

## It's an old camp oven merely. The camp oven story

Without a doubt a camp oven is the quintessential piece of bush cooking equipment.  
Cathy Savage, *Australian Bush Cooking*.<sup>1</sup>

There are two strands to the story of the camp oven in Australian cookery. One is about cooking in a hole in the ground and the other about a piece of kitchen equipment. This article is about the latter. The material draws on:

- Newspapers found in Trove<sup>2</sup>
- Bill Harney's Cook Book<sup>3</sup>
- Outback Cooking in the Camp Oven<sup>4</sup>
- A Guide to Bush Cooking<sup>5</sup>
- Australian Bush Cooking<sup>6</sup>

### The camp oven

The first reference to a camp oven I came across was as one of the items imported by Macqueen, Atkinson, and Pritchett in 1823.<sup>7</sup> There was no description of it.

In 1896 *Cheap Oven For The Bush* was published describing making a camp oven out of tin.

#### Cheap Oven For The Bush

Take a large nail can or oil drum, either will do as long as the lid fits closely; get a piece or iron plate, cut the right size for a shelf : build the tin in on its side with bricks or stone the same as you would a colonial oven, leave a space underneath of about twelve inches for the fire and you will have an oven that will bake beautifully and is easily heated. This is a very handy and useful contrivance, doing away with all lifting as in baking with camp ovens, which is very trying in hot weather.<sup>8</sup>

In 1898 It is the subject of *The Adventures of a Camp Oven*.<sup>9</sup> Here again there is no description of it.

In 1901 *The Queenslander* published a poem from Edward Dyson.

#### The Old Camp Oven

We don't keep a grand piano in our hut beside the creek,  
And I'm pretty certain Hannah couldn't bang it, anyhow;  
But we've got one box of music, and I'd rather hear its squeak

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<sup>1</sup> Cathy Savage *Australian Bush Cooking* Boiling Billy Publications 3<sup>rd</sup> edition 2009 Camp oven cooking pp. 88 – 127.

<sup>2</sup> Trove is the digital repository for newspapers and magazines managed by the National Library of Australia

<sup>3</sup> Harney, Bill, *Bill Harney's Cook Book* Landsdowne Press 1960

<sup>4</sup> Absalom, Jack & Reg, *Outback Cooking in the Camp Oven* Five Mile Press 1982

<sup>5</sup> Rabbit On A Shovel, *A Guide to Bush Cooking* 1987

<sup>6</sup> Cathy Savage *Australian Bush Cooking* Boiling Billy Publications 3<sup>rd</sup> edition 2009

<sup>7</sup> Macqueen, Atkinson, and Pritchett *The Sydney Gazette and New South Wales Advertiser* 30 January 1823 p.2

<sup>8</sup> Cheap Oven For The Bush, *The Dawn* 1 May 1986 p.22

<sup>9</sup> The Adventures of a Camp Oven, *The Clipper* 17 December 1898 p.3

Than the daisiest cantata that's been fashioned up to now.  
It's an old camp oven merely, with a handle made of wire,  
But no organ built could nearly compensate to me for it  
When I come off graft and find it playing tunes before the fire,  
And I'm feeling sort of vacant, but just wonderfully fit.  
In its sizzle, sizzle, sizzle,  
There's thousand little airs  
And no man can sit and grizzle  
Bout his troubles and his cares  
While the flames are gaily winding,  
And the tea is down to brew,  
And the old camp-oven's grinding  
All the reels he ever knew.<sup>10</sup>

It is illustrated with a drawing of a camp oven cooking on top of a fire. It's shape is standard: a three legged large pot with handles and a slightly domed lid. It looks made of cast iron as are all manufactured camp ovens at this time

In 1910, 1219 camp ovens are imported. This suggests that there are no locally made camp ovens as yet or perhaps they were inferior to the imported ones..<sup>11</sup>

The first recipe I found for using the camp oven is this in 1915 for making bread.

#### Camp Oven Bread

G. F. Pike, Bandstone, writes :-Good, light, digestible bread can always be made in a camp oven if the dough be baked quickly from the top. It is only necessary to put a little heat under the oven if a good quick fire is kept going on the lid. This quickly forms a crust, closes the pores, and keeps in the bubbles of gas and steam in the dough, thus causing it to expand. This is really what makes light bread. Good flakey bread can be made as follows: Roll out the dough, dust the surface with flour, fold and roll again and repeat, the process several times. The greater the number of rollings and dustings the thinner the flakes. It is not the flour that is used so much as the way it is used. The waste of good flour in the Australian bushland would keep a good mill going.<sup>12</sup>

In 1932 'Mammy' writes to 'Miranda' describing the cakes and pastries she has made in a camp oven: bread, scones, biscuits, tarts, meat, stewed meat, stewed fruit, fruit cakes, custards, puddings. Sadly no recipes are given.<sup>13</sup> A recipe for Camp Oven Buns was published.<sup>14</sup>

'Cootaburra' in 1935 gives a method for Roasting A Joint.

