That good creature the gourd has fallen from its high estate of use to one of mere ornament. This is not as it should be—in gratitude if no more. Our grandmothers owed it so much in the way of housewifery, that their era may be denominated the days of the gourd. Witness its uses. They had pretty well every manner of it. There was the great calabash with inch-thick shell, and capacity from one to ten gallons. It was none so easy to raise in perfection, but once raised, lasted through two lifetimes. And it held pretty well everything—sugar, flour, feathers, molasses, dried fruit, eggs, soap, lard, candles, the family sewing or Sunday clothes. The neck always short, was, in the very biggest specimens, conspicuously absent. These big fellows were cut at the top, a smooth round opening to which a wooden lid was afterward fitted accurately. If it was desirable to swing up the gourd, double holes were bored some little way from the rim-edge through which leathern or rawhide braided thongs were passed up and down, and knotted together above so as to serve also for handles.

After cutting, all the inside came out, the pith was scraped away and the gourd filled with boiling water, well dashed with lye. This with the scraping was repeated many times, until the gourdy taste was gone, and a clean hard woody shell remained. All gourds which had to do with eating or drinking got approximately the same treatment, al-
though smaller ones were boiled several hours, then finished off at once.

Other uses, other manners. An egg-gourd needed only to have a squarish opening cut well above the round of it, and seeds and loose pith removed. The ideal egg-gourd was rather deep, with a short handle so crooked it would stay securely over the arm of the egg-gatherer. These gathering gourds were of moderate size, and emptied into the big main calabash which sat under the bed or up the loft. It was the crowning mercy of the big fellows that they were flat enough at the blossom end to stand solid. A big neckless gourd, very much flattened at each end, was sometimes sawed in two and fashioned into wash basins, or sewing baskets. But the dipper-gourds and the dancing ones were round or oval. Care was taken in the growth of dippers to have them straight or crook-handled at need. Gourds with long, straight handles were best for many things—as dipping up boiling liquids, washing down hogs at killing time, and lying primly across a water pail. But for hanging on a peg, or swinging to a martin-pole, crook-handles were the thing. So for straight handles the gourd vines were trained to run high—over fences or brush heaps or cabin chimney. The young gourds thus pendant, straightened and stretched of their own weight. Contrariwise, if the vine ran huddled over itself, sprawling on the ground, the handles were sure to crook—sometimes after the fashion of a ram’s horn.

Every cool spring, no matter how deep in the woods, had its gourd, either hung upon a near tree-trunk, or thrust over the end of a stake driven in the brink. This for wayfarers—who were never lawless enough to break or misplace the drinking vessels. Powder gourds, beloved of hunters, were round and short-necked, small enough to slip handily into the pocket, with a wooden stopper neatly fitted into the cut end of the neck. Seed-gourds and bottle-gourds were cut in the same fashion. A full set of seed-gourds, duly labeled, made a fine showing upon the cabin shelf. Yet they were not so near the hearts of the cabin-dwelling folk as the martin-gourds swung
from the cropped boughs of a tall sapling, planted pole-fashion a little way from the door. The gourds were bigger than the two fists, cleaned out and cunningly cut so as to keep the mud nest secure yet not hold rain-water. House martins built in them year after year, singing joy in the shelter, and paying rent and more by fighting away all the plundering hawks. Crook-handles were best here, in that they permitted the birds to perch upon them an instant before darting into the nest.

Here is a gourd tradition lightly touched with romance. The first wheat crop of a pioneer settlement had been flailed out, winnowed and measured, and found to amount to almost three bushels. Half of it was religiously set aside for seed, but the landowners yearned for at least a taste of wheaten bread. There was no flour-mill within a hundred miles—indeed corn was beaten to meal in the hominy mortar. But the house-mother was resourceful—she had neither sieve nor bolting cloth, but meant to have flour. So she had a bushel of wheat pounded fine, then took her bridal veil, of fine silk gauze, and spread it over a big gourd which had been cut on both sides, leaving it no more than a hoop with a gourd-handle. In this improvised sieve she bolted her flour, and triumphantly made cake from part of it. No doubt she got the idea of her sieve from the gourd milk-strainer, which remained in high favor as late as the Civil War. The gourd, a straight-handled one, not too big, is cut at top and bottom, and, after cleaning, covered with a knitted cloth just wrung out of boiling water. The cloth is pressed well over the edges, and deep down inside, then all set in the sun to dry. Fully dried the cloth holds firm throughout a long straining.

There was a special strain of banjo-gourds, long and straight handled and very round in bowl. The top was cut almost flat with the handle. Under-cutting varied, according to the maker’s whim, or the tone he aimed for. Sometimes it left no more than a rim two inches deep. Sometimes also there was just a tiny moon-face below. Sheepskin stretched over the top and strings fastened to pegs in the rim and handle completed an instrument, which in trained African hands gave forth weird untranslatable harmonies.

If the gourd had many uses, the trough and its congeners had more. The big sugar trough, dug from a poplar trunk, often held two hogsheads of sap, which was fetched to it in gourds from other smaller troughs, set under the spiles. But the salt trough was even bigger—besides a well-furnished smokehouse had several of them. Meat was packed down in them to take salt for later smoking. Some
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were twenty feet long and stood breast high. The outsides were hewn smooth, the insides finished, after digging out, with the adze. Indeed the adze and the drawing-knife were very present helps in pioneering. Skilled use of them made possible beautifully smooth bread trays of native ash, and spoon-shaped oak fire-paddles, nearly as good as iron shovels in heaping coals on a lid, or throwing ashes off seed fire. Axe and hoe-helves had to be drawn smooth and to shape, so did the staves of piggins, noggins, indeed all small cooperage.

A piggin was of hard wood, preferably cedar, and metal-hooped if possible, but young hickory answered at a pinch. It was unlike the bucket, in that it lacked a bail, having instead as handle one of the staves standing a hand’s length higher than the others, and shaped so as to be easily and firmly held. Most commonly it was sacred to the dairy and to drinking water. Much scouring kept it always sweet. The noggin, broader and shallower, also got much scouring, but was less inviting. It was used for washing up dishes, vegetables, fruit—pretty well anything. The “cup-noggin” was sacred to tableware.

What mere modern ever saw a broom-sedge broom or one of corn, tied without a handle? Both were standbys of our great grandmothers, and whatever the stuff, the broom was bound with white-oak splits. Broom-sedge, tall, tawny, feather-seeded, is the pest of grassland, but, tradition has it, was taken from the seaboard over the mountains because the settlers pined for the sight of it no less than the uses.