

**Foods in Their Seasons:  
A Look at 1848 with Mrs. Jacob Meredith  
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The historic interpretation of the year 1848 is the focus of the role-playing, or first person, program at Hale Farm & Village, a living history museum property of the Western Reserve Historical Society. Located in the township of Bath in Summit County, the museum has devoted 9 of its historic buildings, relocated from several different Western Reserve sites, to the creation of the fictional "Village of Wheatfield." Although "Wheatfield" never existed, its populace is comprised of role-players who portray characters based on historic research of the early-to-mid nineteenth century in the Western Reserve of Ohio.

The year 1848 was chosen for a variety of reasons. The country was embroiled in political discussions over slavery, states rights, and presidential candidates for the upcoming election. The first Women's Rights convention was held in the summer of 1848. The Industrial Revolution was well under way. Transportation systems, including canals and railroads, allowed for the movement of goods and people from one area to another more quickly than had ever before been possible. Gold was discovered in California, spurring many Americans to look to the western territories for the fulfillment of their hopes and dreams. The war with Mexico ended in the early months of the year, opening thousands of acres of new territory for settlement. A pandemic cholera outbreak responsible for the deaths of thousands was in the newspapers every week. The discussion and portrayal of how these world, national and local events affected the daily lives of "Wheatfield" residents brings the past alive to the museum visitor.

Each interpreter has a set of educational objectives that are important tools in the interpretation of nineteenth century daily life. By visiting several sites, the visitor is exposed to a variety of thought and experience. Through all of these discussions the visitor can freely question the interpreter about the museum setting or daily life in the nineteenth century. The visitor watches a "Wheatfield" housewife cook a meal over a hearth or on a wood-burning stove while she talks about how she feels about her life, what her joys and concerns are, how she interacts with her neighbors or misses family far away. Her husband may enter the room and engage the visitor about problems he is having with his crops or animals, the effect of the weather on the family finances and his wondering if he should move the family further west.

One of the characters a visitor may encounter in "Wheatfield" is "Mrs. Jacob Meredith." Mid-life finds her having left her Pennsylvania home behind in 1837 to move with her husband and growing family to the Western Reserve of Ohio. "Mr. Jacob Meredith", Hannah's husband, is a prosperous dairy farmer. He chose to move his family west because of the availability of affordable land in the 1830's and the reputation of the Western Reserve as a fine dairy farming area. Talk of "Cheesedom", as the Western Reserve was often called, had reached all areas of the United States. Western Reserve cheese was shipped to the major ports of New York and New Orleans for transport as far away as London, England.

"Mrs. Meredith's" life revolves around her home and family. The "cult of domesticity" is very much personified by Mrs. Meredith. As the mother of a growing mid-western family, she has experienced the pains of separation and death as well as the joys of adventure and birth. Caring for her surviving children, Ethan, Margaret, Elijah and Abigail, and husband fills her days with the drudgery of cooking, cleaning and sewing. However, this drudgery is tempered with society's higher calling to raise her children to be responsible, mature adults who will someday take their places in the world.

Whether male or female, nineteenth century life was regulated by the seasons. For women this meant an endless cycle of food preparation and house cleaning. Spring was dominated by the monumental task of spring housecleaning. This involved every female member of the family and upset the daily routine of every male since there was little time for meal preparation while the house was being turned topsy-turvy in search of dirt. Spring also meant that the time for the preparation of the garden was at hand. After a winter diet of preserved fruits and vegetables, early spring greens were eagerly picked and prepared for meals. Poor spring weather might mean a delay in planting and a shortened growing season. The kitchen garden was the woman's domain. She planned, planted and tended it and, except for the gracious act of turning over the soil, she received little help from the men in the household.

The Spring of 1848 finds Mrs. Meredith waiting for the weather to change so that she can begin the task of planting. She has already planned the size of her garden and has carefully gathered or saved seeds and seedlings to fill the garden beds. Her daughters will help with the planting and later, the weeding and harvesting. The family will enjoy fresh asparagus, a variety of lettuce and greens, tender onions and early peas. Some of these, like the asparagus and peas can be preserved for later use by drying or pickling.

