

University of North Carolina at Asheville

Images of Vulgarly and Crudeness:
European Opinions of American Eating Habits from 1810-1850

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Between 1827 and 1828, Mr. and Mrs. Basil Hall, English travelers to America, separately described American eating habits and utensils. While Basil Hall was writing for anticipated publication, Margaret Hall was writing, without constraints, for the amusement of her family when they returned to England. She deplored the common method of eating in America: "...we went to the public table and found a party of eighteen or twenty, all eating with their knives, which is a most universal practice here."¹ In one of her entries, she complained that while English people were accustomed to a three-pronged silver fork, two-pronged forks were, "all we are indulged with in this uncivilised [sic] country."² Basil Hall confirmed his wife's opinions, and added that putting a knife in one's mouth was dangerous, ugly, and, "followed in England only by the lowest vulgar."³ He was torn, "between reluctance to do what he [had] been taught to consider ill-bred, and the desire to please by conformity."⁴

What is thought of today as a mere table utensil, barely given any thought, defined ones social status and national identity during the nineteenth-century. The fork was a, "social [prop] for genteel dining," only used by those who could afford it.⁵ The English had adopted fork eating during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and its use had become commonplace in all but the poorest of households. America was one of the last Western countries to replace hand and knife eating with that of the fork. This astounded English travelers while visiting in the early

¹ Margaret Hunter Hall, *The Aristocratic Journey: Being the Outspoken Letters of Mrs. Basil Hall Written during a Fourteen Months' Sojourn in America, 1827-1828*, ed. Una Pope-Hennessy (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1931), 20-21.

² *Ibid.*, 37.

³ Basil Hall in Barbara Carson, *Ambitious Appetites: Dining, Behavior, and Patterns of Consumption in Federal Washington* (New York: The American Institute of Architects Press, 1990), 61.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 61.

⁵ Diane L. Berger, "Pray Let Them be Neat and Fashionable or Send None: Dining in Eighteenth and Early Nineteenth-Century America, An Exploration of Ritual and Equipage with a Case Study of Virginia Probate Inventories," MA Thesis, George Washington University, 1990, 104.

nineteenth century, and many of them commented on American habits in their letters, diaries, and publications.

The history of instruments of the table is finally a popular topic, but most of the work that has been done has taken an art history approach; the focus on form and design has preceded function in the study of flatware. It has been difficult to find many American sources that describe domestic methods of eating. Fortunately, contemporary English travelers, such as Basil and Margaret Hall, cannot say enough about the peculiarities of American eating habits. Through their eyes it is possible to uncover American dining customs between 1810 and 1850. In this period, the English were extremely vocal in their criticisms, and, by implementing the use of the fork, Americans drastically shifted the ways in which they ate to live up to European standards. This troubled some citizens, and a war at the table began; one side favoring the fashionable European technique of eating with a fork, and the other that clung to the archaic method of using a knife. Eventually the desire to feel equal in all ways, including at the table, to a European power such as England, encouraged the eventual wide spread use of the fork.

Most scholarly works that includes information about the evolution of the fork tends to have an art historians perspective. In *Feeding Desire: Designs and Tools of the Table 1500-2005*, eight curators and specialists examine the evolution, physical form, and social meanings of utensils throughout history.⁶ This book, published alongside an exhibit at the Cooper-Hewitt Museum of the same name, includes an abundance of images from the exhibit, as well as seven essays on distinctly different topics in the field of flatware. The curators note the changes in table settings rather than emphasizing the ways that the utensils were used, and focus on paintings of elaborate dinner tables and intricate utensils that appear to be more for ceremony than use. While

⁶ Sarah D. Coffin, Ellen Lupton, Darra Goldstein, Barbara Bloemink, Sarah von Drachenfels, Phillapa Glanville, Jennifer Goldsborough, and Caroline C. Young, *Feeding Desire: Design and Tools of the Table, 1500-2005* (New York: Assouline Publishing, 2006), 16-186.

the use of artwork that depicts more common usage of the fork and how it changed is certainly important, more research needs to be done that describes how Americans were eating.

Barbara Carson's publication, *Ambitious Appetites: Dining Behavior, and Patterns of Consumption in Federal Washington*, is the most exhaustive study on the topic of American eating habits and their European counterparts to date. She examines the American diner in and around Washington D.C. at the turn of the nineteenth-century. Her work critiques foreign interpretations and reactions to American eating habits, as well as an examination of probate inventories.⁷

John F. Kasson's work, *Rudeness & Civility: Manners in Nineteenth-Century Urban America*, complements Carson's work well.⁸ He continues to examine the relationship between people who ate with forks versus those who ate with knives, but also includes considerable information on etiquette practices throughout the nineteenth-century. While Carson uses the population of Federal Washington D.C. to examine eating habits and manners, Kasson focuses his research on urban areas in general throughout the entirety of the nineteenth-century.

