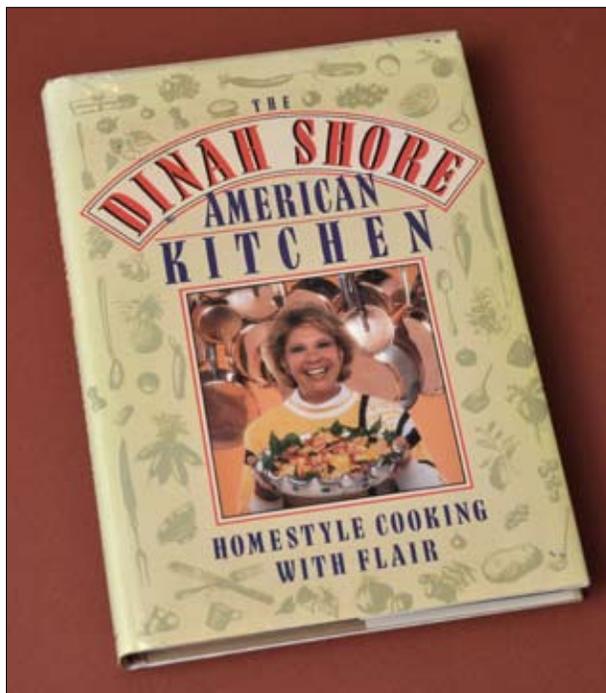
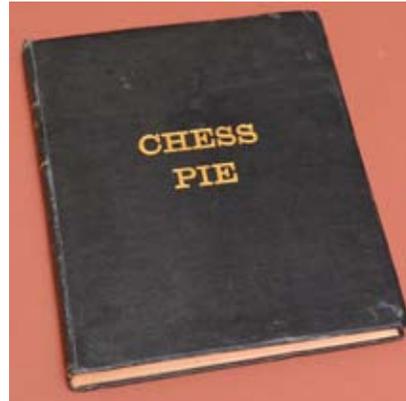
My mother was also an expert baker. Pies were her specialty. Her apple pies were encased in a perfect crust, with beautifully fluted edges, flaky and never tough. I've never been able to duplicate them. Her lemon meringue pies were topped with perfect peaks of whipped egg whites, just browned at their tips.

I love cooking, but I never follow recipes. For me, cookbooks capture moments in time, telling us what people were eating around the time of publication. But after my initial foray into the cookbooks my newly married mother might have used in 1948, I have more recently focused on a small corner of cookbook publishing in search of the answer to one of American cuisine's greatest mysteries: how did chess pie get its name?

If you grew up north of the Mason-Dixon Line, you probably don't know what chess pie is. When I first saw the name in a novel a few years ago, I assumed it must refer to a pie filled with alternate dark and light squares,

like a chess board. But my assumption was wildly wrong. A chess pie, in its most classic form, is filled with a mixture of butter, sugar, and eggs, in about equal proportions. It bakes up looking like a custard with a slightly papery top.

A 1922 British Chess Federation keepsake has nothing to do with chess pie.



Even Dinah has an explanation.

But it's not really like a custard, which would also contain a large portion of milk or cream. It's much denser and has no wiggle or spring. Some people describe it as a pecan pie without the pecans, but the filling lacks a pecan pie's glossy and gelatinous texture, which comes from the corn syrup or molasses used in place of sugar.

Chess pie is today considered a Southern specialty. From Tennessee to Texas (with the notable exception of New Orleans and its environs), it can be found on restaurant

menus, in private homes, and in regionally focused cookbooks. There are many variations. Some people consider a tablespoon of corn meal essential. Others add a small amount of milk or cream, but not enough to form a custard. The most common variation is lemon chess pie, with added lemon juice. Chocolate chess pie is not uncommon. I have even seen a recipe for Hawaiian chess pie with – of course – chunks of canned pineapple.

I ate my first piece of chess pie at the Crown Restaurant in Indianola, Mississippi, which is locally famous for its pastry. Theirs was the corn meal variation, served at room temperature, with a slightly cakey texture. Later I had chess pie at the Bon Ton Mini Mart in Henderson, Kentucky, a restaurant highly recommended by "Road Food" mavens Jane and Michael Stern. It was too bland for my taste.

Once I tried to make a chess pie myself, but the effort was doomed by my inability to form a decent crust.

I'll take a good mince pie any day. But chess pie still fascinates me for historical reasons. The name defies reliable etymological analysis.

If you are like me, your first attempt to solve the mystery would be to consult a dictionary. Perhaps you are fastidious enough to prefer *Webster's Second*. If so, you'd come a cropper. Chess pie is not mentioned there. *Webster's Third*, however, offers the following:

chess pie also chess cake . . . [prob. alter. of *cheese pie*, *cheese cake*]: a dessert consisting essentially of a filling made of eggs, butter, and sugar and baked in individual tart shells of rich pastry.

"Prob." disappoints. What authority supports it? Perhaps standard dictionaries are not the right place to look. Surely this is a job for the *Dictionary of American Regional English*. D.A.R.E. provides an entirely different answer, but with no greater certainty. Its entry for "chess pie" ("Also *chess-cake pie*, *chess tart*") See *CHESS PIE*, page 2



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CHESSE PIE, from page 1

says "Prob alter of *chest*," while offering no basis for the "Prob."

