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# Small Town Life

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*"Owning a Chambers range in 1950 had the status equivalent to owning a Viking or a Wolf today."*



## ***My Vintage Chambers Range:***

**Looking & Cooking Like No Other**

by Stacy Wanchisn Long

**"S**o, ah, does...robin's egg blue do anything for you?"

Thus ended my search for a legendary Chambers range. The first and last stove I'll ever own.

Let me explain my lead-in. My husband and I started the wonderfully insane process of getting our first (and last) house built in the winter of 2003. By June of 2004, she was still under construction -- the interior walls were set, and the wiring started. The windows were in. We were embroiled in a hundred nasty little decisions: when could the refrigerator be delivered, and just how wide was it anyway? Where will all the lighting fixtures be coming from and how long should they dangle? Where would the lightswitches go? I had completely thrown the kitchen design at the cabinetmaker. He designed every corner, unencumbered by my input. My only request was that he design around the stove I knew I had to have: a genuine, vintage Chambers range.

I don't watch telly (satellite TV was abandoned when we got a mortgage), but for those of you who are addicted to The Food Network, cookbook author and cooking-show ("30-Minute Meals") host Rachel Ray has a stove like mine. (Haughty sniff: mine is the upper model of that particular line of stoves. Hers is a Model 60-C, whereas mine is a Model 90-C.) The Model C line of Chambers ranges were cranked out of Shelbyville, Indiana, by the Chambers Corporation in the late 1940s through the 50s, for the discriminating housewife. Owning a Chambers range in 1950 had the status equivalent to owning a Viking or a Wolf today. Except for the fact that a well-taken-care-of 1949 Chambers range will most likely out-live a 2005 Viking...but I digress.

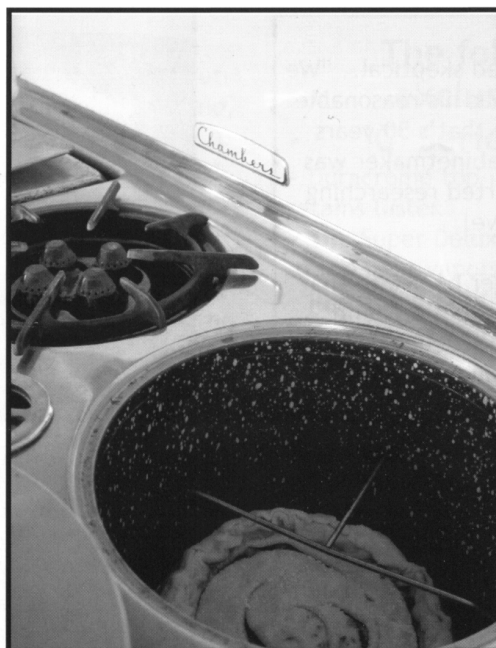
### **The Search**

My friends are a maddening influence on me. It was they who sparked the blue flame of desire to own a legendary Chambers range.

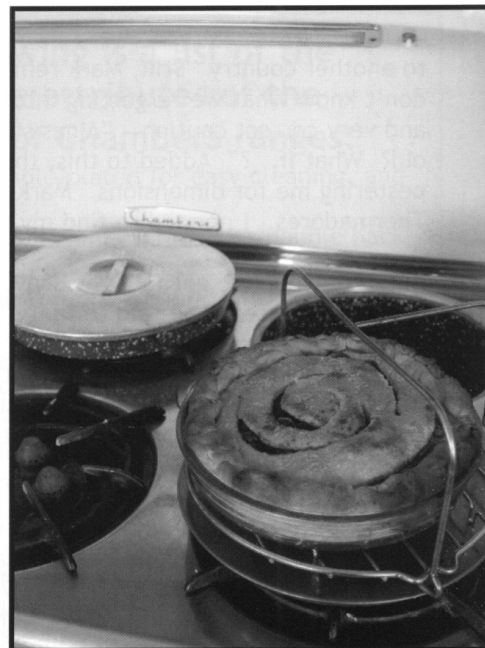
The summer before we started building, my friend Billy was helping me salvage for treasure in Buffalo, NY for our as-yet-unplanned house. "You should really think about getting a Chambers," he told me when I whined about having to pick out new appliances. "They were so well insulated, that they came with their own cookbook. You would throw a cake into your preheated Chambers, shut the gas off, and the cake would just go right on baking." I was listening to this politely, knowing my engineer husband, Mark, would never go for an old stove. In fact, he was fretting about this "salvage for treasure" trip as my friend spoke. Old stuff doesn't have quite the same appeal to Mark as it does for me.

