

A HISTORY OF THE CHICKEN BOOYAH PHENOMENON

By

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In Green Bay, Wisconsin Republican State Rep John Macco introduced a bill in early 2016 to make Chicken Booyah the state soup. Several Democrats, including State Senator Dave Hansen, co-sponsored the bill. They felt this soup represented the large population of Belgians who settled in the state. According to an aide at John Macco's office, they didn't plan to choose a particular soup recipe, and just call the state soup "Booyah." But at a June 3rd booyah event at St. John Evangelist Church in Green Bay, Hansen said the bill was "thrown out." Turned out not enough people outside of Green Bay know what Booyah is. Hansen agreed that with a little notoriety, they might be able to resubmit the bill.

In stepped Taylor Hicks, his production team and the new cable limited series State Plate. They got wind of this unusual concoction and wanted to film us making it. As my mother had just died the month before, the task to do the cooking fell on her sister, and Alexander Hannon's granddaughter, Marlene Olejniczak.



Marlene Olejniczak cooked the original 1894 recipe on 6/3/16 for the State Plate taping.

Hannon’s Booyah got attention because of a previous editorial to the *Green Bay Press Gazette* in response to a recipe they published. “Green Bay Chicken Booyah” appeared in the cookbook, *Cook’s Country Eats Local*. The ingredients included cabbage and tomato. All in good fun and good taste, I complained in an editorial, saying that my great-grandfather invented Chicken Booyah and he would never put cabbage or tomato in it. My point there—and here—is that there is no such thing as “Green Bay Chicken Booyah” because of all the varieties being made in the Green Bay area.

When the reporter contacted me to follow up on my editorial, I reiterated the challenge for anyone to come up with a booyah creation story that’s earlier than Hannon’s. He got some responses to the article, but no challenges. Here, then, is a history of booyah from the perspective of Hannon’s creation, based on oral family history, with a nod to other recipes in the area.

THE HISTORY



Alex's parents Francois and Celine Hannon from *Voyageur*, "Amazing Grace" by Judith Carlson, Fall 2011

Alex Hannon's grandparents immigrated to this country under the spiritual leadership of Lambert Bodart, who helped the Walloon Belgians move from New York to Wisconsin in 1853. By 1861 they were still struggling to establish themselves and death decimated their ranks. Alex came from hardy stock; his parents survived and settled at Robinsonville (Champion), where many had started a Presbyterian church. The *Voyageur* in 2011 ran an article by Judith Carlson that talked about the Robinsonville Presbyterian Church that served the Belgian community around Champion in Brown County (Champion is 21 minutes from Bellevue).

Alex Hannon was born on September 3, 1882, 6th of nine children of Francois and Celine Hannon. Most of the men in the area, including his father, felled trees and made shingles for rooftops. The children went to school, but most only for a couple of years. In the summers, the children worked the gardens, including Alex, who quickly grew into the tallest in the neighborhood.



Alex is the tallest one, at about age 13. Some are neighborhood kids, others are his siblings. Could one of these boys be Andrew Rentmeester? He's from the area.

Alex was twelve in 1894 when he got his hands on a chicken and wondered what to do with it. Every Sunday his mother made chicken bouillon (they pronounced it boo-yah) by stewing a chicken and adding floured round pastries (dumplings) to make a delightful summer special. Alex decided he could do that and make the neighborhood kids a dinner of their own. So with the help of some boys (perhaps including Rentmeester), they killed, gutted, de-feathered and put a chicken in a water roasting kettle. In true early Belgian tradition, the bones and skin stayed in the pot for added flavor.

After the chicken was cooked, Alex realized he did not know how to make dumplings, and his mother might whack him if she knew he grabbed a chicken. Back then everyone had chickens, but on this particular occasion Alex didn't think to ask whose chicken he had. He went into the garden, gathered up all the vegetables he liked, and threw them into his soup. Alex liked what most boys at that age liked, and what was grown in Belgian gardens at the time. He wasn't German, so cabbage never went into his soup.