Since chess pie appears to be a Southern specialty, I next consulted John Egerton's usually reliable *Southern Food* (1987). Promisingly enough, the entry begins, "Here is a mystery. Where did this thoroughly Southern pie get its name?" But rather than answer his own question, Egerton (who was born in Kentucky and lives in Tennessee) simply floats several theories:

The British had a cheese pie that was somewhat similar, but not the same. Chess pie by that name does not show up in American cookbooks until the twentieth century, at least not with any regularity, not even in the South. There was transparent pie and jelly pie and Jefferson Davis pie, all of which seem to be variations of what we now call chess, but the modern version of chess pie is rarely found in old recipe books. . . . As for its name, there are two stories among the many that seem to ring true. The first has to do with an old piece of Southern furniture called a pie safe or pie chest. It's a cupboard with perforated tin panels, and its name is derived from the fact that pies and other confections were put there for storage and safekeeping. Chess pie may have been called a chest pie at first, meaning that it held up well in the pie chest. The other story is even simpler and more appealing. It is that a creative Southern housewife came up with this concoction and tried it out on her husband. He loved it. "What kind of pie is this?" he is said to have exclaimed. His wife shrugged and smiled. "I don't know," she said; it's ches' pie."

That is, "just" pie, in a Southern pronunciation.

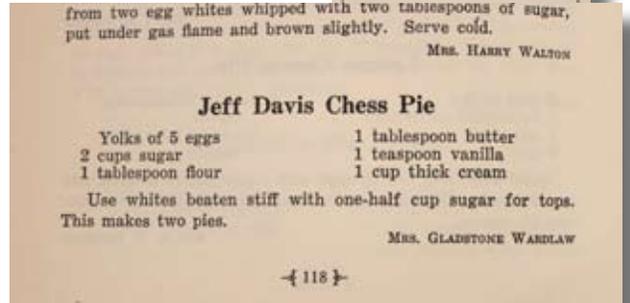
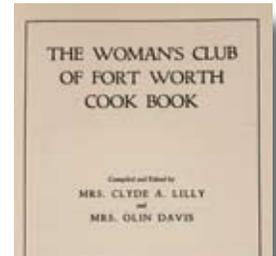
Call me a cynic, but Egerton's explanations don't "ring true" or even make much sense. Many types of pie were kept in pie safes or pie chests before the advent of refrigeration. Why was the chess pie singled out to be named after the piece of furniture? And why wasn't it called "safe pie"? To be sure, the "chest" theory explains the D.A.R.E.s "Prob," but it would be reasonable to ask whether there is a single cookbook on the planet containing a recipe for "chest pie." I have found none, and not for lack of trying.

As for the story of "ches" pie (or "jes" pie, as I've seen the story told in other books), it may be appealing, but why is chess pie "ches" pie and not, say, apple? And how did the fabulous Southern housewife's aw-shucks exclamation make the transition from her dinner table to kitchens and cookbooks across the South?

None of the reference works suggests that chess pie has any connection to the game of chess. But in 1922 the British Chess Federation published a keep-

sake book for an international tournament it hosted that year. The book's title? *Chess Pie*. Maddeningly, the book provides no explanation for its name. I rather think it safe to assume the title was a pun. Shakespeare (as Dr. Johnson noted) was quite fond of them. Why not the brainiacs of the British Chess Federation? But if it was a pun, what was the joke?

That takes us back to *Webster's Third* and the British pie theory Egerton quickly dismisses.

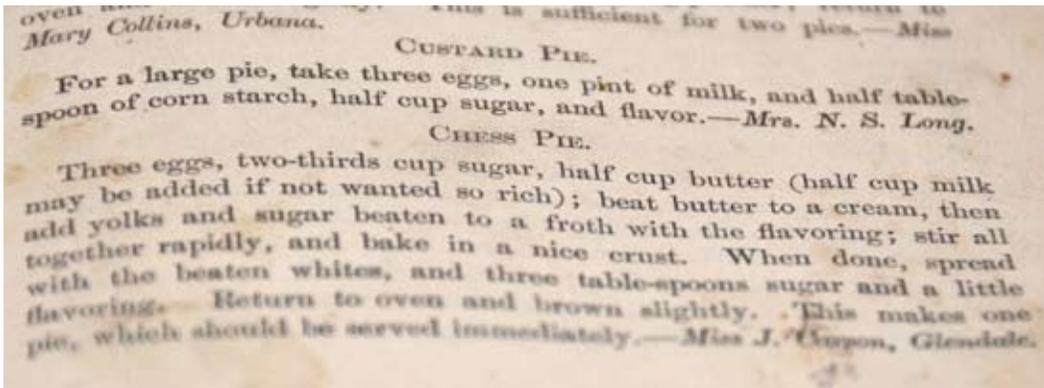


Earliest published recipe, from 1928? Not hardly.

Logically, *Chess Pie* is a pun on "cheese pie." Still, that leaves open several links in the chain leading to the American dessert.

To forge those links, we need to look at some old cook books. Egerton says the traditional British "cheese pie" was not the same as chess pie. It turns out he's not entirely correct. Old British and early American cook books contain many recipes for "cheese" pastries that contain no cheese and are mostly eggs, butter, and milk. Perhaps they escaped Egerton's attention because they were often called cheese "cakes," as *Webster's Third* notes. For example, Eliza Smith's *The Compleat Housewife: Or, Accomplish'd Gentlewoman's Companion* (London 1727) contains a recipe for "Lemon Cheesecakes," made from sugar, egg yolks, butter, and lemon juice baked in a pastry crust. Hannah Glasse's *The Art of Cookery Made Plain and Easy* (London 1747; Alexandria, Virginia 1805) contains virtually the same recipe under the same name and was an early favorite cookbook on this side of the Atlantic. A similar recipe for "lemon cheesecake" appears in *Mrs. Porter's New Southern Cookery Book, and Companion for Frugal and Economical Housekeepers* (Philadelphia 1871).