During the same salvage-fest, incredibly, someone had deposited one of these Chambers-things on the out-sized stoop of our next stop. Billy was excited to illustrate: "See? This one's in bad shape, but a clean one with all its parts will be the last stove you'll ever own." I remember trying to hide my horror at that iron oxide-oozing behemoth. The oven door was weeping orange tears of rust over its white porcelain face. Peering over the gaping holes that used to shelve burners, great clumps of rust obscured where one valve connected to another. More out of politeness for my friend than curiosity, I googled "Chambers Range" when I got back to Pennsylvania. By that fall, I was jabbering about every miraculous Chambers attribute to anyone who asked me how my day was. I would doodle diagrams of the distinctive Chambers face for inquiring (and probably over-polite) pals on any scrap I had handy.

As I'd expected, Mark didn't quite share my rabid enthusiasm. "A Wolf is a *new* stove, honey," he'd offer. "But



Thermowell with the pie in



Thermowell with the pie out

a Chambers even 50 years old was built to last *another* 50 years, honey," I'd dodge.

We planned our house together, my husband and I. I'd been told that this activity was the stuff divorces are built on. Happily, we were a united front, matching taste for taste, item for item. But we couldn't agree on my choice of stove. A stove you couldn't buy in an appliance store. An old, gas stove. A stove I'd never even *stood* in front of (I chose not to share the rust-bucket story). And so The Hunt was on.

### Looking Down the Well of a Chambers

I began scouring eBay and openly blabbering to everyone about just what I was looking for, in the hopes of generating a good, local lead.

"The Chambers Company offered the American housewife of the 40s and 50s her choice from *six* colors -- at no extra charge!" I'd blather. "The three burners on a Chambers are the same size as a modern commercial burner. The insulation in a Chambers is so complete, you could freeze ice cream in the recessed well, and bake a pie in the oven -- **AT THE SAME TIME.**" I was going over the edge.

Any spare moment I had that summer was spent researching any lead I found on the Internet, in any state. With everything I saw or read on a Chambers, I only became more, well, heated to have one. My favorite one-liner to Mark was this gem: "People who have one, *take them with them when they move.*" I saw it all the time on eBay -- these poor saps lamenting having to give up their Chambers because they were moving



Stacy takes pies out of her Chambers range.

Cover photo by Mark Long

All other photos courtesy of Stacy and Mark Long

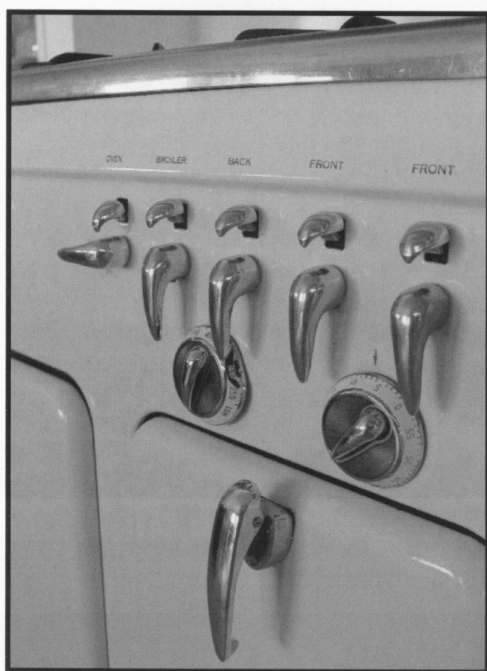
to another country. Still, Mark remained skeptical. "We don't know what we're getting into" was his reasonable and very correct caution. "A gas stove that's 50 years old? What if...?" Added to this, the cabinetmaker was pestering me for dimensions. Mark started researching Thermadores. I needed to find my stove!

Billy's partner, JP, got into the scavenger hunt late that summer. "Listen," he said to me. "I've got a friend who's got one in storage. I'll ask if he'll sell." As Plan B, I continued to scour eBay, comb through auction listings, call local auctioneers and consult my huge list of Chambers/Vintage Stove sites on the Internet. I visited all of them every day.

Then one fine August day, JP called with his "robin's egg blue" message. We made instant plans for a pilgrimage to Lehigh Valley, where his friend lived, to take place in two weeks. My husband, a dear, fair man, was cautiously happy for me. One of these fabled stoves, for sale, in PA no less! (I had bored him to tears with tales of previous followed leads coming from Ohio, Illinois and Texas.) "Don't buy anything I wouldn't buy," he was chirping as I skipped out of town.

I can't really describe the feeling I had when seeing the stove for the first time. She was perched on a flat dolly, and made of glowing porcelain and chrome that made everything around her look twice as drab. I was so excited, I almost left the still-moving truck. Right away, I knew I wasn't leaving Lehigh without her. She wasn't "robin's egg blue," as her color had been described, but a very pale, ice blue. (Chambers literature calls it Pastel Blue.) My guess at describing my somewhat unnatural

gaze at a mere appliance is probably much akin to what some types feel when they see a '53 Packard. The shiny, smooth surfaces, the curving lines, the drop-to-the-knees aesthetic, the presence, the craftsmanship...moreover, the idea that *you could be the master of a superior machine*. I remember hearing JP saying over the happy whooshing in my ears, "I think Stacy found her stove."