What Alex created became the basic chicken booyah known in Northeast Wisconsin today. To this basic soup many add their own likes to create new varieties. The most popular one in the Green Bay area today is made with cabbage and tomatoes, probably because of the large German population in the area.

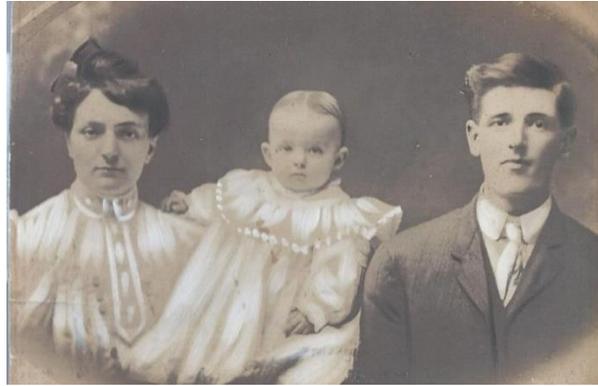
For the Belgian recipe, here's what Alex put in:

- Chicken
- Salt & Pepper
- Green Beans
- Carrots
- Potatoes
- Peas
- Celery
- Onion
- (Corn)

After the chicken was completely cooked in water, it had created its own broth. He then tore the chicken meat from the bones and skin, put it all back into the soup and then added the vegetables.

No, Alex didn't get "whacked" by his mother. She thought the soup, and her son, were quite wonderful, and continued to make it and share it with her friends. She had a large family of nine and making big pots of soup was a way of life for them.

When Alex was 15, he worked in the lumber camps and he made his booyah there—they always gave him plenty of time for cooking, said his granddaughter Betty Fierros. At some point after this, when he couldn't always get his hands on a chicken, he used squirrel or rabbit instead. This led to further experimentation, and the unique recipe today always calls for beef bone, or oxtail—the addition of dark beef meat. Also later on, according to Olejniczak, he added tobasco for flavor.



Alex with his first wife May and Marlene's mother Ethel, around 1905.

Alex was a joyful man who loved putting things together. All through the years he would



2,000 Wood Pieces in Clock — Alex Hannon, 528 Goodell St., used 2,000 pieces of wood of 18 different kinds in making this clock cabinet for his home. It represents 500 hours of work.

make his booyah whenever he was asked. “He would put on his apron and we knew a good meal was coming,” said Fierros. Once his great niece asked him what to do with a turtle she had found, so he put that in, too. Fierros had his booyah for the last time at a 1971 farewell party, as she was moving to Arizona. “I asked him for booyah and of course he came in with his apron on, even though he was 90 by this time, and put on a big kettle for us.”

Alex Hannon was just the kind of person to create something like booyah. He also made “hobo” grandfather

clocks for his two granddaughters. Using small pieces of wood his family and friends sent him from all over the world, his art gained him a little local fame. He also built two houses in Green Bay.

“To me, he could do anything,” Fierros said. “So when he told me the story of how he invented chicken booyah, the soup I was raised on, I believed him.”

Hannon's original Chicken Booyah as the base from which all others are made is based on oral family history. Mary Jane Herber, local historian at the Brown County Library, became incensed by this claim. "Anyone can claim anything and that doesn't make it true." Herber noted how many people have contacted her as at the library to say their family invented Chicken Booyah. But I've not received a challenge to Hannon's date, and she could use that as a basis for establishing validity. An oral story is the starting part (generally with a first-person account) which can then be researched and recorded as a base of written history, as we're trying to accomplish here.

When I asked Herber if she didn't believe oral history had any validity, she complained that I was putting her on the spot.