Egerton says the name "chess pie" did not appear in American cookbooks until the twentieth century, though he provides no examples. I don't know about you, but I find reference books without citations to be mighty annoying. On the other hand, *The Encyclopedia of American Food and Drink* (1999), by *Esquire* restaurant critic John Mariani, tells us that "[t]he earliest printed reference to the pie was



The recipe in a well-used copy of the 1877 Buckeye Cookery and Practical Housekeeping.

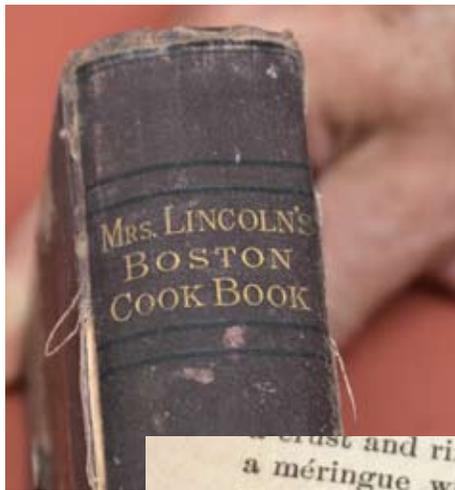
in a cookbook published by the Fort Worth Women's Club in 1928." True enough, *The Woman's Club of Fort Worth Cook Book* (Fort Worth 1928), by Mrs. Clyde A. Lilly and Mrs. Olin Davis, contains a recipe for "Jeff Davis Chess Pie," made from eggs, sugar, butter, a small amount of flour, vanilla, and one cup of cream. I'd call that closer to a custard pie. And as for the name, "Jeff Davis" refers of course to Jefferson Davis. But his name – also cited by Egerton – only adds a new layer of mystery. Sweet desserts and the rather dour Confederate leader would seem to have no obvious connection.

In any event, Mariani's reference is wrong. It now seems fairly well settled that the first appearance of "chess pie" by that name in a cookbook was in *Buckeye Cookery and Practical Housekeeping*, compiled by Estelle Woods Wilcox and published in 1877. The book's publishing history is a bit complex. In 1876, the women of the First Congregational Church, Marysville, Ohio published the *Centennial Buckeye Cook Book* as a fundraising vehicle to commemorate the nation's centennial. Wilcox, a Marysville native who had moved to Minneapolis in 1874, supervised the publication. It contains no recipe for either "chess" or "cheese" pie, cake, or tarts. The book quickly sold out, and Wilcox published a second edition (now called *Buckeye Cookery and Practical Housekeeping*) in 1877 through her own Buckeye Publishing Company, based in Minneapolis. The same year, she published a third edition,

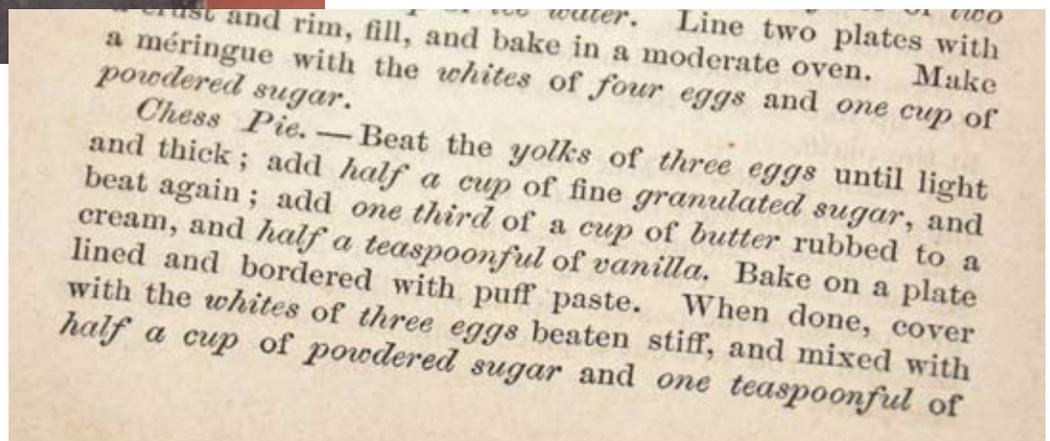
virtually identical to the second, in Marysville.

The second and third editions contain the first appearance of "chess pie," made of eggs, sugar, and butter, with the option to add milk "if not wanted so rich." Still, the 1877 debut of "chess pie" does not demonstrate that the name had become widely established by that time. Indeed, another cookbook published to commemorate the centennial, *The National Cookery Book*, by the Women's Centennial Committees of the International Exhibition (Philadelphia 1876) contains a recipe for "lemon cheese cake" made from eggs, sugar, butter, and lemon baked in a pastry shell.

The *Buckeye* recipe was contributed by Mrs. J. Carson of Glendale, Ohio, a suburb of Cincinnati. That's not far from the Kentucky line, and if you've been to southern Ohio you know it has a flavor of the South. Other evidence seems to show a northern Kentucky connection to the "chess"



Recipe in the 1884 Mrs. Lincoln's Boston Cook Book.



name. At the County Historical and Genealogical Society in Henderson, Kentucky (just across the Ohio River from Evansville, Indiana), there is a manuscript cookbook written by members of the Cheaney family on the blank pages of a Provost Marshal's record book kept in 1865 by their ancestor, Thomas Franklin Cheaney. The entries are, alas, undated. Among them, however, is a pie made of eggs, sugar, and butter that, in a clear and firm hand, is titled "chess cake."