Knobs, timer, and burner valve controls



In the top, more hidden features.

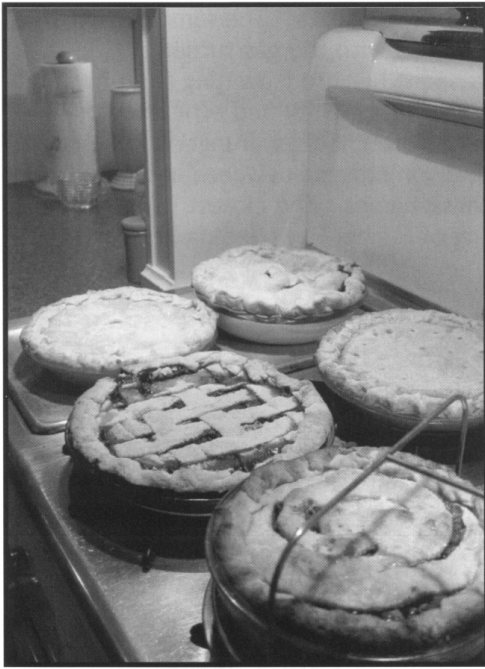
### Working on a Chambers Gang

My stove needed some work. And some parts. She'd been in dry storage for 15 years, and she needed a good cleaning. No parts were missing, but replacement parts were needed. So I made some acquaintances and I made them fast. I was determined to deliver on all the miracles I had read about. Plus, there was my husband to please. Now he was joint owner of this stove, and it needed to be made to work. Good-naturedly, he rolled up his sleeves, and joined us in scoping out gas line connectors and reading ancient owner's manuals. Secretly, I think he was impressed with her good looks and her heft (it was all four of us could do to lift her a mere foot). She weighs over 400 pounds, and she's a three-burner/one-oven stove. The quality had to be there somewhere!

The website where I found the most collective information on Chambers ranges is a must-stop for a Chambers geek, or vintage stove fan: [www.chamberstoves.net](http://www.chamberstoves.net), operated by Chambers owner Todd White of Oklahoma. Todd sold me the indispensable "Idle Hour Cookbook" (the Bible of the Chambers stove owner) and made loads of recommendations for reputable dealers in parts. He even gave me his personal cell phone number, inviting me to call if we needed help hooking up the stove and calibrating the burners. Stove-geeks are a rare breed. I honestly believe he was just as excited as I was to experience the joy of using a Chambers for the first time.

The second parts dealer I phoned was Ralph, of Mom's Stove Parts ([www.momsstoveparts.com](http://www.momsstoveparts.com)) of North Carolina. This man became my champion. Ralph is a retired stove repairman who knows these stoves inside and out. I would spend hours on the phone with him, poring over every detail of my stove, and he offered





Pies after baking

advice, and better yet, pristine, clean parts at a reasonable cost. The first batch of orifi (little brass caps that regulate the amount of gas fed to the burner) he sent to me for no money down. "Take whatchoo want and send da rest back," he told me in his thick Brooklynese. "Pay me for whatchoo use." I would gurgle on and on about

Ralph to Mark

after one of these sessions: "Ralph has a THERMOBAKER, honey. A real one, with the rack. Clean. And he's selling it to ME." Or, "Ralph has the 7-quart kettle, last one in his shop, and he's going to ship it along with..." Ralph would tuck little extras in his boxes to me. Stainless steel polish (for keeping the DuraCrome top in tiptop shape), and even salt and pepper shakers that had paired with a Chambers model older than mine. The day I got my replacement pilot light assembly from him was like Christmas. I couldn't wait to tear into the packing. Every flash tube sparkled, sleek and smooth. "You bought a Cadillac," Ralph is fond of telling me. "The Cadillac of stoves."

#### Cooks With the Gas Turned OFF!

The stove delivered the goods. The first meal I cooked was nothing complex -- a kettle of soup -- but I knew even then that I was dealing with a superior tool. Mark and I cooked a full meal for 16 guests two weeks after moving into our newly completed house, using the Chambers oven for the first time. Quite literally a trial by fire, and all three of us came out smelling like a pie-filled stove. The whole meal was hot, crisp and delicious.

