CHAPTER 8

REMEMBERING FAMILY MEALS:
IN GOOD TIMES AND LEAN

We are entering that special season when nostalgia will play a starring role at family holiday gatherings. Much reminiscing will take place over heaping bowls of delicious home-cooked food prepared from traditional recipes that have been in the family for generations. A few weeks ago, I asked readers to share their memories of foods they recall from their youth, dishes that many of today's young folks have probably never tasted.

Many readers took me up on my offer, e-mailing and mailing me vivid descriptions of homemade dishes they enjoyed as youngsters. Some even sent me recipes, in case I wished to sample these delicacies for myself. I also heard about certain foods some readers would rather never taste again, accompanied by poignant tales of families where love was abundant, but the larder was bare.

I will share these stories with you over the next few articles. Today we will look back at how the family cooks of past generations prepared vegetables, greens, and soups, using whatever ingredients were available to them. Even the common dandelion found its way to the dinner table.

"Dandelion leaves were a natural, edible green right from our yard in Allison #1," remembered Christine Mattie of Pittsburgh. "My father picked, washed, and then sautéed them with butter and garlic salt. I remember I didn't like them though, because they were very bitter, like brussels sprouts."

Former Brownsville resident Lou Opall of Ostersund, Sweden, recalls searching the woods for an uncommon green plant.

"We were looking for poke weed," Lou explained. "I clearly remember my grandfather Melrose taking me walking in the woods where we picked poke weed. It was poor man's greens, I guess. I have no idea now what it looked like, although I get the impression it was tall and green. When it was prepared at home, it was cooked like spinach, usually with smoked pork. It tasted good as I recall, but perhaps that was because I was along for the harvest."

Another "delicacy" that some folks harvested in the wild was the mushroom.

"I would be very hesitant to pick wild mushrooms now," admitted former South Brownsville resident Hannah Millward Fisher, "but my dad would sort through our baskets, and we never suffered any ill effects. Dad would take my brothers and me to pick mushrooms at Orbash's farm. One day we brought home two bushels. My mother decided to can them, and they were delicious. In fact, I would love to have a big plate of wild mushrooms now!"

Many of the vegetables on the dinner table came from a huge backyard garden, a common sight in many area towns and coal patches.

John Batovsky of Chester, Virginia, noted, "We raised our own vegetables in Rowes Run, and we ate creamed lettuce and creamed green beans until they must have come out of our ears. The dish was creamed like a soup, with potatoes and fresh dill, and we always added a teaspoon of vinegar and ate it with buttered homemade bread. My wife still makes creamed lettuce and green beans.

"Being Catholic, Mom had always said it was a sin to waste food, so when she made creamed lettuce or green beans from the garden, it sometimes seemed like we ate those for months!"

Or at least until another section of the vegetable garden came into its own.

"When tomatoes came in season," John continued, "we had tomato soup. My mother also made a tasty dish that she called 'cowboy stew,' in which she cooked the tomatoes, green peppers, and onions together. It looked like what we call salsa, and we ate it hot. I think she called it 'cowboy stew' to get my younger brothers to eat it!"

"My grandfather, Charlie Rohrer, had a big garden on Middle Street in West Brownsville," remarked Darlene Johnson Widmer of Scottsdale, Arizona. "He would bring us young leaf lettuce and tender green onions from his garden, and my mom would make wilted lettuce for supper. He also grew huge tomatoes, bell peppers, carrots, and green beans. After tasting vegetables fresh from his garden, the store-bought vegetables could not compare."

Of course, the fact that vegetables were from a backyard garden did not guarantee that cooks would prepare them in a way that would please the American Heart Association.

"Mom made a combination of fried cabbage and egg noodles," said Sharon Jobes Stenner of Owings Mill, Maryland. "Usually it was fried in bacon grease, and sometimes she made it with sausage. My dad, Brownsville native Keith Jobes, made this for me when I was in Florida recently, because I never seem to get it quite right."

The season often dictated what was on the menu at home. Bill Johnson of Olean, New York, wrote, "Whatever fruit or vegetables were in season, that is what we had. If strawberry shortcake was served for supper, it was 'all you could eat,' because that is all we had. If we had corn on the cob, that alone is what we had for supper. The same was true for red potatoes, peas, turnips, and parsnips, and even for blackberry, elderberry, peach, or apple pie."

