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Five Peelers, 5,000 Potatoes: How Collaborative Cooking and Eating in the Woodcraft Folk is Building Co-operation from the Ground Up

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This short article explores the potential of 'clans' — mixed-aged working parties responsible for preparing, serving and clearing up after meals — to embed multi-generational co-operation at Woodcraft Folk camps. These residential events, where children and young people greatly outnumber responsible adults, are shaped by the need for sustenance, shelter, purpose, and a sense of belonging; this amounts to a huge amount of physical and emotional labour. Amid (perhaps because of) these conditions, the Woodcraft Folk model of clans creates significant displays of creative collaboration, joint problem solving, and peer-to-peer support. The experiences of Wivenhoe Woodcraft Folk in Essex suggests the perennial obstacles to and opportunities of co-operation play out most positively in tiny ad-hoc field kitchens, embedding a habit of collaborative thinking and acting in our young people.

Introduction

Today's young people face an unenviable spread of existential threats. The world has always been a scary place: global conflict, poverty, and social isolation surely coloured the zeitgeist of Woodcraft Folk's foundation in 1925. But a mental health emergency among our young people, and the scale of the emerging climate collapse could, I think, reasonably overwhelm any burgeoning instinct for activism towards social change. Nonetheless, the Woodcraft Folk movement, with its focus on empowering and facilitating young people to strive for positive change, seeks to embed a sense of agency, as well as co-operation and collaboration, in its members. The very coalface of this endeavour, at least in my small corner of the movement, seems to be the communal field kitchen.

Commonground: Multinational, Multigenerational Kitchen Clans Feeding 80 at a Sitting

In the scorching hot July of 2022, Woodcraft Folk hosted the International Falcon Movement — Socialist Educational International (ISM-SEI) at Commonground: a 10-day camp at Kelmarsh in Northamptonshire. More than 2,700 people from 22 countries attended, ostensibly for a

programme of 150 workshops around social change devised and delivered by a panel of young adults. But while the scheduled activities initially faltered amid disorganisation, translation issues, and a collective inertia or shyness, co-operative ‘clans’ incorporating every camper instantly mobilised in more than 20 tent ‘villages’ across the 124-acre site.

For those without a working understanding of the movement’s roots and methods, clans present as ad-hoc working groups that jumble together ‘kinsfolk’ from different age brackets and social groups. They group (usually via a chalkboard with lists of names) dreamy five-year-olds and bored teenagers with experienced leaders, awkward attending parents (who may feel participation is a bit beyond their remit), and everyone in between.

Clans are a common feature of all Woodcraft Folk camps; campers are generally assigned to clans at the start of the event and are called away from their own activities and back to this grouping every time the rota has a job for them. Tasked with collecting, storing, preparing, serving, and clearing away food for upwards of 80 people three times a day, the village clans at Commonground quickly became the embodiment of co-operation, with all the spreading benefits that come with it.

Over mountains of raw potatoes, onions, peppers, and carrots, multigenerational mobs fell to work peeling, deseeding, and slicing. Teenagers who had never met discussed first food allergies and then shared experiences of neuro-diversity, sexual orientation, and gender as they hauled water and scoured pans. Some children learned from their clan adults to safely use a knife and attend a hot pan, taking their first steps towards feeding themselves and others. Others displayed such a competence that they were able to take the lead in these tasks while adults facilitated, acting as sous chef.

Young adults fretted over inadequate gas rings and debated flavour profiles and food waste, sometimes in second or third languages. Older adults were required to serve shifts in a central storage hub, breaking down huge, shrink-wrapped towers of coconut milk cartons or cauliflowers, sorting, and distributing them for deployment in kitchens. These supplies had to be loaded into festival carts (their loan negotiated with joyriding groups of young children) and hauled back to villages by many hands.

