By Nancy Whitaker

ONCE UPON A TIME

Being a lover of history and intrigued with lives of the early settlers, I am almost always looking for information that tells how they really lived. What did they eat? What did they wear? How did they keep clean?

I have always had the desire to be a pioneer and travel out west in a wagon train. It sounds exciting and adventurous, but scary at the same time. The old shows we watch on television are probably not even close to telling what and how our ancestors lived and survived.

Can you imagine saying good-bye to family and friends, loading up a wagon with necessities and heading to parts unknown? I cannot imagine doing that today, but if I would have been a pioneer lady, I probably would have had to, like it or not.

Our land was settled by hardy pioneers who had the stamina, willpower and the hope that they could tame the Wild West. Everyone in the family had their work spelled out for them. Determination, hard work and being resourceful was the qualities it took to live as a pioneer in approximately 1835.

Food was one, if not the most, important part of pioneer living. Meat, being one of the most necessary foods, was taken from streams, forests and prairies. The fare included fowl, rabbits, squirrels, opossum, raccoon, deer, elk and bear. As for me, I am scared to death of anything that even moves or is furry, so I do not think I could ever have cleaned and cooked a critter.

The pioneer woman managed pretty well with what was referred to as “Make-do Cooking.” Measurements were done by simply “eyeballing” the amount of the ingredient. While I am one

to measure every thing when baking or cooking, my grandma could cook with a “by gosh, by golly throw it in” attitude. Plus, her food always turned out delicious.

Bread was an essential staple for the early settlers. If they were fortunate enough to grow wheat or get any flour, how did they get it to raise? Baking soda (saleratus) was available and when combined with sour milk produced what was needed to raise the bread.

Today, I use packaged yeast and a bread machine. Thank God for technology.

One item I was surprised to find was that the early settlers had a recipe for fake olives, of all things. I just wonder how many of you have tried this? The recipe that was used for faux olives is: “Soak full grown green grapes in salt and water for 48 hours. Then scald them with strong vinegar.”

If anyone has ever tried or even heard of making these fake olives, let me know how they turned out and how they tasted. (Just think, they could put them in martinis.)

The pioneers only took a bath on Saturdays if they needed it or not. They were a step ahead of their ancestors, the colonists, who almost never took baths. In fact the colonists thought that cleaning the dirt off your skin made you susceptible to disease.

Just imagine being that dirty and stinking. However, I suppose that if nobody ever took a bath, they probably all smelled alike.

Each family only had one brush and one comb that all family members shared. Some women washed their hair with homemade soap once a month while others brushed oil into their hair instead of washing it. Could I live like this? No. I am already changing my mind about wanting to be a pioneer.

Another tidbit about the pioneers: chewing gum was called “wax” in the south and it was

scarce. In fact, instead of chewing the gum and spitting it out, it was passed around from child to child for days. Today, I am sure the FDA would have something to say about that.

The pioneers also used many homemade remedies and ate some very disgusting food. It was not fun but was a survival instinct that got us to where we are today.

Have you ever made fake olives? Do you remember taking a bath once a week? Have you ever cooked or baked by just a “by gosh and by golly?” Let me know and I’ll give you a Penny for Your Thoughts.

Next week watch this column for some old pioneer information, recipes and oddities.