The next published cookbook reference comes, however, from a far-flung source. In 1884, the Bostonian Mrs. D.A. Lincoln published *Mrs. Lincoln's Boston Cook Book*, which contained a recipe for "chess pie" made of eggs, sugar, and butter, though Lincoln topped it with a meringue. Lincoln was the first principal of the famed Boston Cooking School, so possibly the recipe was taught there. But when Lincoln's successor, Fannie Farmer, published her *Boston Cooking-School Cook Book* in 1896, she omitted the recipe by that or any other name.

I am persuaded that "chess" pie is "cheese" pie. The question still remains, however: how did "cheese" become "chess"? The Southern accent theory, as applied to "chest" and "just" pie, doesn't really work here. Though dropping a final "t" is common enough, I can think of no vowel shift prevalent in the South that would make a long "e" short. To be sure, we can't really be sure people spoke in 1877 the way they do now. But the vowel shift seems unlikely.

That appears to leave two theories. Was "chess" a pun on "cheese," as in the 1922 Chess Federation book? Or was "chess" a typo for "cheese" in Wilcox's 1877 book that was copied by Lincoln and others (cookbook authors
See CHESS PIE, page 8

Unused to books, unfit for trade

The sad outcome of a young man who fails with literature

Dan Crawford

Suppose violent death, dismemberment, and disfigurement have always been popular themes for children's books.

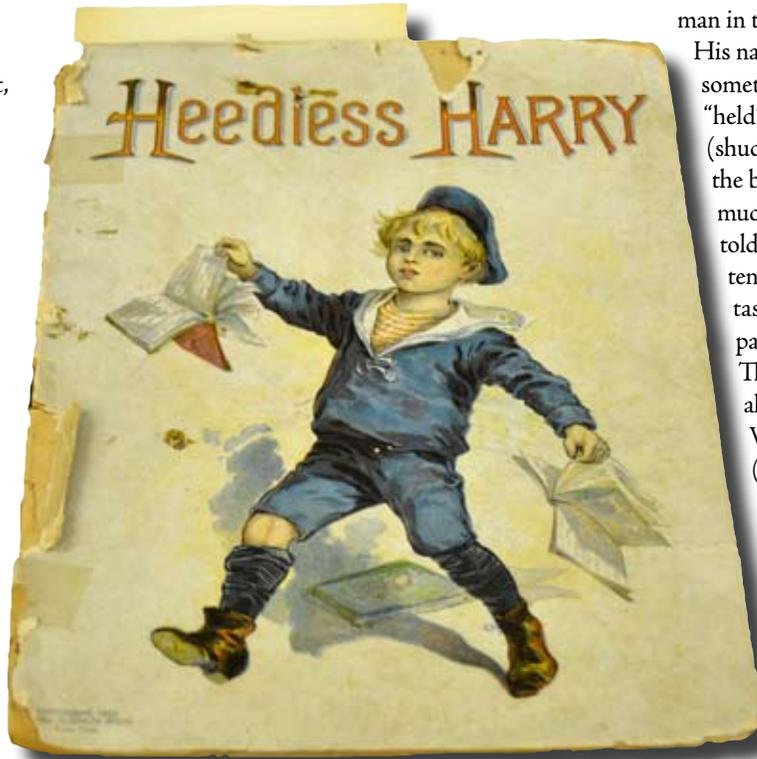
Last summer, my neighborhood was filled with posters for a children's musical called "Pinkalicious," the suspense-filled story of a girl who eats so many pink cupcakes, despite parental warnings, she turns pink. I recognize the plot. A little boy cries "Wolf!" too often and gets eaten by a wolf. A little girl doesn't wash her ears and radishes grow out of them. Some kid uses his thumb to push food on his fork and winds up with a vegetable garden on his thumb. Some child does something in spite of parental warning, and winds up deformed, dead, or at least disgusting.

I recognized some of the reviews I read, too. "What a horrible story! The brat gets away with it!" (As I understand it, she eats healthier foods and returns to normal. Those reviewers were actually disappointed that the little glutton didn't die.)

Ghastly admonitions have been a staple of children's literature. Was it funny from the first, or were these stories intended to be taken seriously? Maybe it depended on the reader. Heinrich Hoffman wrote the classic collection of violent cautionary tales, in the 1840s for his own son, and he seemed to have intended the tales to be funny. *Der Struwwelpeter*, in which a horde of naughty children wind up maimed or buried because of their individual bad habits, drew similar reviews. Some reviewers got it, but others complained that the brats who came to such well-deserved ends were made too interesting, and would teach children bad things.

A lot of readers, to judge by the popularity of *Struwwelpeter* and his followers through Wilhelm Busch and Edward Gorey, got the joke. Sure, some children had nightmares as well as a laugh, but as a species we seem to enjoy that. That's where the latest wave of zombie movies comes from.

Heedless Harry, the book which has brought me to consider these classics of children's lit, appeared in 1905. (This particular *Heedless Harry* is not to be confused with at least three other *Heedless Harrys* who starred in other books of useful admonitions to small



children.) The book, like many of the others, seems to be written on two levels: it can be read as a series of cautionary tales but you can also hear the poet whispering "You're not taking this seriously, are you?"

The story of Tommy Topps – a variation on the *Boy Who Cried Wolf* – tells of a little fibber who lies so often that when he falls in a well, nobody believes his cries for help. The well is not full enough to drown little Tommy, and he merely spends a cold, damp night sitting on a bucket at the bottom. Still, actions have consequences:

"They pulled him up at break of day
But, oh, that sad dilution
Settled upon his lungs, they say
And spoiled his constitution."