Garden produce was often blended to produce some unforgettable treats.

"My great-aunt Sadie made 'chow-chow,'" wrote Donnell Redlingshafer Wisniewski of Fairview Heights, Illinois, "and if anyone has a recipe, I hope you will please print it! It was some kind of relish made from home-grown pickles and veggies."

Some cooks guarded their secret recipes closely, which lent an air of mystery to their specialties.

"Aunt Sadie used a 'secret ingredient' when she made her home-made ice cream," Donnell continued. "It turned out that it was distilled from castor beans and found to be poisonous!"

South Brownsville native Phyllis Barreca Grossi of Schwenksville, Pennsylvania, told me, "I remember the smell of our home in the fall when we were making piccalilli, chili sauce, sickle pears, and fourteen-day pickles that were sometimes made in seven days. All were simply delicious and bring a smile to my face even now."

A mouth-watering aroma often emanated from a big pot of homemade soup simmering on the stove. Former Brownsville resident Barbara Santee Davis of Malabar, Florida, was particularly fond of "bread soup," which you may know by a different name.

"My mother boiled potatoes until tender, then cubed them," Barbara explained. "She fried bacon and onions until crisp, broke up the bacon into pieces, cubed some stale bread, poured broth over everything, and sprinkled it with cheese.

"Nowadays you can order something like it as French onion soup," Barbara noted, "at the price of $3.95 a bowl. But ours tasted better, because it had more bacon grease in it!"

Richard Wells, whose childhood home was on Gray's Lane on Brownsville's South Side, recalled his mother's savory 'Pasta Fazool.'

"Believe me," Richard joked, "it was not the same as you get at Olive Garden. Her 'pasta fazool' was just pork and beans and a few pieces of spaghetti in a very thin sauce. It was the Depression, you know. But it was delicious!"

When Darlene Johnson Widmer's grandfather headed down to the Monongahela riverbank in West Brownsville, Darlene would begin

eagerly anticipating a savory treat.

"One of the most unique things I remember eating when I was in grade school was turtle soup," she said. "That was something my grandfather made, and I loved it. I think he caught the turtles down by the river in West Brownsville, and he prepared the soup with some special spices. I don't know what all he added to the soup; I just know it was good! I ate turtle soup somewhere else many years ago, but I remember it couldn't compare to my grandfather's recipe."

Nothing was wasted, and leftovers often found their way back onto the menu a few days later, disguised as soup.

"I remember a big two-gallon soup stockpot on the stovetop," said Allison #1 native Tom Liberator of Portland, Oregon. "No food liquid ever went down the sink drain; it went into the soup pot. Whether it was the juices from a roast, liquid from canned beans, peas, tomatoes, or whatever, it all went into the pot, and this became the stock for dinner soup.

"A big bowl of soup preceded every evening meal," Tom continued. "The aroma of the soup pot prevailed at our house – that is, as long as there was fire in the kitchen stove. We had a deluxe Majestic coal stove. I say 'deluxe' because it was equipped with a hot water heating jacket inside the firebox and an adjoining galvanized thirty-gallon storage tank, so we had running hot water as long as there was fire in the stove."

How wonderful it is when you are coming home to be greeted by the delicious aroma of home-cooked food in the air, even before you reach your front door.

Rhoda Novak lives in Los Angeles with her husband, Alicia native John Novak. Rhoda told me, "I would sit in my mother-in-law Mary Novak's kitchen in the 1960s, watching her make a well in flour on her yellow Formica table and add eggs. Then she kneaded it, rolled it thin, cut it into multiple strips, and dried the noodles on a pole suspended from two yellow vinyl kitchen chairs. The next day, she simmered chicken with freshly-picked carrots, celery and onions on her 1940s white electric stove.

"I remember when my husband John and I would come up the driveway to Mary's house. It was summer, and our car windows were rolled down. All of Alicia smelled wonderful with the scent of her chicken soup, freshly brewed coffee, and cinnamon nut rolls. I knew I was coming home."

Next we share more tasty tales as our readers describe meat dishes that were delicious – and a few that were, shall we say, unusual!

LEAN TIMES MADE FOR INTERESTING MEALS

"When we were little girls," the lady told me, "my sister Marcie and I would put anything we could in front of us at the dinner table, so that we could not see Grandma eating them in one clean sweep!"