#### Roasting a Joint

Roasting and frying are quite easy. If I have a big roast, and want it to cook slowly, I use the same method as for the bread; but, if only a small leg or shoulder, I just stand the oven on the fire-irons, and cook that way: I nearly always do it this way, and find it quite satisfactory. As for frying, well, use as one would an ordinary frying-pan. I don't think I need say any more

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<sup>10</sup> The Old Camp Oven, *The Queenslander* 14 December p.2

<sup>11</sup> Pig Iron and Whisky, Camp Ovens and Bricks, From Scotland to Sydney Evening News 21 January 1910 p.6

<sup>12</sup> Camp Oven Bread, *Western Mail* 10 September 1915 p.6

<sup>13</sup> Camp Oven Cookery, *Weekly Times*

<sup>14</sup> Camp Oven Buns, *The Chronical* 23 February 1933 p. 62

about this now, because, once a person gets used to the ovens, they realise that any and every recipe one ever knew can be used with ease. I've had nearly four years with them now, and, frankly, a wood stove worries me when I have to use it!<sup>15</sup>

There are few recipes published post this one. But there are references to camp oven cooking as part of social activities as late as 2016 when the Easter event run by the Myall Lakes Aquatic had a Captain's Stew Competition featuring camp ovens.<sup>16</sup>

### **Bill Harney's Cook Book (1960)<sup>17</sup>**

Born in 1895, Harney spent much of his life as 'a nomadic existence around the Northern Territory wandering from north to south, from east to west and once a year to the big city'.<sup>18</sup> Much of it was spent as a cattle drover, the source for his eponymous cook book.

He frequently discusses the camp oven and its use. 'Long wire hooks, used for lifting the lids off camp ovens and billy cans, are the bush cook's badge of office'.<sup>19</sup>

In the 'twenties Micky Coleman was considered to be one of the best damper cooks of the Georgina. We all wanted to know what his secret was ... He made his dough very soft, then greased his camp oven and let the dough stand in it for about 15 minutes so that the rising would work. When the dough began to rise, Micky would put the oven gently on the coals and cover the lid with hot ashes. In the result, he produced a damper with the consistency of yeast bread or light sponge cake – it was wonderful!<sup>20</sup>

He noted a change in preference for camp ovens.

Nowadays, dampers are often made in camp ovens. They used to be three-legged pots made of cast iron, but they have been largely supplanted by Bedourie ovens, which were first made in West Queensland. Bedourie ovens are made of steel, so that you could put a Bedourie on a packhorse and, if the horse bucked and threw its pack, the steel oven could not break as the old brittle cast iron pots did.<sup>21</sup>

### **Outback Cooking in the Camp Oven. Jack & Reg Absalom (1982)**

'During my first television series in which I did four cooking scenes, I received many letters asking for recipes how to cook kangaroos, wild goat and wild pigs. After thinking about this, I decided to write this book and show people how to use camp ovens for cooking in the outback'.<sup>22</sup>

There is a brief introduction to the Bedourie oven, its advantages being a lid that can function as a frypan, guaranteeing no ashes will get into the pot, its durability.

They have a chart for knowing the heat of the oven using the colouring of a piece of paper placed inside it, an old practice.

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<sup>15</sup> Living On An Opal Field, *The Chronicle* 5 December 1935 p.72

<sup>16</sup> Easter with the Myall Lakes Aquatic Club, *Myall Coast Messenger* 12 April 2016

<sup>17</sup> Harney, Bill, *Bill Harney's Cook Book* Landsdowne Press 1960

<sup>18</sup> Bill Harney. *A Bushman's Life*, Penguin 1990 p.208

<sup>19</sup> Harney 1960 p.13

<sup>20</sup> Harney 1960 pp. 13-14

<sup>21</sup> Harney 1960 p.17

<sup>22</sup> Jack & Reg Absalom Introduction *Outback Cooking in the Camp Oven*. The Five Mile Press 1982

They give recipes for over 100 recipes across the whole spectrum of dish types – soups, fish, meat, desserts, cakes and biscuits and so on. Some recipes have comments.