Can that be taken merely at face value? Perhaps I am overrating the sense of humor of a didactic Edwardian poet. Maybe these ARE serious warnings to children. Perhaps the children of 1905 trembled at the tale of the child who "cried upon all occasions" and was turned into a pump. What did they really think of the boy who played with fire and wound up "A pile of cinders, and his shoes/Alone were left to tell the

news"?

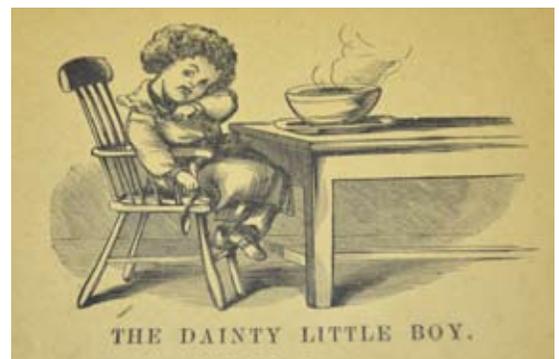
But you wanted to know about the picture on the cover, as any Caxtonian would. This illustrates not *Heedless Harry* but a young man in the middle of the book.

His name is Sam Weld (because something had to rhyme with "held") and he is a boy who (shudder) does not take care of the books his parents spend so much money on. Sam, we are told, has no interest in the contents of his books at all. "No taste he had for learning's page,/No love for books, – That boy: – /Wild mischief all his thoughts engage/What best he can destroy." (Punctuation original.)

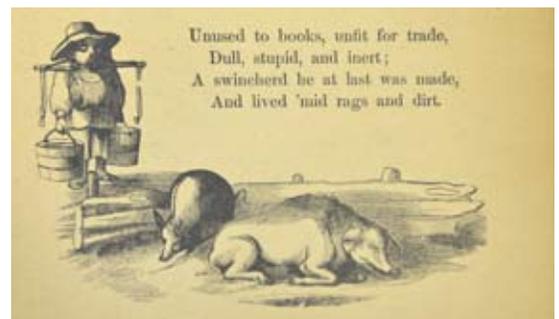
You will be happy to know that the anonymous author dealt severely with reckless Sam. He is faced at last with having to go out into the world and earn a living, and "Unused to books, unfit for trade/Dull, stupid, and inert;/A swineherd he

at last was made/And lived 'mid rags and dirt." Serves him right. The last page of my copy has been torn out, no doubt by Sam, so I will never know the whole story of the old man who goes around in the night pulling all the teeth of children who bite. Maybe someone will make it into a musical.

§§



THE DAINTY LITTLE BOY.



Unused to books, unfit for trade,
Dull, stupid, and inert;
A swineherd he at last was made,
And lived 'mid rags and dirt.

The Peter Pauper Press

Kay Michael Kramer reviews a new bibliography and history from the University of Tampa Press

THE PETER PAUPER PRESS of Peter and Edna Beilenson, 1928 - 1979: a bibliography and history by Sean Donnelly and J. B. Dobkin, with an essay by Richard Mathews. University of Tampa Press, 2013.

This thoughtful and well-developed trip down publishing's memory lane brings back scores of fond recollections as it moves gracefully through the growth and development of printing and publishing during the early and middle part of the twentieth century with all its niches, colorful characters, and camaraderie. While its primary focus is on Peter and Edna Beilenson it provides a nice overview of the change and growth of printing and publishing during the era.

“In the Beginning”

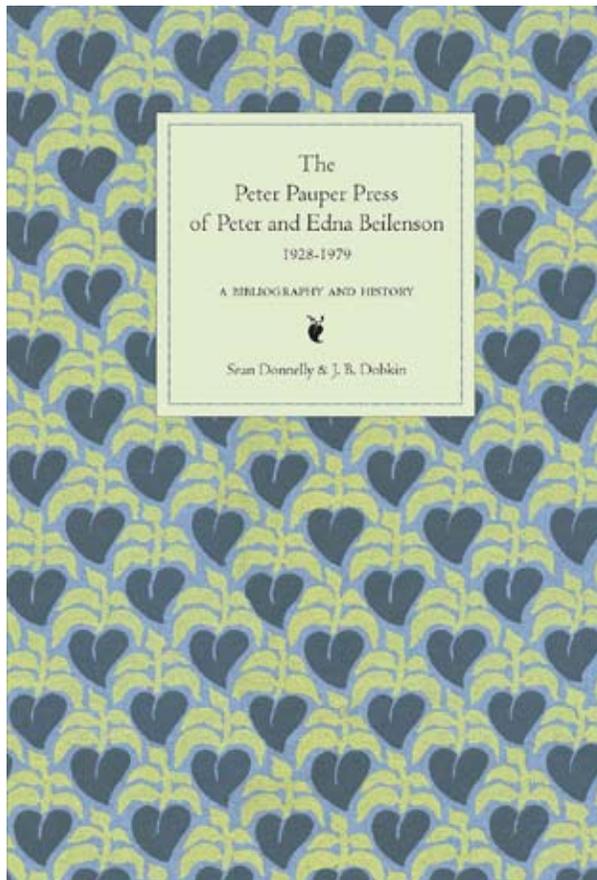
Peter and Edna Belison launched the Peter Pauper Press in 1928. Their soon-to-be-born publishing venture identified a previously untapped publishing market: “the gift book.” They were bright, energetic, well educated, and completely engrossed in their concept. Peter was twenty-three years old and a graduate of City College of New York. Edna grew up in New York, studied journalism at Hunter College, graduated with a B.A. at the age of 19 and taught school for two years at Gardener's Academy in Paris.