C.T.P. Bailey focuses more on the seemingly glamorous knife to the detriment of the fork.⁹ The English, such as Bailey, have made cutlery a subject of considerable scholarly work, particularly the ways in which the knife and fork were used. Much has been written about European methods of eating, but little attention has been paid to the American diner. Scholars have written numerous works on American table etiquette, place settings, and food choice, but they have only tangentially commented upon American eating habits.

⁷ Barbara Carson, *Ambitious Appetites: Dining, Behavior, and Patterns of Consumption in Federal Washington* (New York: the American Institute of Architects Press, 1990), 25-74.

⁸ John F. Kasson, *Rudeness & Civility: Manners in Nineteenth-Century Urban America* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1990), 55-88.

⁹ C.T.P. Bailey, *Knives and Forks* (London: Medici Society, 1927).

The German Sociologist, Norbert Elias argues that the development and use of the fork is an indicator of “the civilizing process.”¹⁰ The introduction of the fork, and its eventual widespread use, replaced methods of eating that had been around for millennia. The origin of the fork can be found with the Medici and other Italian nobility during the fifteenth century, although widespread usage did not occur until the latter half of the sixteenth-century.¹¹ While they formed a part of the table setting in Italy, their usage did not spread to other regions until the latter part of the seventeenth century. This period was one of trial, change, and acceptance. In short, the evolution of the fork paralleled, “the development of Western Civilization.”¹²

Etiquette books written before the widespread introduction of the fork treat manual feeding rituals as nothing short of an art form. For example, during the mid-fifteenth-century the book *La Contenance de la Table* exhorted children not to blow their noses with the same hand in which they take their food.¹³ Jean Sulpice, the author of another fifteenth-century etiquette book described the proper manner in which to convey food to the mouth, “it is wrong to grab your food with both hands at once; meat should be taken with three fingers and too much should not be put into the mouth at the same time.”¹⁴ When practiced correctly this method of eating had an air of delicacy and grace.

For those who were fortunate enough to afford personal eating utensils, the knife was used as a substitute for hands or spoons. The knife has always been a staple item of the table, but its capacity to transfer food to the mouth was not its primary function during the Middle Ages.

¹⁰ Darra Goldstein, “Implements of Eating,” *Feeding Desire: Design and Tools of the Table, 1500-2005* (New York: Assouline Publishing, 2006), n206.

¹¹ Philippa Glanville and Hilary Young eds, *Elegant Eating: Four-Hundred Years of Dining in Style* (London: Victoria & Albert Pub., 2002).

¹² Goldstein, 116.

¹³ C.T.P. Bailey, *Knives and Forks* (London: Medici Society, 1927), 1.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 2.

As one might imagine, the purpose of the knife has always been to cut an item to a more manageable size for consumption, as can be seen in an engraving from Nuremberg.¹⁵

A hierarchical division of appropriate eating utensils, or lack thereof, during the fifteenth-century can be seen distinctly in the 1491 engraving, *Schatzbehalter*, from Nuremberg (Fig. 1).¹⁶ Footmen surround the King, at the head table. The footman in the left hand corner can be seen carving the King's food to place on his trencher. The King has a personal eating knife, which may be used to further divide his meal, and possibly to lift food to his mouth. The people sitting at the table on the right of the picture only have spoons at their disposal, while those at the table on the left have no utensils at all.

Outside of Italy, hands, knives, and spoons were the primary conveyers of food throughout Europe until the seventeenth-century. During this period other European travelers took note and slowly adopted some of those methods in their own countries. Thomas Coryat, who is celebrated with possibly introducing the fork to England, described how taken he became with the new utensil, "Hereupon I myselfe [sic] thought good to imitate the Italian fashion by this forked cutting of meate [sic], not only while I was in Italy, but also in Germany, and oftentimes in England, since I came home..."¹⁷ From that point it took a little over a century for the practice of eating with a fork to take hold in England. However, Britain's colonies in North America did not adopt the practice until considerably later.