Summer will bring warmer temperatures, continued anxiety over the weather, more food preservation, and — the Fourth of July!!! The "Glorious Fourth", one of the few holidays celebrated nationally in 1848, will be celebrated in grand style by all of Wheatfield. Mrs. Meredith's efforts will truly shine as Mr. Meredith's prosperity will allow for the purchase of

more exotic foods for the community picnic. Pineapples from far-away lands will be purchased for a special treat. Turtle steaks and oysters can be purchased in Akron markets. Mrs. Meredith will spend much time and effort in the preparation of foods for the picnic. Her menu might include fried chicken, ham sandwiches with mustard, new potatoes, green salad with dressing and, for dessert, red raspberry pie and Washington Cake.

Food preservation for winter use really begins in earnest in late summer. Storage areas will need to be cleaned thoroughly and prepared for use with bins, shelves, barrels, boxes and other storage containers. Salt, vinegar, paper, fabric, sand, and straw are just a few of the things that will need to be stockpiled for use in preserving fruits and vegetables. Crock, preserving jars and kettles need to be scrubbed. The seemingly endless tasks of cleaning and peeling vegetables will begin. The foods preserved in the spring need to be checked for spoilage. This task will be repeated every few weeks throughout the year. When spoilage is found, the foods are re-processed and placed in cleaned containers.

The fall harvest means more work for everyone in a rural farming community. Mrs. Meredith will be preparing foods for her husband, sons and farmhands to eat as they harvest all of the remaining crops. While this time of year means an abundance of fresh fruits and vegetables, fresh meat is scarce. The family would be using up the last of the smoked meats from last winter's butchering. Fresh game would also be on the menu as the men in the family have time for some hunting. The remainder of the kitchen garden is scoured for any remaining vegetables and the family is busily using and preserving the harvest from the apple orchard. For days on end the Meredith women peel apples for making apple sauce, apple butter and apple cider. Apples are also packed away in sand or wrapped in paper for winter storage.

Late fall and early winter bring cooler temperatures to Wheatfield. The Meredith's and their neighbors are busily engaged in the labors of butchering some of their animals for family food and to avoid having to feed so many large animals through the winter months. Butchering is a very labor intensive process that, once begun, cannot be stopped until it is finished. If the weather is not cool enough, the family could lose valuable meat to spoilage before they can process all of it for later use. Meats like ham, bacon and chops can be smoked in a smokehouse for summer use. Sausage is made and stuffed into casings. Large cuts are put into strong brine in crocks or barrels. Winter meals include more meat dishes since the fresh meat is readily available. A family like the Meredith's can procure some fresh meat from a rural butcher during the year but many of their neighbors do not have the cash to make regular fresh meat purchases and must rely on their own processed meat for their meals.

The winter months include the celebrations of Thanksgiving, Christmas, New Years and Washington's Birthday. The Governor of Ohio chose a December date for Thanksgiving in 1848. Most Western Reserve families set this day aside as a day for giving thanks and for feasting from their stores of foods. Some Western Reserve families, including the Merediths, celebrated Christmas with parties, large family dinners, and Santa Claus with his bag of treats. Many of the Meredith's neighbors, with their strong New England background, still frown on Christmas festivities as being pagan. Everyone will join in the celebration of the New Year. Travel by sleigh is relatively easy if there is snow on the ground so there are an abundance of parties and gatherings. Large spreads of the very best treats are put out by many women in expectation of the gentlemen callers they will receive on New Year's Day. The last of the winter holidays finds the Merediths paying tribute to the "Father of our Country." Washington's birthday is celebrated on February 22 with great feasting and toasting. These winter holidays allow for a respite from the rigors and monotony of daily life in a rural community. Diary accounts indicate that women would plan for these celebrations with great excitement. Music and dancing would require the hiring of musicians. Wardrobes would be updated as much as the family budget would allow. And all the stops would be pulled out to fill tables with cakes, pies, candies and other treats not normally seen on a rural family's table.

Arriving at the threshold of a new year must have been a bit melancholy for the rural Western Reserve housewife. As she looks ahead, she sees tremendous amounts of work that she must accomplish and oversee in order to care for the needs of her family. But, as she looks behind, she can be satisfied that through the work of her hands she has brought her family this far in their life journey. Nineteenth century women realized that home was their duty, their domain, their sphere. With the proper kind of hard work, they could be proud.