

*PLATE EXPECTATIONS: Victorian Dining, Decorum & Dishes*  
February 21-October 28

For Interpreters and Docents –

This exhibit includes pieces from our collection, artifacts from the restoration (our collection), artifacts from Pueblo Grande Museum's collection, and a few from private collections.

Visitors are meant to walk through the Dining Room to see the exhibit — not just on the carpet! They should be allowed to spend approximately 10 minutes browsing through the exhibit, and should NOT touch any of the pieces displayed. No one should handle any of the exhibit pieces unless given express permission to do so. The one thing that CAN be touched by everyone is the copy of the Sears-Roebuck catalog (from our Education collection). Exhibit pieces are secured with museum wax, and the silverware in the turret and on the table are sewn to the table linens to prevent theft.

The exhibit includes some pieces/artifacts in other rooms downstairs, including the teas set in the entryway, the Native American artifacts in the back parlor, and the Gammel punch bowl and ladle on the small table in the pantry.

The tall cases in the Dining Room have battery-operated lights that are turned on/off by remote control. Please turn the lights on when you come through to start a tour, and then hit the 30 minute button (timer), so that we don't waste the batteries. All shades in the Dining Room should be open for this exhibit.

The two big, black cases (one in the Dining Room and one in the Back Parlor) have artifacts from the archaeological digs around Heritage Square in the 1990s, and are on loan to us from Pueblo Grande Museum. There is a little information in each case about the dig, what was found and where.

There will be more signage going up very soon (hopefully by Feb 23<sup>rd</sup>) to give visitors a little more of the information I've given you here.

*The Victorian age matched decorum and design with conspicuous consumption and extravagance. There is no place that better typifies that era than the dining room of an upper class home, where they had as many rules of etiquette as they did forks to eat with.*

Today, with our Corning ware and paper plates, take-out meals and microwaves, and our truly enormous grocery stores stocked with food (and anything else you might need) quickly shipped from all over the world, it's hard to imagine what the dining experience of the occupants of the Rosson House would have been like. Where did the people from turn-of-the-century Block 14 get their food, and what did they eat? What kinds of plates and utensils did they use, and what was it like to share a meal in this beautiful home?

The easiest answer looks to the turn-of-the-century dishware on display in the Rosson House (and, to every china hutch in America with someone's grandmother's fancy dishes and silverware on display). These pieces are passed down from generation to generation, donated to museums like ours, and sold at estate sales and antique shops. They're brought out for the "big" dinners – Thanksgiving, Christmas, Easter, or whenever we have lots of family and food at the table. But, for Victorians, these were every day pieces, and though some may have been passed down, most were purchased through catalogs available nation-wide (like Montgomery Ward and Sears Roebuck), and locally at general and furniture stores, or even at jewelry stores. (\*\*The replica 1898 Sears-Roebuck catalog on display in the dining room is from the Education collection, and CAN BE TOUCHED by Museum visitors!! The bookmarks are marked with, "Silverware p. 99" and, "Crockery & Glassware, p. 788" to show what page they should be looking for those pieces.

Food availability was a little different at the turn-of-the-century. Though the railroad, with its relatively quick trips and its refrigerated cars, was changing what kinds of food were on hand and when, most areas of the country suffered through seasonal food shortages – times when fresh food was less available (as in winter), and poorer people often went hungry. With crops grown year-round here in Arizona, shortfalls may have occurred less often. In purchasing the food needed for their homes, Phoenicians had their pick of stores, and often would have to go to several in order to buy all they required (instead of the all-inclusive stores that Fry's, Target and Walmart are today). In 1898, there were 43 grocers listed in the Phoenix City Directory (within the city limits), as well as 10 bakeries, 6 meat markets, and 11 confectioneries. There were also 16 restaurants, 36 saloons, 2 oyster parlors, and 7 ice cream parlors. Pharmacies/druggists had separate stores; as did clothiers, wine merchants, tobacconists, etc. General stores and Mercantiles, with a little bit of everything, were becoming more popular, but many stores still specialized in one area instead of several.

Meals in the Rosson House are a bit of a mystery. We know, from interviews with Jessie Jean Lane (née Higley) in the 1970s, that the Higleys used the back parlor as a dining room, and the dining room as a library. And we know that Mrs. Higley liked to take tea with her friends

in the turret area (which is why we have the tea set displayed there for this exhibit). We also know from Whitelaw Reid's letters, that Elisabeth Reid didn't like how small the Rosson House kitchen was for her servants, and that's why they rented two houses the next time they wintered in Phoenix.

Upper class Victorian meals were elaborate and extensive. Etiquette books for those who wanted to act "properly" coached the less elegant on everything from how to have servants set up for meals (including how many inches a table cloth should fall below the top of a table), to how to be the perfect hostess and guest (including which utensils to use for each course, and why you shouldn't clean your plate, drink all of your wine, or pick your teeth at the table). Rules were important, and good table manners could mean the difference between social acceptance and ostracism.

More Info –

It's important to remember that there were no nation-wide regulations on food until 1906, when Congress passed the Pure Food and Drug Act and the Federal Meat Inspection Act, both inspired by revelations about packing plants and the food industry in Upton Sinclair's [The Jungle](#). If you haven't read [The Jungle](#), it was written to emphasize the horrible working conditions (mainly for immigrants) at the turn of the century. But what really struck people were the stories about unsanitary food processing (hence the actions by Congress). If you decide to read it, I hope you have a strong stomach!

PBS had a fantastic series called *Hidden Killers of the Victorian Home* (you can see most of the full episodes on YouTube), and some of what they talked about was food.

In preparation for this exhibit, I read several Victorian/Edwardian etiquette books, all available as free eBooks on Google. I also read [Forgotten Elegance: The Art, Artifacts, and Peculiar History of Victorian and Edwardian Entertaining in America](#) by Wendell Schollander and Wes Schollander (it had great info about all the different silverware and dishes Victorians used); and [Food in the Gilded Age: What Ordinary Americans Ate](#) by Robert Dirks (not a lot of info directly used in the exhibit, but a good over look at what lower and middle class people ate at that time). I also delved into the Arizona Republic digital archive from the Library of Congress (a wonderful resource), to see what food ads were represented there.