Writing in 1829, an author referring to himself as Dick Humelbergius Secundus reaffirms fork's materials available for use in America: "Our forks, therefore, are of a quite different

¹⁵ Peter Brown, ed. *British Cutlery: An Illustrated History of Design, Evolution and Use* (London: York Civic Trust, 2002), 68.

¹⁶ *Plate from Schatzbehalter der Wahren Reichtumer des Hails* (image) (Anton Koberger: Nuremberg, 1491) as seen in Darra Goldstein, "Implements of Eating," *Feeding Desire: Design and Tools of the Table, 1500-2005* (New York: Assouline Publishing, 2006), 23.

¹⁷ Bailey, 6-7.

shape- the steel ones being bidental [sic], and the silver ones generally tridental [sic]...”¹⁸ His work focused on comparing the differences between forks and chopsticks, although his claims that forks migrated from China into Italy are somewhat misguided.

There existed a specific vocabulary for utensils and their functions. Sources that describe silver forks usually refer to forks with three or more tines. If the term silver forks are used, the fork itself is the conveyer of food to the mouth, with the knife simply acting as a utensil to cut. For example, the forks pictured in Figure 2 are examples of turn of the 19th century English silver forks.¹⁹ The design of the forks follows their function; the curved head allows for ready conveyance of food, while the multiple tines stabilize items while being lifted.

While the wealthy had access to silver forks, the majority of the American population commonly used two-pronged forks. The purpose of these steel or iron utensils was to hold the food item while it was being cut, or to raise large objects to the mouth, a practice that was looked upon with some disgust by many European visitors.²⁰ Usually, when one ate with a two-pronged fork, the knife would be used like a spoon to lift items to the lips. The two-pronged forks displayed in Figure 3 are examples of American forks from the early nineteenth-century.²¹ The heads of these forks are flatter than the silver forks previously discussed, which suggests that the function of these utensils was solely to stabilize food while being cut.

In surveying eating habits among Americans during the nineteenth-century, it must be noted that no habit was universal. There were differences in regional availability of items,

¹⁸ Dick Humelbergius Secundus, *Apician Morsels, or Tales of the Table, Kitchen and Larder* (New York: J. and J. Harper, 1829), 80.

¹⁹ “Set of Six Irish Silver Forks” (image). Available from: Brunk Auctions online November 3 catalog < <http://www.brunkauctions.com/>> (accessed 02 Nov 2007).

²⁰ Barbara Carson, *Ambitious Appetites: Dining, Behavior, and Patterns of Consumption in Federal Washington* (New York: the American Institute of Architects Press, 1990), 58.

²¹ “Two-pronged forks and Knives” (image). Available from: Brunk Auctions online November 3 catalog < <http://www.brunkauctions.com/>> (accessed 02 Nov 2007).

varying degrees of personal preferences, and utensils that, due to their novelty, were only available to the upper and middle classes. The distinctions between British and American eating methods and manners were most pronounced in the early nineteenth-century, but diminished over the next hundred years.

This work focuses on the middle, and to some degree, the upper class in the first quarter of the nineteenth-century. An etiquette book published in Hartford, Connecticut in 1849 described the rationality of only looking to these classes, because the author claims that the, “lower orders are ignorant, from want of means or instruction; the higher, from indolence and perpetually increasing incapacity.”²² The author concludes that one must look to the middle class for “good society,” since it is the, “class which has not had its ideas contradicted by laborious occupations, nor its mental powers annihilated by luxury.”²³ This class is the most important when looking at changes in etiquette, since they had the means in which to purchase new utensils, but chose whether or not they wanted to. The wealthy bought new forks once they were available without question, since they tried to stay on the cutting edge of table fashions. The middle class, however, was able to decide if the new utensils were worth the money and change in lifestyle as they learned how to use them.

One traveler who encouraged the immediate adoption of the fork was Margaret Hall. As an English aristocrat, Hall was taken aback at how desperately many Americans sought validation of their manners. While staying in Albany, New York in 1827, she noted that everyone’s mind appeared to be, “bent in seeming quite English in their manners and customs, but a lurking suspicion that they are not quite what they ought to be makes them seek to have

²² An American Lady, *Ladies' Vase, or, Polite Manual for Young Ladies* (Hartford: H.S. parsons and Co., 1849),

²³ *Ibid.*,

their opinion confirmed by those who they think qualified to judge.”²⁴ While her own feelings of superiority may have affected her judgement, this was not a singular incident. In several entries she complains about the persistent manner-related inquiries of some Americans:

What can I say? I can't tell people who are doing their best to amuse and please me that they are not within a hundred degrees of the polish and refinement of English society; the very question shows their deficiency, for what can be more ill-bred than to ask anyone what they think of yourself, in fact, neither more nor less.²⁵

Her writings describe a general American ignorance of “English matters,” especially as they related to etiquette at the table.²⁶ While her own prejudices surely factored into her conclusion, she claimed “...even they themselves cannot deny the superior importance of England to them over America to us.”²⁷ This appears a strange comment to make of a nation which prided itself on Independence and Liberty. Americans, while confident in their budding systems of government, did not have the same confidence at the table opposite the English, and looked to them for guidance and acceptance.

