

## GOING, GOING...SOLD! A SHORT HISTORY OF BOX SUPPER SOCIALS ON THE PRAIRIE—by Jo-Ann Roberts

July 23, 2021 by [Guest Blogger](#)



With homesteads on the American prairie often far from the nearest town, people needed a unique way to get together, aside from an occasional quilting bee or barn raising. Some ingenious folks came up with the idea of holding a “box social” as a way to catch up with friends, smile at new babies, and—and many cases—raise funds for school supplies or church pews. Since corrugated cardboard boxes weren’t in existence until 1871, and wooden crates were expensive, willow baskets proved a good substitution.

The premise for the auction was simple; women would decorate a basket and fill it with a supper for two. The men bid on the women’s boxes anticipating a meal with the women whose box it is. Generally, the boxes are anonymous, so the men don’t know whose box they are bidding on. Of course, if the men knew their wife’s box, they were expected to bid on it and get it for their supper. The real competition was among the bachelor’s and the unmarried ladies with the mystery, teasing, joking, and sometimes humorous results adding to the fun.



The women were very clever at decorating their baskets. Many times, the unmarried women would surreptitiously drop hints indicating which box was hers. Pieces of fabric, wildflowers, string or yarn, or burlap doubled as clues as a way of rigging the results.

The auctioneer would start the bidding by announcing the contents of the basket. Cold fried chicken, ham biscuits, hard-cooked eggs, pickles, and

cornbread were perennial favorites. Coconut Jumbles, Joe Froggers (molasses cookies), slices of pound cake were most welcomed. And if a bidder was real lucky, a dried apple pie might be tucked in between the folds of a length of toweling.



Often the bidding would start slowly at “two bits” (twenty-five cents). To sharpen the bidding, a glib-tongued auctioneer encouraged the men, embellishing the contents of the basket making the food sound more appetizing than it might have been. By the end of the bidding, towns usually netted between ten to fifteen dollars depending on the number of baskets.

Though the practice had fallen out of favor with young people since the 1950s, there has been some resurgence in recent years. The rules have become less rigid with men providing boxes as well, but the goal remains the same...raising funds for a school, church, or civic project.

**March 8, 2025**

Step Back in Time - Box Supper Auction  
Presentation by *Modern Times Theater*

Bring a Decorated Dinner For 2 ~ Box of Your Choice  
To be Auctioned or Be the Bidder for that Dinner Box.

*The choice is yours!*

Music by Jeremy Harple & Co.

*Bring your instrument to join in and jam!*

Proceeds raised by boxes will go to the SLD Fund.