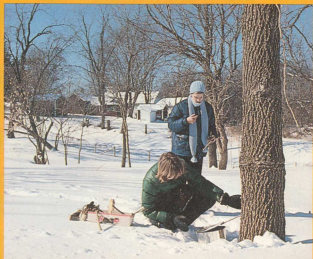


19TH CENTURY GUMPTIONOLOGY

By Candace Bradford



When her two sons were small they used to beg Dr. Virginia Fisher (BS Ed '40) to play "olden times" with them. Who would have imagined that 20 years later, Fisher would teach the same game to a class of Mizzou students?

This bright April morning the sprawling Fisher home in Arrow Rock is a beehive of activity. On the front porch, Jerry Schlink is sitting astride a bicycle frame, peddling furiously to turn the gears of an improvised stone grinder. "You can say you peddled six miles and a half-bushel of corn flour this weekend," observes Lisa Banes, watching the kernels of corn run through the grinder and collect as meal in an icetray attached below.

In the living room, a large red-and-white quilt cover is stretched across the floor, and two other students kneel over it, basting. At the dining table, amidst plates of white, yellow and cream cheese and maple sugar candy, Susan Faden is deliberating over recipes for hominy. Should she use one with baking soda or lye?

In the small kitchen, whole grain wheat is soaking on the counter, soy grits and soy beans with bacon seasoning are bubbling on the stove, and four or five





Wielding an ax,
Kirk Schultz joins other students
in participating in the hard work
required before maple sugar
and maple syrup are ready to eat.

other women are dissolving yeast, sifting flour, measuring sugar, and kneading dough. "Judy! You be quiet," calls Fisher to a large yellow dog barking at the bathroom door. "That's the bread-rising place today and you can't go in there."

In the backyard, a demonstration in log-hewing is underway. "Whew! That's hard work," grunts Steve Wilson as he hands the ax back to James Logan Buntin, his 94-year-old instructor. "You fellas are getting the hang of it all right," says the elder, chuckling sympathetically. "You just need to practice is all."

In the driveway, a fire has been built under an old iron kettle, over which will be cooked pancakes and waffles. Meanwhile, back on the front porch, room has been made for Fisher's husband, Ted, to give Beth Skelton a lesson in chairbotom weaving.

THE OCCASION? Just another "Arrow Rock Day" for the new home economics course, "Self-Sufficiency in the Nineteenth Century."

The backgrounds and academic majors of the 15 students enrolled in this upper-division, three-hour "Topics" course demonstrate the wide appeal of its content. Fisher, professor of child and family development at the University, has been holding most of the class sessions in her home because Arrow Rock "is such a great place for students to do all sorts of things."

It is also a highly appropriate place to conduct a class with such a title. Established in 1829, Arrow Rock, 50 miles northwest of Columbia, was a booming river town long before St. Louis and Kansas City had much importance. The Santa Fe Trail began here, and a ferry across the Missouri River provided embarkation for the westward movement. By 1860, Arrow Rock's population had reached 1,000, and the town had weekly stage line service and a telegraph line.

Arrow Rock began to diminish in importance shortly thereafter. A bridge across the Missouri built in 1923 at Glasgow rather than Arrow Rock completed its decline. But by the late 1950s the State Historical Society began to take an interest in the sleepy little village, and now residents who once bemoaned the passing by of progress are dedicated protectors of Arrow Rock's past.

Arrow Rock's past, however, is more practiced than preserved. Many of its residents grew up in or near the town, developing skills in self-sufficiency which they have been eager to pass on to Virginia Fisher's students.

The main focus of the course is on developing "gump-tology," a term Fisher borrows from the book *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*. But Fisher's acquaintance with the concept dates from long before counterculturalists began to yearn for the "good old days."

"Many people of my age who grew up on a farm have a kind of respect for being able to do things for themselves, to be producers rather than just consumers," she says.

"I guess I was a typical child of the Depression, but my mother looked for ways to 'make do' always in a spirit of fun. She liked experimentation, and her attitude was always, 'You can do it; you figure it out — try it.'"

Fisher has told the same thing to her students, and they've found that if they can't figure it out, there are plenty of people around Arrow Rock who will help.