With the Great Depression on the horizon they launched a new venture, calling it The Peter Pauper Press. This was not only humorous, but prescient and fully attuned to the economic condition of the country when the market crash in 1929 created a host of “paupers” over night. Peter and Edna had clearly not been making decisions based on Wall Street's financial indicators and it was certainly an inauspicious time to start a new business. In 1930 Peter and Edna made yet another beginning when they married. Edna, who in the next couple of years learned book-keeping and typesetting, became a full partner in the infant enterprise.

Together they shared an interest in art, literature, bookmaking, and fine art, both past and present. Both Peter and Edna learned by doing, with tuteledge, and collaboration. They

met, worked with, and gradually became close friends with many of the leading printing and publishing luminaries of their day including type and book designer Bruce Rogers, William Edwin Rudge, and Fred and Bertha Goudy (who were the Godparents of the press).

They obviously learned well through those processes, because during the period from 1928 through 1959 The Peter Pauper Press grew and flourished while placing 69 titles among the American Institute of the Graphic Arts annual “Fifty Books of the Year” selections. Other presses took note of the types of books pioneered by The Peter Pauper Press and have, over the years, benefited significantly from the publication of the small, attractive, and well-manufactured book.

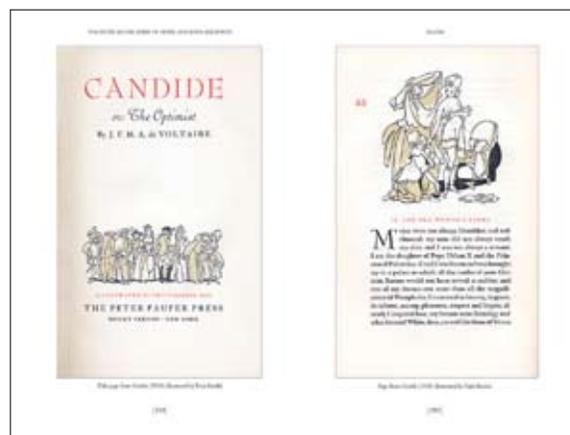


Perhaps the title of Richard Mathews' essay “Are We Having Fun Yet?” best summarizes what one finds in reading the marvelous little books from The Peter Pauper Press: it is obvious that Peter and Edna were having fun. A quote from Edna is another way to think about the products of their press: “Peter wanted to educate the tastes of buyers; I wanted also to publish what I thought they'd like, and we did both.”

This 300-plus page book includes bibliographic entries divided into two parts. It contains a chronological listing, identifies the A.I.G.A. “Fifty Books of the Year” Selections, and also contains a useful index of authors, and of artists. Preceding the bibliography you'll find 50 pages of insightful information about the press, and Peter and Edna Beilenson and their journey through an astounding publishing venture. However, the highlight is a 42-page section in full color showing a selection of pages from a wide variety of Peter Pauper Press publications. The book was designed by Sean Donnelley and Richard Mathews

and typeset by them at the University of Tampa Press. The design is based on the 1936 Peter Pauper Press edition of Bruce Rogers: *A Bibliography* by Irving Haus. The decorated cover paper is adapted from the Peter Pauper Press edition of *Green Mansions* (1943) by W. H. Hudson.

Ironically, as I sit in front of my iMac wrapping-up this review, a copy of the Autumn 2013, Peter Pauper Press, Fine Gifts



Since 1928 catalogue arrived in the mail. My wife is the buyer for a small gift shop in our local municipal library and makes purchases from this catalogue to sell in the shop. Though the company has evolved into something quite different, it is fun to see the name still in use and the legacy alive and well.

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Book and manuscript-related exhibitions: a selective list

Compiled by Lisa Pevtzow

(Note: on occasion an exhibit may be delayed or extended; it is always wise to call in advance of a visit.)

Art Institute of Chicago, 111 S. Michigan Avenue, Chicago, 312-443-3600: "Play, Pretend, and Dream: Caldecott Medal and Honor Books, 2010-2013" (16 Caldecott Medal and Honor award winners from the last four years), Picture Book Gallery, Ryan Education Center, through December 1. "Fashion Plates: 19th-Century Fashion Illustrations" (19th century illustrations shed light on the history of women's dress), Ryerson and Burnham libraries, through September 9.

Chicago Botanic Garden, Lenhardt Library, 1000 Lake Cook Road, Glencoe, 847-835-8202: "Butterflies in Print: *Lepidoptera* Defined" (hand-colored plates and scientific engravings of butterflies and moths), through August 18. "The Feminine Perspective: Women Artists and Illustrators," August 23-November 10.

Chicago Cultural Center, 78 E. Washington Street. Chicago, 312-744-5000: "Modernism's Messengers: The Art of Alfonso and Margaret Iannelli," Chicago Rooms, through August 27.

Chicago History Museum, 1601 N. Clark Street, Chicago, 312-266-2077: "Vivian Maier's Chicago" (Maier spent her adult life as a nanny but devoted her free time and money to photography), through January 2014.

Lilly Library, Indiana University, 1200 E. Seventh Street, Bloomington, Indiana, 812-855-2452: "One Hundred Books Famous in English Literature" (commemorating the Grolier Club's influential rare book exhibition in 1903, this re-enactment was compiled by Caxtonian and newly appointed director of the Lilly Library Joel Silver. It features three books by William Caxton: an original copy of *Canterbury Tales*, an original copy

of *Confessio Amantis*, and the show's one and only facsimile, *Le Morte d'Arthur*, of which only two copies are extant), through August 24.

Museum of Contemporary Art, 220 E. Chicago Avenue, Chicago, 312-280-2660: "Modern Cartoonist: The Art of Daniel Clowes" (works by acclaimed comic book artist and graphic novelist), through October 13.