Another benefit of owning a Chambers is that my quirky cooking curiosities can be explored without fear, because I know that I have the proper equipment. If a recipe doesn't turn out, it's my doing nine times out of ten, not uneven heating or "cold spots." Baking is a pastime I have revisited because my Chambers holds an even, hot, dry heat throughout. My first shot at brioche was tender and golden, my banguettes (the shorter version of a *baguette*, those slender, two-foot-long French bread

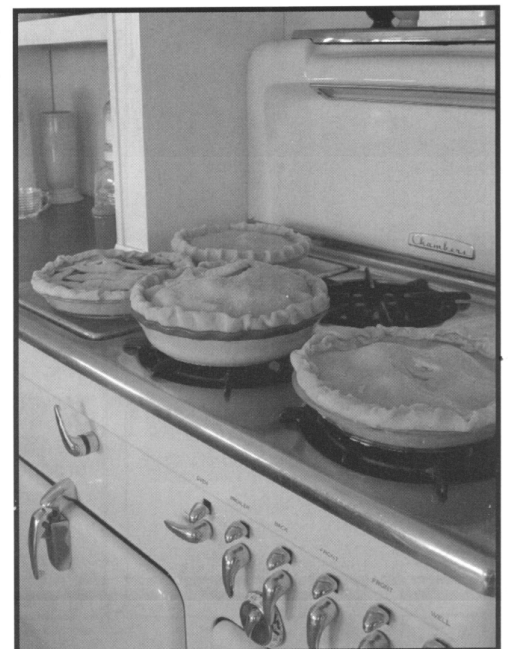
### The following is a list of the exclusive attributes of the 'C' Series of Chambers ranges:

- ~ Duracrome top is triple-plated for easy cleaning, and retains luster.
- ~ The Super Deluxe Back vents through its double back, so the heat vapors won't stain walls.
- ~ In-A-Top Broiler and Griddle are built into the top of the stove -- no more stooping.
- ~ Non-tilt Basket oven racks
- ~ Built-in lamp lights entire work area of range
- ~ Thermowell boils, steams, stews, roasts and bakes. Ten minutes of gas does one hour of cooking.
- ~ Top burner pilot provides extra warming burner.
- ~ Wide, wing-spread burner grates accommodate any size utensil.
- ~ "Daisy" burners are hot, fast and adjustable to any speed. They were guaranteed 25 years against wear.
- ~ Accurate Chambers timer, built right into the stove.
- ~ Large utility cabinet stores pans, dry cereals, crackers, and allows for servicing the stove.
- ~ Chromium-plated safety gas handles are designed to keep children from turning on the valves.
- ~ Oven is super-insulated for retained-heat cooking, accurately controlled for low temperature cooking.

Plus, I have to add: *the thing looks great.*

loaves) were chewy-crisp, and I've bashed out batches of biscotti bang-bang-bang. I've seared burgers and thick steaks in the In-A-Top broiler that are darn fine, and very, very juicy. The In-A-Top, I might add, is wonderful for entertaining -- lightly heating or toasting a trayful of hors d'oeuvres is streamlined bliss. I once kept a sauce on the wee-est, barest of simmers in a cast-iron skillet over the Chambers' famed "daisy burners" for over an hour without scorching. This past July, I baked over 30 pounds of scalloped potatoes in one fell swoop. I can make seven quarts of real popcorn at a time in the Thermowell. Actually, I can stew, bake, or steam seven quarts of WHATEVER in the Thermowell.

Even given all this, you may still ask: why would anyone want an old Chambers range? It's a pretty good question. Why be



Pies before baking





The stove

burdened with the searching of parts and service help, the installing, the cajoling of spouses, when you can just go to Sears and buy up a Kenmore? I'll answer that question in one cheesy statement: a Chambers looks like no other, cooks like no other. To quote from charming, original Chambers literature: "Its appearance is lovely, its performance, superb. The oven is completely insulated on top, bottom, front, back and

sides. It comes up to high temperatures rapidly. It maintains low temperatures accurately." These lines include a graphic of a woman pulling on her gloves, smiling in anticipation of an afternoon of pinochle with girl-

friends, not of slaving over a stove. The famous tagline for Chambers was, "Cooks with the gas turned off!" Miss Alma Chambers spent her life travelling from city to city, demonstrating the high quality and efficiency of her daddy's *other* creation, the Chambers range. I'm enough of a geek to wish that someone somewhere had newsreel footage of one of these demos. The closest I suppose I'll get is seeing a taping of Rachel Ray opening her Pastel Yellow oven door.

### The Proof Is In the Proverbial Pudding

A year later, I can report that I still haven't made full use of every feature, but we're good partners, my stove and I. The Chambers' ability to live up to, and even surpass, all its claims has spared me from getting robin's egg blue on my face. And Mark has admitted aloud his fondness for my stove on several occasions, in front of guests, no less! So that makes our threesome a very cozy culinary team, one that I expect will indeed last all our lifetimes.




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