Bunny Thomas, a waitress at the Black Sheep Inn, showed the class how to make rag rugs. Agnes Van Arsdale, who has lived near Arrow Rock all her life, helped with the jelly-making, showed the students how to make rag dolls, and shared her lifelong passion, needlework. "I don't ever remember not doing needlework," she says. "My mother said I was sewing pieces of material together when I was three." That time to do whatever you want may come later in life, as it has for John Emmerson, who is spending his retirement raising Nubian goats. Emmerson gave the class the raw goats milk from which they made cheese and butter.

FROM THESE AND OTHER ARROW ROCKERS, such as Kitte Smith, of Keeler's Handweaving and Gift Shop, and Herb Templeton, who showed them around his blacksmith shop and helped them boil down maple sap in his sorghum vat, the students have learned that one step toward self-sufficiency may simply be finding out what's to be gained from other people.

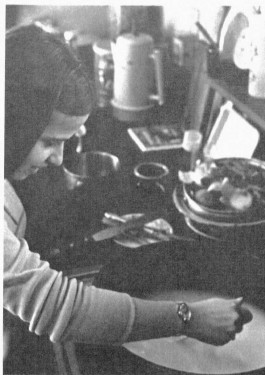
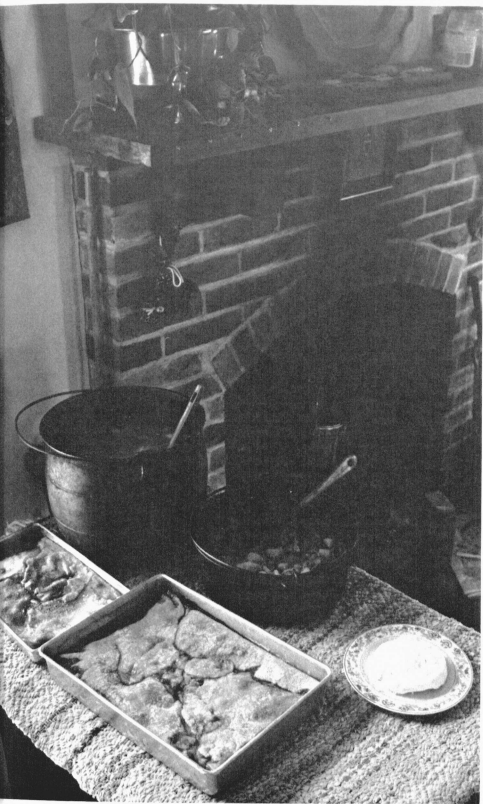
But are these students really interested in trying to duplicate the lifestyle of the nineteenth century? Do they expect to spend their whole lives making their own soap, butter, cheese, furniture, toys, blankets, canned goods?

"Well, no," says Lisa Banes, a freshman from Memphis, "I don't think I could live that way." But she had developed an interest in a number of hobbies and she'll never forget the experience of making her own butter. Marla Hill, a fashion design major from St. Louis, enjoyed the day the class cooked lunch over the fireplace best, but she can't see herself turning into a pioneer-type woman either.

But that's not the idea, says Beth Skelton, a forestry major from Webster Groves. "The idea is to put together all the wonderful things the pioneers had and all the wonderful things we have — like making corn meal in a blender."

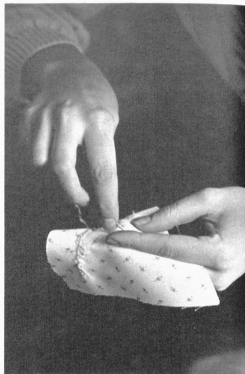
"**THERE'S A DIFFERENT PHILOSOPHY** involved," says Steve Wilson, an agricultural education major who grew up on a small farm although his father was a teacher. "Modern techniques just reduce the time involved." His roommate, Jerry Schlink, a master's student in poultry science, agrees, adding solemnly, "This will be good information to have when the economy collapses."

As lunchtime rolls around, the pace slows down and people begin wandering into the kitchen to help themselves to cheese and soy beans and cracked corn and millet and bread and rolls and pastry.



Marcia Novak
learns about cheese,
while Marla Hill studies
butter making
with Virginia Fisher.





It's quilting time for Susan Faden and Dawn Anderson. Below, Kittie Smith demonstrates the loom.



"I've been grinding my own flour since 1913," Buntin says, but he lost his wife seven years ago, so he's missed good home cooking. "You know," he muses, "America grew up under conditions these kids are perpetuating." Buntin was born in Napton, 15 miles away, in 1884. He's worked most of his life as an agricultural engineer, but for the past seven or eight years he's been involved in restoration of old Arrow Rock buildings, notably the log cabin that houses the Country Doctor Museum.