THE EVOLUTION

Dan Rentmeester's grandfather, Andrew, claimed to have introduced booyah as the first fundraiser. According to the 1976 Press Gazette article, Lester (Dan's father) related how his father was "probably the pioneer of the chicken booyah supper." In 1906 Andrew (who died in 1969) wanted to raise money for the school where he taught, so he "went around to parents and neighbors, gathering up beef and chicken for the local Belgian soup." He also supposedly went to the Press Gazette office for publicity, but this 1976 article did not produce any proof of that 1906 publication, where supposedly the reporter first wrote out the word "booyah."

This claim, that Rentmeester served it first as a community function and first got the word spelled out for that function, is not being challenged. However, whether he was the one who first introduced beef to the mix is impossible to say.

Now just suppose Andrew Rentmeester was one of the friends Hannon had helping with his creation; Rentmeester was a year younger than Alex and they were both living in the same

general area. They also both worked in the local lumber camps. Now when they were both in their 20s, around 1906, Rentmeester cooked up the recipe for a fund raiser. At this time Hannon was a young father; they could have had a falling out for any reason. From there, at some point, Rentmeester devised his own version with cabbage and tomatoes, which became popular in Green Bay's German community.

By the time of the Press Gazette article of October 29, 1976, Les probably didn't even know Hannon's name. Hannon wouldn't have seen the article, because he had died the year before.

Mary Ann Defnet was the local Walloon Belgian historian at the time (she died early in 2016). Back in 1997, Defnet responded to Professor Fleurant at UWGB in his quest to uncover the origin of Booyah. She called the early Walloon Belgians too uneducated to spell "bouillon" so they wrote it as booyah. She found it difficult to believe a school teacher (like Andrew) couldn't spell bouillon, which indicates she missed the link to the word being sounded out from pronunciation. She might also be the one who put "booyah" at Wikipedia, where "booyah" was thought to have derived from the French language words for "to boil" (*bouillir*), and subsequently broth (bouillon). The spelling with an H has been attributed to the phonetic spelling by Walloon immigrants from Belgium.

What's interesting in this Wikipedia entry is the change to the Press Gazette article from 1976 as quoted here. "Lester (Rentmeester) relates recollections of his schoolteacher father, Andrew, probably the "pioneer" of the word "booyah" and **friend of the creator of the soup.**" [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Booyah_\(stew\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Booyah_(stew))

In the actual Press Gazette article, however, "creator" was not used and instead the soup was "probably" Rentmeester's, so at some point that got reworded for Wikipedia. I can imagine

Defnet interviewing Les for Wikipedia and he admitted that it could have been Andrew's friend who created the soup; Dan Rentmeester told me late last year that Andrew was not the originator of the recipe. And Defnet is one of the sources for the Wikipedia article.

Hannon's Booyah evolved over the years. When I was a little girl I used to hate Hannon Booyah, because it had bones. St. John the Baptist church picnics served booyah starting in the 1950s, and according to Olejniczak they would put out little plates on the picnic tables as a place for people to put the bones. No one worried about a choking hazard back then. My mother-in-law, Adeline Reinhard, was also a member of that church, and she made Hannon Booyah, too, for our big family events—she used Hannon's original recipe.

By 1981, while I was managing my father-in-law's golf course restaurant, Vince wanted to offer Hannon Booyah, the kind his wife made. I thought that was a great idea but told him we would have to leave the bones out. He said people would feel cheated if the bones and skin weren't left in. But I asked his friend Ken Nelson, who was at the bar with him, if that was a good idea. And Ken agreed that you'd be taking a chance if someone were to choke on a bone. We never did put it on the menu. This was only seven years after Hannon died. There's probably not a recipe today that leaves the bones in, which is a shame; bone soup is very good for you.

Over the years, Booyah has evolved into the many variations we see today. My suggestion for church picnics, and for seeing the phenomenon move outside of its current local community to the state level, is to attach names to each of the varieties. If you make Hannon Booyah, call it that. If you add cabbage and tomatoes, however, call it Rentmeester's Booyah.

VARIATIONS:

Olejniczak related that Alex burned off the pinfeathers of the chicken before tossing it into the pot. After the big feathers were pulled off, a lot of little feathers were left behind. So he

stuck his hand inside the gutted bird and held it over the flame of the cookstove; those little feathers burned right off.