Hall was not alone in her observations of vulgar behavior; an Anglo-German Aristocrat wrote a journal early in the nineteenth-century that recalled a conversation with an American woman at a dinner party. At the sight of his, “formidable” European “three-pronged fork,” she decried the manners of her fellow guests during the meal, “Indeed...our people do not know how to eat.”²⁸ Though the Aristocrat objected to her statement, she continued, referring to her fellow American diners, “And you call that eating?...What must the English think of us when they see us act in this manner? Oh! I wish dinner were over!”²⁹ Based on this passage, it appears that either the aristocrat carried his own utensil with him (and therefor had a different fork than

²⁴ Hall, 70.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 23.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 75.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 75.

²⁸ *Aristocracy in America*, ed. Francis J. Grund (Gloucester, Mass.: Peter Smith, 1968), 42.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 42.

everyone else), or was the only member at the table with uniform utensils that operated the fork with any skill. The uncouth table manners displayed by her fellow countrymen horrified the young lady to such an extent that she felt compelled to apologize to her foreign guest. Americans in the early nineteenth-century began to acknowledge what they considered inadequacies at the table. For some the movement towards refinement and acceptance in the presence of Europeans became an obsession.

The item that was the center of such insecurities, and what caused the lady at the dinner party such distress, was the silver fork. In Garrick Mallery's 1888 journal article from *The American Anthropologist*, he described a transitional period which affected Americans in the first half of the nineteenth-century:

Quite recently forks have been made with three, four or five tines, leaving such small spaces between them as to allow of the ready and convenient conveyance of peas for instance. Now such forks, when first invented, were almost always made of the precious metals and were marks of wealth and culture. People who did not have them still used the knife as a means of conveyance, *ergo*, people who ate with their knife were not cultured, that is, were vulgar.³⁰

Writing at the end of the nineteenth-century, Mallery described a time when multiple-tined forks could only be bought by the elite. During this period of change, American public opinion split regarding the proper usage of the fork. Two camps emerged: one adopted European dining habits, while the other rejected the primacy of the fork.

Numerous English travelers wrote extensively of their disgust with the American habit of eating with knives. This trait so disgusted Margaret Hall that she could barely stop talking about the subject over the course of a year. While visiting Captain Partridge's Military School in New Haven, Connecticut in October of 1827, she was appalled when she saw the young cadets, "Helping themselves to butter, stewed onions, salt, or potatoes, all with their own nasty knives,

³⁰ Garrick Mallery, "Manners and Meals," *The American Anthropologist* I (July 1888): 200.

which the moment before they had been eating...”³¹ While this may be perceived as an isolated incident reflective of military culture, only four months before Mrs. Hall proclaimed that Americans, “...one and all, male and female, eat invariably and indefatigably with their knives.”³² Hall became horrified by American table manners and carefully catalogued all of their deficiencies during meal-times. “It goes rather against one’s feelings to see a prettily-dressed, nice-looking, young woman laddling rice pudding into her mouth with a great knife, and yesterday to my great horror I saw a nursery maid feeding an infant of seventeen months in the same way.”³³

Though her comments on the Americans are highly critical and belittling, it is important to remember that her book was not intended for publication. It acted as a travel journal to record the events of her trip across the Atlantic and is, in some cases, more valuable than her husband’s work. Basil Hall wrote for publication, and most likely self-censored his work for a diverse audience (which included Americans). Margaret was only writing for herself and the amusement of her family, but she was not alone in her harsh judgements of the Americans.

Another critical English traveler during the same period was the redoubtable English traveler Francis Trollope. Writing in 1828, she criticized Americans for the speed at which they ate, their spitting from the table, and, “the frightful manner of feeding with their knives, till the whole blade seemed to enter their mouth;...the dinner hour was to be any thing rather than an hour of enjoyment.”³⁴ Even an American gentleman, writing ten years after Margaret Hall’s and Francis Trollope’s travels, dismayed at a guest’s manners when he came to dine.