Kirk Shultz, a mechanical engineering student who's decided to become an architect, has been interested in learning from Buntin the skills he'll need to build his own log house. Shultz has had experience with modern carpentry and framing, but he says with a log house, "You've got a little more character, a little more life — and you know it's going to last longer."

After the lunchtime letdown, the students seem more worn out than Fisher, but eventually they get back to the chairbottom weaving, log hewing, quilting, and the final batch of baking. It's almost time to get together to plan the last class meeting, but before that, Fisher suggests a "greens walk."

"I'd like to walk over the lot a little bit and show you the things that are edible," she says. There's chickweed growing in the flowerpots as well as among the grass. "I just walk outside and snip some off for the salad." And oxalis, with pods that taste tart like pickles (the students sample and agree), which is why some people call it sour grass. Fisher gives them all a taste of violet leaves and flowers, points out wild lettuce and onion grass, discusses the shortcomings of dandelion greens and wine.

THE GROUP CIRCLES the yard, discussing asparagus, rhubarb, yucca (the "soap plant"), hemlock, poke. Then it's time for everyone to assemble in the living room for the only "organized" meeting of the day. After a little prodding from Fisher, the group decides their last class day, they'll have a picnic and invite all the people who helped with the class. Two of the students will donate the meat — 10 live chickens to be killed, dressed, and roasted. There will be a display of their projects, not all completed, and they'll plan to hunt for mushrooms and more wild edibles. Their papers, evaluations of the course and collections of resource materials will be due the following week.

And now it's time for the last activity of the day. The students and Fisher pile into cars to dig sassafras on the way out of town. The calm that falls over the house seems almost unnatural. Ted Fisher, relaxing on the front porch says, "At night we can't hear a sound for miles." A former agronomist and soil chemist at the University, he now runs Ted Fisher Woodcrafts, a restoration shop on the bottom floor of the house, and is planning to try his hand at cultivating a vineyard this summer.

Virginia Fisher pulls into the driveway and gets out of the yellow Pinto stationwagon with a knot of sassafras root

in her hand. Ted calls. She nods, just the slightest bit wearily. "At least they had time to clean up the kitchen today," she says.

But if the house shows the effects of the busy day, that's only as Fisher intends it to be. "This class is run like a good preschool ought to be," she says. "The first day I told them to go individually through every room of the house and look in cupboards and drawers to find out where everything is. They work now as if it were their own lab. I just get things out. *Teacher* does, in fact, mean arranger — on a concrete level, stage-setter. It's almost like organizing a production."

Fisher's main emphasis of study (she has received both master's and PhD degrees from the University) has been child development, but she served as a home economist for Farmers Home Administration during World War II, teaching poor rural families to make better use of their resources. She also draws on her experience working with Girl Scouts in primitive and pioneer camping.

"There's a lot of human development in the course," she says. "Home economics was first called home ecology, to take in the basics of living and individual art — practical art and practical sciences. There's so much that people like Agnes [Van Arsdale] can teach the students. Like in jelly making. Most of the girls anyway had followed recipes before, but we've lost that capacity to look, to listen, to see changes."

FISHER IS AMUSED to find that her sophisticated students have demonstrated interests that are clearly delineated along male-female role model lines. "But I keep saying that's part of the nineteenth century, so it's all right," she says.

In truth, Fisher is less interested in the past than she is in the future. "I don't think we have to be purists," she says. "The point is to adapt. It's the ingenuity we try to promote that represents the historical aspect of the course. For instance, Agnes really knows how to appreciate the new. She knows about how pectin works in jelly-making because she used to have to use apple skins to get the same effect."

Both Fisher and her students recognize that nineteenth century skills and twentieth century needs are drawing closer together. "A great deal of our handwork is a simulation of recycling, as in rag rugs and patchwork quilts," says Fisher, "and we tend to emphasize the same kind of behavior in our preparation of food — sour milk butter and cheese, for example.

"The Bicentennial and the whole 'Roots' phenomenon have focused attention on the fact that we're at the hub of the past and the future," Fisher says. "As we adapt to a low energy situation, it becomes a question of values. I'm not expecting anyone to master skills, but I hope they become sensitive to our heritage and gain self-confidence." □