Northwestern University's Mary and Leigh Block Museum of Art, 40 Arts Circle, Evanston, 847-491-4000: "Drawing the Future: Chicago Architecture on the World Stage" (architecture and urban planning in the United States, Europe, and Australia through drawings, large-scale architectural renderings, sketches and rare books), through August 11.

Ukrainian Institute of Modern Art, 2320 W. Chicago Avenue, Chicago, 773-227-5522: "Chicago's Bauhaus Legacy" (works of art and design created by students – from 1937 to 1955 – of the New Bauhaus and its successor schools), through September 29.

University of Chicago, Joseph Regenstein Library Special Collections Research Center Exhibition Gallery, 1100 East 57th Street, Chicago, 773-702-8705: "Souvenirs! Get Your Souvenirs! Chicago Mementos and Memories" (historical Chicago-related books, postcards, objects, souvenirs, and prints, including from the two Chicago world's fairs), through October 5.

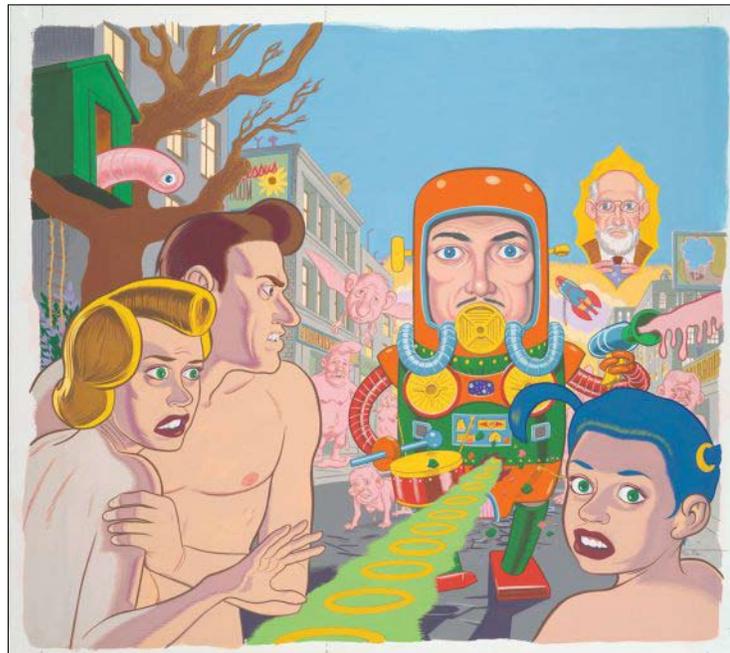
Woodson Regional Library, 9525 S. Halsted Street, Chicago, 312-747-6900: "Faith in the Struggle: Rev. Addie L. Wyatt's

Fight for Labor, Civil Rights and Women's Rights" (exhibit tracing life of the late Rev. Wyatt, co-pastor of Chicago's Vernon Park Church of God and one of the leading human rights activists in 20th century America), through March 15, 2014.

Send your listings to lisa.pevtzow@sbcglobal.net

Museum of Contemporary Art: Modern Cartoonist Daniel Clowes

DANIEL CLOWES EIGHTBALL 18 (COVER), 1997. IMAGE COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND OAKLAND MUSEUM.



Ukrainian Institute: Chicago's Bauhaus Legacy

SERGE CHERMAYEFF 1900-1997, COLOR SCAPE, 1979, PRIVATE COLLECTION.

Caxtonians Collect: Schmillian Schmaxton

Interviewed by Peggy Sullivan

As a long-time reader of *Caxtonians Collect*, even as a former subject of one column, writing one of those pieces had always attracted me. I had just never done anything about it until my phone rang one early evening, and a shaky voice asked for me. It sounded like an older man, but not one I knew. He wanted me to interview him for *Caxtonians Collect*. I thought that would be great – “But,” I said, “I don’t remember seeing you at the Caxton Club. Are you a member?”

“Well, if I am not, I should be,” he said. “But...” I started again. “What are you, some kind of goat?” he cried. “All this butting, and we have not even gotten started. Just get your butt over here and interview me!” His tone was not very Caxtonian, it seemed to me. Nor was his choice of words.

“Where is ‘over here’?” I asked. “I’m at the Studs Terkel Branch Library, right at the end of the bus line.”

“But I don’t think there is a Studs Terkel Branch,” I said, and I pride myself on being fairly knowledgeable about branch libraries and their names. “There you go again with a but,” he said. “If there isn’t a Studs Terkel Branch, there should be one. Agreed?” he said. “Oh, yes, of course, I agree!”

It was nice to agree on something, even an imaginary branch library. He went on with details: bring a nice big, old-fashioned camera with a large flash attachment, a notebook with pens or pencils, go to the nearest bus stop and take the first bus. “But...” I said, but he had hung up. There I was, all alone at the bus stop, lugging that big camera and a bag with my note-taking stuff. Along came an empty bus marked “Studs Terkel Branch Library.” The bus stopped, the driver smiled at me (this was getting stranger and stranger) and lowered the step for me to get on.

With very few words between us as I saw the city’s lights flashing by, we made

no stops until he pulled up to the door of a branch library identified as the Studs Terkel Branch. I walked into the well-lit lobby, and there Schmilliam was: thin, a head taller than I am, neatly dressed, almost smiling. He led me to the small con-



ference room and we began.