#### Absalom Style – Kangaroo Leg Seasoned

1 kangaroo leg  
1 cup dripping

#### Stuffing

½ loaf bread  
1 large onion, chopped finely  
2 strips bacon, chopped finely  
2 soft tomatoes, chopped finely  
1 dessertspoon mixed herba  
1 egg  
salt and pepper to taste

Cooking time 2 ½ - 3 hours

Take the kangaroo leg and cut pockets well into the leg so as to push the stuffing in. To make the stuffing cut the crust off the bread and crumb it. Add the bacon, onion, and tomatoes. Rub well together with the breadcrumbs, then add the egg, mix well, adding herbs, then salt and pepper and stuff this into pocket of kangaroo leg. Bake in camp oven with the cup of dripping until well cooked – about 2 ½ - 3 hours. Remember to baste the meat all the time because it has no fat.

*I have served this meal to governors, millionaires, T. V. crews and hundreds of ordinary [people, and I never get a complaint.*

#### **A Guide to Bush Cooking (1987)**

Wessa and Lummo as Rabbit On a Shovel

In their introduction, they write, ‘ ... we have attempted to make campfire cooking a simple, enjoyable task, utilizing only basic supplies and utensils’.<sup>23</sup>

In the book they have included

1. A comprehensive list of the contents of Wesso’s own tuckerbox, which contains all the ingredients that have been used in the recipes in this book.
2. A list of basic campfire equipment and utensils.
3. A list of supplies to supplement and freshen your basic provisions.
4. A list of fresh meat supplies for those not so lucky fishermen and hunters.<sup>24</sup>

Camp Oven Chicken (1987)

For those who are lucky enough to have a fresh chook or wild turkey or can get their hands on one, here’s a way you can roast it in your camp oven.

Ingredients:

1 chook or wild turkey

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<sup>23</sup> Wessa and Lummo, A Guide to Bush Cooking, *Rabbit On A Shovel* 1987 p.6

<sup>24</sup> Wessa and Lummo p.6

1 medium onion  
A couple of shakes of garlic granules  
A good spoonful of margarine  
A couple of pinches of salt  
A couple of pinches prepper  
4 slices of bread

They way to do it

Mix the margarine, garlic, salt and pepper into a paste and rub over the chook.

Chop onions and crumb bread, mix bread crumbs, onions, and remaining paste with a drop of water to form stuffing, stuff the chook then put the chook into camp oven with bacon and place on coals. Cook until tender.

Potatoes, carrots, etc. can be roasted, in the pan with the chook. <sup>25</sup>

### **Australian Bush Cooking. Cathy Savage. (2009)**

Savage's book is everything you want to know about bush cooking, including the camp oven.

There are recipes for 33 dishes. In her hands the camp oven becomes a tool of multiculinarly: flame'n good curry; moroccan lamb; dee's chow mein; chicken paella; camp oven pizza.

Other recipes play on the terminology of working on sheep and cattle stations: teamster's beef & beans; boss cocky osso bucco; sundowner's chicken casserole.

flame'n good curry

*The name says it all, this is bushcurry at its best*

Cooking time: around 1 ¼ hours

750 g round steak, cubed  
Oil  
3 onions, chopped  
4 garlic cloves, crushed  
1 tablespoon, crushed ginger  
1 teaspoon chilli powder  
2 teaspoons ground cardamom  
1 ½ cups beef stock  
6 potatoes, peeled and cubed

Heat oil and brown meat in a camp oven. Add onion. Garlic, and ginger to pan and cook until onions is tender. Stir in chilli powder, cardamom and tomatoes and cook until fragrant. Add beef stock and cook covered over medium coals until meat is nearly tender, depending on coals around 30 – 45 minutes, Add potatoes and cook uncovered until meat and potatoes are tender. Serve with rice.

### **Other uses of the camp oven**

Half of an old disused camp oven filled with sand and on the fire is suggested as a medium for roasting peanuts. <sup>26</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Wessa and Lummo, Rabbit on Shovel 1987

<sup>26</sup> Roasting Peanuts A successful method Camp Oven and Sand The Farmer and Settler 13 April 1928 p.14

Another was a stroke of genius.

Camp oven for Incubator

A farmer neighbor of ours on the Richmond Rlvor, who wanted to hatch some wild ducks that he had brought home from a swamp, and not having a broody hen at the time, conceived the idea of hatching them In the camp oven. He wrapped the eggs in an old flannel shirt, and kept the oven at what he considered a "hen temperature." standing it on coals that were heavily covered with ashes. Eventually seven out of ten eggs hatched: The ducklings were reared without any difficulty, but as soon as felt their wings they flew away. —

"Gumblegubblm".<sup>27</sup>

### **End words**

From its earliest appearance in 1823 to 2016 the camp oven has occupied a place at the Australian table. This is the first comprehensive survey of the uses to which the versatile camp oven has been put over 200 years.

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<sup>27</sup> Camp Oven for Incubator *Smith's Weekly* 6 December 1930 p.4