³¹ Hall, 112-113.

³² *Ibid.*, 35.

³³ Hall., 35-36.

³⁴ Francis Trollope, *Domestic Manners of the Americans*, ed. Donald Smalley (New York: Vintage Books, 1949), 18-19.

How important are some things, which many persons regard as trifles. Manners & personal habits for instance. Mr. B. today ate with his knife, smacked his lips, . . . and I was so much annoyed and disgusted that, tho I respect the man & do not dislike his conversation, I was glad to get rid of him.³⁵

The use of a knife to eat appeared to get a stronger reaction than that of eating with a fork. Very few examples describe a strong distaste to forks when utilized in a European fashion, but descriptions of lost appetites, dismay, and horror can be found when writing about the knife.³⁶

The habit of using a knife to bring food to one's mouth had been eradicated in England decades before. According to Basil Hall, conveying food to the mouth "was followed in England only by the lowest vulgar."³⁷ In the humorous watercolor from 1816 (Fig. 4), a group of men can be seen devouring chicken speared on their two-pronged forks.³⁸ Drawings like this certainly exaggerated the vulgarity of eating at an American table, but this caricature was a commonly perceived notion among Europeans. It is not known whether this image was drawn as an example of how Americans were actually eating, or just as a perceptive exaggeration of the differences of eating habits of the Americans to the English.

Even people of little means ate with multiple-tined forks in England, as can be seen in an English etiquette book from 1839, "We have said nothing about the use of silver forks, because we do not write for savages; and where, excepting among savages, shall we find any who at present eat with other than a French fork?"³⁹ The author continued by referencing the transitional period that was occurring in England as well:

³⁵ *A Philadelphia perspective: the Diary of Sidney George Fisher, Covering the Years 1834-1871*, ed. Nicholas B. Wainwright (Philadelphia: The Historical Society of Pennsylvania, 1967), 50.

³⁶ Hall, 35-36; Trollope, 18-19; *Philadelphia Perspective*, 50.

³⁷ Hall in Carson, 61.

³⁸ Abraham Kenuckofritz. "The Delphian Club of Baltimore Celebrating its First Anniversary" (image). Available from Barbara Carson, *Ambitious Appetites: Dining, Behavior, and Patterns of Consumption in Federal Washington* (New York: the American Institute of Architects Press, 1990), 58.

³⁹ A Gentleman, *The Laws of Etiquette or, Short Rules and Reflections for Conduct in Society* (Philadelphia: Carey, Lea & Blanchard, 1839), 148.

There are, it is true, occasionally to be found some ancients, gentlemen of the old school, as it is termed, who persist in preferring steel, and who will insist on calling for a steel fork if there is none on the table. They consider the modern custom an affectation, and deem that all affectation should be avoided. They tread upon the pride of Plato, with more pride...⁴⁰

This reference to “old-school” manners reflects the dying practice of eating with a knife in England. Where Basil Hall claimed that only the “lowest vulgar” practiced the habit when he wrote in 1827, the author of the English etiquette book claimed that there were “gentlemen” who still insisted on calling for heir steel knives.⁴¹

Everyone did not have the same sentiments of travelers such as Trollope, Hall, or other English authors. As more visitors were commenting on the use of forks, young “fashionables” in America wanted to be among the first to use such stylish utensils. However, not everyone in America was willing or able to go to the silversmith and order a set of forks. Some citizens hearkened back to opinions of Noah Webster, who argued in 1788 that his fellow countrymen should create their own, unique identity, “Americans must *believe* and *act* from the belief that it is dishonorable to waste life in mimicking the follies of other nations and basking in the sunshine of foreign glory.”⁴² The use of forks at the table infringed upon a sense of national identity that some citizens associated with the use of knives. By “mimicking” foreign “follies,” Americans lost some of their sense of national pride, and some did not see the advantage of following European manners when they felt that there were no deficiencies with their own.

Writing in 1836, Eliza Farrar detailed a conversation she had with an old gentleman on the subject of new manners. In the conversation, the old man decried the conduct of a stylish gentleman who ate with them at a dinner party, “Whereas those who have always been used to

⁴⁰ Ibid., 148-149.

⁴¹ Ibid., 148-149; Basil Hall in Carson, 61.