Schmill collects miniature books. He pulled them from his pants pockets, his jacket pockets, his shirt pockets, then took off his jacket and pulled more from his sleeves. They poured out – all colors, different binding styles, some of them illustrated with postage stamps as frontispieces, others with hand-colored drawings, and such varieties of paper! I was charmed by them, and he enjoyed my reaction. But then, he started to talk. This was not an interview in the *Caxtonian* tradition; it was a monolog. “I started this collection when I was so small I could scarcely lift one of these,” he began. “Oh, but...” I began, realizing what an exaggeration that had to be, but he cut me off. “There you go again with a but! Do you want this interview or not?”

“Oh, I do, I do!” I said. “Well, then, listen!” he continued. And he continued and he

continued. All my skills at drawing out interviewees were for naught. I wondered whether he would ever stop. He told me about crawling across battlefields to pull tiny diaries from the pockets of the dead and sometimes of the wounded. He

remembered finding a tiny volume in a huge bag of Irish potatoes, drying out another after spotting it near a corner drain after a recent thunderstorm, being given one by a woman he loved who was so tiny he had held her in the palm of his hand, just as she had held the book, a story of St. Valentine, in the palm of her hand.

Schmill had even bought a few of these books, but he had less to say about them. He had never caught on to bookstores, but apparently, they had caught on to him. He mentioned several where he was no longer welcome. It was all too easy and too tempting to pick up these bibelots, often without even realizing he was doing it. He would find them when he got home, he said, stuck in a French cuff or sometimes in the grocery bag he happened to be carrying. He did not look like a French cuff man to me, but I let that go.

Like many a collector, he loved the thrill of the chase, he said. He also loved to trade up, to replace a

later edition with an earlier one, although multiple editions of miniatures were rarer than of most books. He loved the fact that he had been able to acquire a substantial collection without having any of his wives nag him about it. “I know you hear that all the time – how wives make men throw out books when they get too crowded. How they resent the money their husbands spend on books – all that! Not a one of my wives ever even noticed these little beauties!”

“Not a one of your wives –” I repeated. “How many –” “How many wives did I have?” he broke in. “Well, not as many wives as books but more than there were apostles. Maybe thirteen or fourteen,” he mused. He was more vague about his wives than he was about his books. I had seen that before in other men, but not in one with so many wives.

See *CAXTONIANS COLLECT*, page 8

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CAXTONIANS COLLECT, *from page 7*

Although he had poured the books on the table like mints from a bag, when he handled them individually, he was gentle, almost reverent. It is not easy to be reverent to something you can hide in the palm of your hand, but he managed it. I was impressed. As he went on, he talked about some of the people who made these books. He thought they were the real heroes of bookmaking, and yes, he knew about Stanley Marcus of Neiman-Marcus fame, and his collection of more than 1,000 miniature books, but he found his own collection more evocative. He thought that probably none of Marcus's books had ever been moist, much less drenched, as some of his had been. He was as proud of the flaws in the books as in the distinctions. In other words, he was really just kind of an ordinary man-next-door collector, although he had read more of them than a typical collector, it seemed to me. Of course, they were all fairly short. I read a few myself when he took short breaks to relieve himself or to refresh himself at the water fountain.

The time passed quickly, and I was still

scribbling notes when he pointed to the camera and said it was time to take his picture. I did so, pulling up my own memories of how to use that old camera. The flash went off with a little pop, but I was, of course, not able to show him what I really had on film. He didn't mind. He said my bus was waiting. Indeed it was – empty except for the smiling driver. The sign now read, "The End." As I said goodbye to Schmill, he said, "Thank you for coming. This has been a dream of mine."

I stepped on the bus and realized I was tired and drowsy. As often happens, the trip home seemed shorter and quicker than the trip to the library had been. I did not write up my notes that night, and it was several days before I developed the photo. There was nothing there but a reflection of the flash, shiny bright with some little shadowy rectangles the sizes of those books scattered all through it. I thought of what Schmill had said about this whole thing being a dream of his. But (there's that word again!) was it his dream or mine – or was it enough for both of us?

§§

CHESS PIE, *from page 3*

being notorious copycats)? Each theory has its drawbacks. There are no other punned recipes in Wilcox's book. And while the pun offers some amusement when the subject is chess, it offers only bewilderment when the subject is pie. As for the typo theory, one wonders why Wilcox wouldn't have corrected it in later editions, of which there were some twenty-nine through 1905.

Or did I dismiss the chess game connection too quickly? Recall that the Fort Worth Women's Club called it "Jeff Davis chess pie." In 1990, the singer and TV star Dinah Shore, born in Winchester, Tennessee, published *The Dinah Shore American Kitchen: Homestyle Cooking with Flair*. She has this to say about the name "chess pie or tarts":

From time to time – from recipe to recipe – I've heard this referred to as Jefferson Davis Chess Pie. I don't know if he created it or if it was created for him, but legend has it that he was a dedicated chess player and never wanted to interrupt his concentration to go to the kitchen for whatever. The kitchen staff kept a generous supply of chess tarts at his elbow during a hot chess match. The tarts were small, didn't crumble all over the chess board, and provided enough energy to keep him alert and, of course, perceptive. Fact or fiction, it's a nice picture, isn't it?

I don't believe a word of it. But where "chess pie" is concerned, the only certainty is that there is none.

§§

Looking forward to September...

SEPTEMBER LUNCHEON

On Friday, September 13, we will meet at the Union League Club. Valerie Hotchkiss, Director of the Rare Book and Manuscript Library at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, will return. Stay tuned for her topic.

SEPTEMBER DINNER

We meet at the Union League Club Wednesday, September 18. Stephen Clarke, a London lawyer and independent scholar, and a Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries, will speak on Horace Walpole's Strawberry Hill Press.