Now, of course, you just go to a grocery store. From there, you make any number of known varieties in the area today.

At the taping of the Booyah Event with Taylor Hicks on June 3rd, I asked people who attended our event what kinds of varieties they've had. One lady called her booyah "pink" because they put beets in it. Most of them knew Rentmeester's version of cabbage and tomatoes. Cabbage has a very strong flavor and alters the taste of booyah. Let's start naming the variations:

The Original Hannon's Chicken Booyah:

In honor of the first national airing of Hannon's Booyah on State Plate on October 21st, I finally made my very first pot of Booyah for our Packer party on November 13th. First I had to find a pot big enough; I found a nice sized one at Fleet Farm. Next, we had to cook the chicken in water to create the broth. Here was a slight problem—we had to leave town for up to six hours while it was cooking. Joe decided it would work well in our big crock pot with enough water to cover it. When we got home, I transferred the now fully cooked chicken—bones, skin and all—into the big pot and added more water.

Here's where your guesswork will come in. I actually ended up with too much water, but it was soup, right? So add enough water that you think will be enough to hold all the vegetables later, but it's easier to add less and then add a little more, if necessary. I added more water, and then let the chicken keep cooking on low heat until just before bedtime, at which time I added the beef bone and salt and pepper.

The fun part is getting up during the night and stirring. I think I had four and a half hours of sleep that night! But it was worth it.

On Sunday morning, before adding potatoes, I removed the skin and bones from the soup. This was more fun to do than I expected! Of course, the smallest pieces of skin could remain, and provided a tasty amount of fat. The marrow also came out of the beef bone, which I also removed (so no one would get grossed out). After adding a little more salt and pepper I added the chopped up, bite-sized potatoes (about 13 normal whites), about 12 carrots, peeled and chopped, and a stalk of celery (without leaves and ends). After that cooked for a couple hours, remember, on very low heat here, no boiling, I added the frozen (fresh is better) beans, peas, and onions. I opted out of the corn. I'm told corn does not reheat well in the soup. But if you expect it all to go in one day, and have some fresh corn, go ahead and add it. I expected to freeze and reheat about half a pot.

Now remember, the pot should be big enough to hold a whole chicken, up to four gallons of water, and all your vegetables. Keep that in mind before you start. And never ever bring the water to a boil.

The whole process started Saturday morning at about 7 a.m. and was done by 10 a.m. on Sunday. Then all I had to do was wait for the vegetables to finish cooking and serve. This was enough for a house full of people, 14 in all, and about half left over for later. Some had two helpings, so I'd say my first Booyah made my Great-Grandpa Hannon proud.

Andrew Rentmeester's German Booyah

All of the above except they use split peas instead of peas; additional ingredients include pork, cabbage, tomatoes, tomato juice, a can of pork and beans, lemon juice and butter (which my aunt used in place of the skin).

Dan Rentmeester's German Booyah:

Same as his grandfather's but he's perfected the proportions and uses northern beans instead of pork and beans.

- Another tomato/cabbage recipe was printed in the Press Gazette in 1962, using also parsley and navy beans along with 25 lbs. of chicken and 12 lbs. of veal or beef.

Defnet's Booyah:

She noted that traditional bouillon was made by boiling a chicken and adding onion, celery, salt and pepper. Rice would be put on the table to be added, if desired—making it chicken rice soup. Defnet got that information from a woman who was born in 1895, of Belgian descent, who had never seen Booyah as a young person that we know today.

Defnet noted in that letter to the professor: “For years people have been trying to figure out how the concoction originated and what makes it so special. We don’t really need a scientific answer. We just eat and enjoy!” www.uwgb.edu/wisfrench/kitchen/booyalet.htm

See a full recipe published in 1948, with tomatoes and cabbage
<http://www.uwgb.edu/wisfrench/kitchen/booyah.htm>

Some even put noodles, rhubarb or rutabaga in their soup. One who came for the soup on June 3rd asked whether our soup was gluten free. Olejniczak never heard that question before, but it probably comes from those who put noodles in the soup. That, of course, would make it Chicken Noodle soup. You can’t have booyah if it doesn’t have potatoes, although some put noodles with the potatoes.