⁴² Noah Webster, *On the Education of Youth in America* (Boston:, 1790), reprinted in *Essays on Education in the Early Republic*, ed. Frederick Rudolph (Cambridge, Mass., 1965), 77.

silver forks and cut glass have no fear of doing wrong; they suppose, like you, that helping potatoes must come of itself, and so they never think about it, and do so awkwardly all their lives.”⁴³ The speaker was piqued with Americans who were so eager to curry favor with European travelers that they neglected common table manners.

In some cases silver utensils were even seen as pretentious and sent the wrong message to other diners. In 1820, Louisa Catherine Adams recalled a conversation she had with her friend, Mr. Randolph, who had gone to a presidential candidate’s dinner party. At the party Mr. Randolph’s place was set with a “four pronged silver fork,” and he declared that he knew a person who would never “vote for a man who made use of such forks.”⁴⁴ The fact that the man would not vote for a President who used silver forks likely indicated that the common citizen did not own such utensils. The want of a President who represented the common man was actualized in 1828 with the election of Andrew Jackson. Jackson’s public receptions were open to all citizens, including the “men begrimed with sweat and filth.”⁴⁵ These same men would not own stylish silver forks. If a President wanted to represent the common man, he would do everything that he could to appease them, including not alienating them at the table due to the utensil he chose.

Not everyone agreed that silver forks were the way of the future. Eliza Farrar, the author of the 1836 etiquette manual, *The Young Lady’s Friend*, was among the most outspoken of American authors who were in favor of the “old-fashioned” habit of eating with knives. “If you

⁴³ Eliza Ware Farrar, *The Young Lady’s Friend* (Boston: American Stationer’s Company, 1836), 354.

⁴⁴ Barbara Carson, *Common People and their Material World: Free Men and Women in the Chesapeake, 1700-1830*, (Richmond: Colonial Williamsburg Publications), 71.

⁴⁵ Jack Larkin, *The Reshaping of Everyday Life: 1790-1840* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1989), 162.

wish to imitate the French or English, you will put every mouthful into your mouth with your fork...”⁴⁶ Farrar continued by proposing a more nationalistic form of eating:

...if you think, as I do, that Americans have as good a right to their own fashions as the inhabitants of any other country, you may choose the convenience of feeding yourself with your right hand, armed with a steel blade; and provided you do it neatly, and do not put in large mouthfuls, or close your lips tightly over the blade, you ought not to be considered as eating ungentlely [sic].⁴⁷

This sense of national identity fueled a war at the table between silver forks and knives for people like Farrar. Sharing Webster’s distaste for foreign “follies,” Farrar was one of the few authors of etiquette books during the 1830’s that argued to ignore the new European fashion of eating. She tried to persuade Americans to retain a sense of national identity at the table, arguing that it did not have to be considered ungentle.⁴⁸

Garrick Mallery cautiously agreed with Farrar’s beliefs in his article, though he admitted that people who ate with knives were social outcasts:

It is absurd to say, as it generally is said, that the objection to the vehicular use of the knife is from danger to the corners of the mouth. I venture to wager that among the thousands and tens of thousands of persons in the rural districts who still use the knife in that so-called vulgar manner there never was an accident produced by that operation; and, indeed, while, in deference to society’s canon, I totally repudiate it myself, I am obliged to confess that some of the most cultured and dignified persons I have ever met did in fact carry portions of their food to their mouth by this process.⁴⁹

Both Farrar and Mallery were in the minority. While Farrar was writing during a major transitional period of eating habits and utensils, Mallery, writing in 1888, wrote well after the habit of eating with a knife had supposedly been stamped out. In his article, he references, “thousands and tens of thousands of persons” who still ate with knives in the rural districts of

⁴⁶ Farrar, 346.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 346-347.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 347.

⁴⁹ Mallery, 200-201.

America.⁵⁰ The practice at that time was unheard of among the socially conscious. The tide of eating with forks began to turn in the 1840's, following the publication of numerous English travel narratives that ridiculed American dining practices. The progress of this transformation can be seen in many etiquette books of the time.

Despite intense public debate over the proper use of forks, some British visitors preferred to remain neutral. In 1839, English politician Frederick Marryat traveled to America to examine the political structure in the new and developing nation. In the introduction of his book, Marryat was irritated by the gossipy travelers who preceded him.