Collectively, clans conjured huge, sustaining meals to feed multitudes, transforming carts of raw ingredients into fuel for their grateful village. The physical experience was educational: to comprehend the heft of the rations, the power needed to haul them, and labour to process them is to realise some of the universal challenges of being human hidden from view in Western consumer culture. The aesthetic of this work — bright coloured plastics, scuffed aluminium, canvas, and wood — deserves an essay of its own but the giant saucepans, industrial kitchenalia, starched tea towels, and military-like tents of camp seem to underline the status and value of the work. Infrastructure for collective eating dwarfs the domestic; it speaks of solidarity and practicality in the face of adversity.

Re-connecting with our Food

The precedent for collaborative cooking for social cohesion is well established. Parallels can be drawn with everything from langar (the community food and kitchens of gurdwaras), to the communal canteens traditional to kibbutzim, to the South African braai. The challenge of feeding any community — which will inevitably have intersecting and perhaps conflicting nutritional and cultural requirements — is a perfect playing field to practice relational problem solving. These settings provide a kind of ‘third place’ in food consumption: neither the domestic family sphere with its internal politics, nor commercial spaces where hospitality is transactional and dependant on our financial stake. When we eat as a clan, each individual has — literally — an equal and unarguable place at the table.

Co-operation can get messy. In a field kitchen, the challenges — often knotty and overlapping — just keep coming. Where can food be stored to keep wasps, sunlight, and hungry teenagers

away? How should five kilos of leftover bean chilli best be disposed of when bin bags are flimsy and the nearest dump a long cart-ride away? What does a balanced meal look like for a seven-year-old who only eats white bread and Marmite? And just how much porridge scraping can be expected of a hyper-active four-year-old, or their exhausted parent?

Domestic issues are pulled into public discussion. What does conscious consumption of meat look like? How dirty is *too* dirty when it comes to washing-up water? And does the calculation change when it has taken four people and 25 minutes to haul, boil, and distribute the water in question? When is it OK to eat food dropped on the floor? When isn't it? Debate, decisions, and actions become public, collective, and — ideally for Woodcraft Folk purposes — democratic. And these dilemmas are sharpened by the real hunger of outdoor life, the absence of domestic labour-saving devices, and usually, sleep deprivation.

Yet despite these challenges the camps I've attended have shown that field kitchens are often calm places of mindful, meditative activity and co-operation. Without screens, without the distractions or comforts of home, groups fall to quiet work. Arguments about participation are, to a degree, solved by the convention to join in — positive peer pressure! — and obvious need for that person's input. No one, no matter their age, skill level or mobility, is redundant when there are so many mouths to feed!

Yes, meals run late. Seasoning is rarely on point. Choice is limited and the execution of each dish probably lacks finesse. But the lessons to be learnt are quite exhilarating. The child who throws a tantrum when their parent cannot provide the perfect snack will generally accept any food if served to them by someone just one or two years their senior. A disengaged teenager will become a reliable member of the kitchen brigade if given some autonomy and agency over their task. Every one of us, softened by our reliance on twenty-first century gadgetry designed for one user, can learn to be more mindful, conscious, efficient, and co-operative in a kitchen where water containers, pans, and tables can only be moved in partnership with others.

Enduring Impact

The impact of collective cooking as experienced via Woodcraft Folk is enduring; the experience of food at camp very often dwarfs other elements in the memory. Whether we have learnt how to safely hold a very sharp knife, why a friend's family boycotts a specific cereal brand, or that we can break our own unhealthy food habits, the ripple effect is huge. The blossoming of collectivism and co-operation shared at camp can take hold of young people who in turn model and seed it in their own home communities. Clan values spread in Woodcraft Folk 'districts' and their groups to children and adults who have not attended camp, but experience the collective cooking in meeting halls or public spaces.

Across district, regional, and national camps clan duties, and co-operative cooking, eating, and clearing, are ingrained practice. Participating becomes a foundational cooking experience for children with diverse experiences of food and eating, and a practical template for co-operation to be cherished.

The Author

Anna Blewett is a freelance journalist, sub editor and copywriter with 18 years of experience in commercial publishing. Since 2022 she has been a leader at her local Woodcraft Folk district in Essex devising and facilitating sessions in collaborative cooking, sustainable crafts, and exploring nature with young people aged between six and fifteen.