- I talked to some Caelwarts from Howard who said that they’ve been making booyah since about 1960 and they use a beef roast, have never left the skin or bones on the chicken, but also add tomato juice and cabbage.
- Back in 2002 there was one being served at Chambers Hill, referred to as “Jerry Klika’s recipe.” If anyone has more information on this, please write the *Voyageur*.

Danser Chicken Booyah:

Long grain rice along with the potatoes and other vegetables—from cans. Heavens! Never used canned vegetables, but I suppose this would be the quick cook version. Rice and potatoes together?

- Grannys Kitchen online demonstrated that Booyah found its way outside this area. This site referred to booyah as an “old” recipe, and this booyah called for “egg noodles” as well as potatoes. Neither of these online recipes used beef bone, by the way. Strictly chicken soup.
- A soldier stationed in Belgium shared a recipe that sounds like it had been Frenchified. This one has chicken, beef and pork along with a lot of spices including garlic, bay leaves, chicken broth, tomatoes, rosemary, thyme and crushed red pepper, along with parsley and lemon zest. You can find it at <http://allrecipes.com/recipe/20936/booyah-chicken/>

There is even a slow cooker Belgian recipe submitted by Bill Bartelme who referred to booyah as a NE Wisconsin kind of thing, again with tomatoes and cabbage. Another one claims that her “grandfather’s uncle made a chicken soup that he sold at the Brown County Fairgrounds on Saturdays. The family name was Boyer. In French it is pronounced Boy-A. In Brown County it is pronounced Boo-yah. His chicken soup came to be called Chicken Booyah after his name.”

Perhaps, with all these varieties, it is silly to try and say that Hannon’s is best, because who would want to improve on perfection? But here is what’s been established:

- Belgian Walloon pronunciation of bouillon is Booyah
- Best made in large batches
- Claimed by Hannon as its creator in 1894
- Hannon’s basic soup has been recreated in the area where he lived with many varieties today.
- The best known variety might well have been made by Rentmeester, a boy who was with Hannon the day he first created his soup.

How did Taylor Hicks like Booyah? Well, he graciously said he did, but I complained to Mar that she should have made it with bones and skin, and beef, but instead she left that out and added butter. Not the version I would have used, but I was unable to help her out with the cooking, working in Madison at the time. Taylor Hicks made it look good!

Having a history for the Booyah Phenomenon in Northeast Wisconsin—is that such a bad thing? Not when it’s all in good fun, and good taste. And could maybe even become the state

soup, in recognition of the Belgian communities of Wisconsin—but only if the state recipe is Hannon’s Original Chicken Booyah.

Sources:

Hannon Family oral stories, Betty Fierros and Marlene Olejniczak, Green Bay.

Rentmeester Booyah stories, in conversation with Dan Rentmeester

“The real reason we call it Chicken Booyah in Wisconsin,” Lester Rentmeester, WhoNEW.com, October 17, 2013.

“Getting to the Bottom of Booyah,” Paul Srubas, *Green Bay Press Gazette*, November 22, 2015 (cover story).

“Booyah heading toward official state status,” Paul Srubas, *Green Bay Press Gazette*, December 11, 2015.

Voyager Magazine, Summer/Fall 2011, Judith Carlson talked about this church that served the Belgian community around Champion. In this article she introduced the Hannon as Walloon Belgian immigrants.

“Books Bind Family History,” *Green Bay Press Gazette*, October 29, 1976.

Ashley Steinbrinck, “The Real Reason We Call it Chicken Booyah,”

<http://whoonew.com/2013/10/the-real-reason-we-call-it-chicken-booyah-in-wisconsin/>