Was there so little to be remarked about America, its government, its institutions, and the effect which these had upon the people that the pages of so many writers upon that country should be filled up with how Americans dined or drank wine, and what description of what spoons and forks were used at table?⁵¹

In a humorous passage, Marryat chides the travelers who came to America before him: "I did not sail across the Atlantic to ascertain whether the Americans eat their dinners with two-pronged iron or three-pronged silver forks,...; it is quite sufficient for me to know that they do eat and drink; if they did not, it would be a curious anomaly which I should not pass over."⁵²

For those who did care about utensils and their usage, the sketch "The Farmers [sic] Son Metamorphosed into a Finished Exquisite (Fig. 5)," clearly illustrates an example of reactions to different flatware during the transitional period of the 1830's. The son, upon returning home, faints at the sight of his parent's flatware.⁵³ "O! dear! [sic] Remove that horrible vulgar looking

⁵⁰ Ibid., 200.

⁵¹ Frederick Marryat, *A Diary in America: With Remarks on Its Institutions*, Sydney Jackman ed., (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1962), 3.

⁵² Marryat, 15.

⁵³ "The Farmers [sic] Son Metamorphosed into a Finished Exquisite" (image). Available in John F. Kasson, *Rudeness & Civility: Manners in Nineteenth-Century Urban America* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1990), 192.

two pronged iron fork from my plate or it will be the death of me.”⁵⁴ The stern-looking father questions, “Well I wonder if this is really my son Bob that used to eat his pork & beans in the fields with the dung-fork across his lap.”⁵⁵ The lady holding the son cries, “Dear! Dear! [sic] What a thing it is to travel to foreign parts and get polished!”⁵⁶

Over the course of one frame, the illustrator manages to capture all of the conflicting opinions Americans had with the introduction of silver forks. The son, obviously submitting himself to the European fashion, become overwhelmed at the sight of his parents’ forks, while the mother referenced the change in his attitude due to foreign influences. The father, on the other hand, doe not understand his son’s sudden distaste for his own heritage, and is in disbelief at his reaction. From the three peaking characters of the drawing, the son cared the most about which utensil he would use.

The authors of etiquette books also cared deeply about which utensil was appropriate at the table, and began to take a stricter approach to stamp out knife eating during the 1840’s. Only forty years before, authors excluded forks entirely and focused solely on the proper ways to eat with a knife or fingers. Subsequent works, however, declared forks as the only appropriate option.

Two books that were published in 1843 described the situation at the American table. In an *Etiquette for Ladies*, the author forewarns the reader of the difficulties of eating at an “old-fashioned” house. “Knives were made for cutting, and those who carry food to their mouths with

⁵⁴ Kasson, 192.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 192.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 192.

them, frequently cut their lips. Eat always with a fork or spoon- unless, indeed, in those old-fashioned houses, where there are only two-pronged forks, you are obliged to use your knife.”⁵⁷ The thought of having to eat at an “old-fashioned” house and possibly risking the safety of their lips may have been too much for some readers to bear, since they were trying so hard to eradicate the use of knives entirely.

The author’s opinions were mirrored in an etiquette book written by Count D’Orsay in the same year. Though a foreigner, D’Orsay was writing for publication in both England and the United States. He agrees with the author of the previous etiquette book, and states that, “at every respectable table you will find silver forks...Steel forks, except for carving, are now never to be placed on the table.”⁵⁸ He continues with a more severe tone, condoning the use of knives, “NEVER use your knife to convey food to your mouth, *under any circumstances*; it is unnecessary, and glaringly vulgar. Feed yourself with a fork or spoon, nothing else- a knife is *only* to be used for cutting.”⁵⁹ By the end of the decade the mention of knives as an alternative to forks had disappeared completely, as can be seen in the *Handbook of Etiquette for Gentlemen*: “Always feed yourself with a fork; a knife is only used as a divider.”⁶⁰ Now there was no excuse for using a knife to convey food to the mouth. Even mention of having to eat at an “old-fashioned” house has disappeared.

⁵⁷ A Lady of New York, *Etiquette for Ladies; A Manual of the most Approved Rules of Conduct in Polished Society for Married and Unmarried Ladies* (Philadelphia: J. & J. L. Gihon, 1843), 49.

⁵⁸ Count Alfred D’Orsay, *Etiquette; or, A Guide to the Usages of Society with a Glance at Bad Habits* (New York: Wilson and Company, 1843), 15.

⁵⁹ D’Orsay, 15.

⁶⁰ An American Gentleman, True Politeness. *A Hand-Book of Etiquette for Gentlemen* (Philadelphia: George S. Appleton, 1849), 45.

