

I recently read a short novel by a Japanese author. The book is called *Kitchens*, and the main character was fascinated by that most useful room in one's house. So, of course, my thoughts turned to kitchens, both in general and in particular.

The old farmhouse where I grew up has a very satisfactory kitchen. The room is large and square, fifteen feet by fifteen feet. There is a long, narrow window on the north side, next to the door from the house to the woodshed. On the west side is a high window over the kitchen cupboards.

The kitchen has changed a little during the years I have been acquainted with it, primarily when that high window replaced the original, when an electric range joined the woodburning stove, and cupboards built under the new window made more storage space than the old freestanding kitchen cabinet had done. But, the character of the room was not altered. It just made food preparation and preservation a little easier for my mother.

The kitchen was the center of life in the farmhouse. In addition to the chairs around the table, there was always a straight chair next to the door leading to what was technically the dining room but that functioned more like the family rooms of today. And by the door leading to the woodshed was a chair with arms and a pad on the seat—my father's favorite resting place when he came in from the barn in the morning.

We ate all of our family meals in the kitchen. The round oak table in the dining room was only used when there was company for dinner or supper. A maple table and chairs in the kitchen served as the family eating spot.

Visitors almost always sat in the kitchen. The coffee pot would come out along with whatever my mother had most recently baked—usually very recently, since there weren't many days without cookies, pies, cakes, or breads coming from the oven.

Coming in from the woodshed, there was a door on the left that led to the stairs to the second floor. Next to the door was an old white cast iron kitchen sink and drainboard, and above the sink was a large, oval mirror. The mirror was turned so that the long side was horizontal. One of my dad's brothers, a lifelong railway worker, had acquired the discarded mirror from a wrecked train in the early 1920s. Next along that east wall was the refrigerator, followed, in the corner, by the woodbox. On the south wall were the stoves—the woodburning range and the electric stove. And, the west side was all cupboards.

When the aunts and uncles were there—or other company of more than a couple of people—the women tended to migrate to the dining room while the men and their cigars stayed in the kitchen. The conversations in both rooms were worthy of my interest, and, during my youth, I gleaned much family and neighborhood history from listening in.

The problem, of course, was which room should have my attention. I usually solved this dilemma by standing in the doorway between the kitchen and dining room with my right ear catching the gist of the talk of the women, and my left ear tuned in to the kitchen. When something came up that was particularly interesting, I could move into that room and listen in earnest.

From the kitchen talk, I learned that my father, Uncle Lincoln, and Uncle Albert agreed on the particulars of the day that lightning killed a good team of horses in the huckleberry country. I also learned about the old time shivarees (local spelling), especially Stella Schafer's. From the dining room, I found out which couples in the community had been joined by "shotgun weddings." I also gleaned a lot of practical knowledge from that room—how to correctly tie the fringes on a rag rug, Aunt Ellen's blitz torte recipe, and the fact that Aunt Joey DID know that her daughter had been "sneaking" marshmallows.

But, my heart was really in the kitchen, where I spent a lot of time during the winter standing with my back to the cookstove, keeping warm while I read. And a preference for a kitchen over all other places in a house has remained with me through the years.