During the first half of the 1850's, the use of forks appeared to be commonplace in every "respectable" household.⁶¹ According to an etiquette book written for the population of Washington, "Napkins and forks are in such general use that no person would think of giving dinner without them."⁶² The author of this book goes so far as to mention that, "There can arise no circumstance which would justify a person carrying his food to his mouth with a knife."⁶³ In the twenty-five years following Basil Hall's comments on his fellow Englishmen, not even the "lowest vulgar" in American society should eat without a fork.⁶⁴

Subsequently, children's etiquette books took a severe approach during this period to ensure that the habit of eating with knives never returned. In a chapter in the book, *Etiquette for Little Folks; or, the Art of Good Behavior*, Mrs. Henry Mackarness described a situation where a child does everything wrong at the table:

At dinner he is more uncommonly awkward. There he tucks his napkin through his button hole...he sits at so great a distance from the table that he frequently drops his meat between his plate and his mouth; he holds his knife, fork, and spoon differently from other people; eats with his knife, to the manifest danger of his mouth; picks his teeth with his fork, rakes his mouth with his finger, and puts his spoon, which has been in his throat a dozen times, into the dish again.⁶⁵

This child managed to perform every duty at the table incorrectly. By having an example of such an ill-mannered youth, other children reading such etiquette books saw a glaring example of what not to do. Proponents of European sensibilities had won out, and the habit of eating with a knife would ultimately be stamped out in most urban areas of America over the next century.

⁶¹ An American Lady, *True Politeness: A Hand-Book of Etiquette for Ladies* (Philadelphia: George S. Appleton, 1851), 48.

⁶² *Etiquette at Washington, Together with the Customs Adopted by Polite Society in the other Cities of the United States* (Baltimore: J. Murphy, 1850), 103.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 103.

⁶⁴ Carson, 61.

⁶⁵ Mrs. Henry S. Mackarness, *Etiquette for Little Folks; or, the Art of Good Behavior* (Boston: G. W. Cottrell, 1856).

By the late nineteenth-century, the mention of knives as eating utensils is barely mentioned. Garrick Mallery, however, describes some of the “tens of thousands” of rural inhabitants that still use knives.⁶⁶ He claims that the “transgressors” were, “all recruits to the eastern cities from the sturdy families of farmers, who had not in early life been accustomed to seeing three or four tined forks.”⁶⁷ Therefore the habit was not one in which they could even care to overcome.⁶⁸ It would be interesting research to examine why these rural households did not adopt eating with a fork until considerably later. While the explanation citing limited financial means might explain the situation in a few brief paragraphs, it is possible that there are more interesting rationalizations. Perhaps these rural communities agree with the opinions of Americans like Farrar and Webster, and see their use of the knife as a symbol of their national identity.

In addition to the statements of Mallery, a rural table covering from 1870 (Fig. 5) confirms the primary use of knives when eating.⁶⁹ The quilted covering was used to cloak the table when it was not in use. The two-pronged forks indicate that the knives were used to eat with, while the forks acted as a stabilizer. It is not certain, however, whether or not the flatware designs were used to signify which utensils the household actually used, or more as folk art which represented previous American traditions.

The evolution of the fork in America illustrates a period of transition that was met with much insecurity. Utensils, while conveying a person’s station and manners, could also support their sense of national identity. While the English were criticizing American methods of eating, some Americans, like Eliza Farrar and Garrick Mallery, believed that they were entitled to retain

⁶⁶ Mallery, 201.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 201.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 201.

⁶⁹ “Table Cover” (image). Available in Jean Lipman and Alice Winchester, *American Folk Art 1776-1876* (New York: The Viking Press, 1974), 277.

their own manners of eating that would be considered just as proper. These people were in the minority, and faced harsh cosmopolitan sneers. By the end of the nineteenth-century the habit of eating with a knife had lost all of its legitimacy, and was considered a primitive method of eating that was only done by poor households in rural districts.

Opponents to American eating habits, like Margaret Hall, Francis Trollope, and the numerous authors of Etiquette books, argued that Americans were vulgar for eating in such a “disgusting” manner. They wasted no time in cataloging and describing every offense Americans made at the table. From their publications and complaints, these authors soon had a following of fashionable Americans who wanted to buy multiple tined silver forks. The standardization of utensils that mimicked European ones became a popular objective, and most resigned to the prevailing fashion of eating with forks. A quote from *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine* puts it best when put into the context of the war at the American table, “Show me the way people dine and I will tell you their rank among civilized beings.”⁷⁰

⁷⁰ “Silver and Silver Plate,” *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine* 37 (September 1868): 434.

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