What was Grandma eating that so disgusted her granddaughters?

"Grandma Pearl Greenfield loved to eat chicken feet," revealed Brownsville native Sheila Greenfield Lynch, who lived at 709 York Street with her parents, Alvin and Gloria Greenfield. "Grandma would eat the meat off the feet, which I think were boiled. She would put the whole thing in her mouth and bring it out clean."

Grandma Greenfield's affection for eating chicken feet may have been rooted in her own childhood. When food was scarce, particularly during the days of the Great Depression, nothing that could provide nutrition escaped consumption. Pearl Greenfield's favorite is not the only Depression-era dish that is rarely spotted on the modern dinner table.

"During lean times," recalled former Rowes Run resident John Batovsky, "we ate things like hash and kidney stew, and I remember the kidneys being really gummy to chew."

William Plichta, who grew up in Knoxville Addition, remembers his mom cooking pigs' feet. "They were cooked in boiling water," he explained, "then put in a container with garlic."

In many households, very little that was edible was wasted.

"All kinds of things from animals that are probably now thrown away were utilized in those days," remarked Brownsville native Lou Opall. "Scrambled calf brains and eggs, for example, were really very good and no doubt very healthy, but would not be accepted by today's eaters."

And then there was the breakfast food known as scrapple.

"Philadelphia Scrapple came in a can," said William Plichta. "It was sliced, put in a skillet, and heated. We ate it during World War II."

What is scrapple? The dictionary defines it as "cornmeal mush made with the meat and broth of pork, seasoned with onions, spices and herbs and shaped into loaves for slicing and frying."

It sounds quite appetizing – until you dig a little deeper into the list of ingredients. One source called scrapple "an amalgamation of tendons, cartilage, feet, skin, ears, nose, gums and more. In short, it is all the garbage that should be thrown away."

Another explained that the word "scrapple" comes from "scrap" or "scrappy," meaning that it was made up of odds and ends that were left

over after the more marketable parts of a pig had been butchered and removed. The pig's skin, liver, heart, tongue, and brains? They were boiled and ground up and combined with spices and cornmeal.

That's scrapple!

So why would anyone want to eat it?

It was prepared in a loaf, sliced, and fried in lard or butter until crispy on the outside and soft on the inside. It could be served under many different toppings including butter, applesauce, ketchup, or maple syrup. If you could forget what you were eating, you might actually think it was pretty tasty.

Fortunately, not all meals in the "good old days" featured calves' brains, chicken and pigs' feet, or scrapple. Conventional meat dishes were also served, some of which may be unique to this area. One such entrée was "city chicken."

"Mom made what we called 'city chicken,'" explained John Batovsky. "It was a very popular dish at the time, but you hardly see it anymore. She used pork and either beef or veal, cut up like stew meat. She bought 'city chicken sticks,' which were pointed and about the size of a pencil, then alternated putting different types of meat together on the sticks like shish kabob. She breaded and fried them like chicken. When they were cooked, they looked like chicken legs. City chicken was a very popular dish for Sundays and picnics."

John, who now lives in Chester, Virginia, lamented, "It has been a long time since I ate or even heard anyone mention 'city chicken' around here."

Carol Brown Townsend, daughter of the late Grant Brown, grew up on High Street. Now she lives in Westampton, New Jersey, and she occasionally serves city chicken to her guests.

"I think city chicken is strictly from the western Pennsylvania area," Carol theorized. "I often serve it to guests, and after the first bite, their reaction is that 'it doesn't taste like chicken.' Then we play a guessing game as they decide what kind of meat is on the wooden skewer."

Norma Ryan of Brownsville remembers a favorite meal whose centerpiece was a real bird, one that isn't eaten much any more.

"A favorite dish from my childhood was pigeon," Norma told me. "My dad used to raise them at our home on Second Street. He would prepare them for cooking, and my mom would bake them in a big roast pan with garlic, sage, butter and olive oil. The pigeon was cooked until the skin was crunchy, and it took a long time to eat because there was such a small amount of meat on the bones. Served with roasted potatoes and other side dishes, it was a delicious meal."

Of course, some youngsters' mothers prepared liver for them, and

West Brownsville native Jim Hartmann was one of those lucky kids. Jim summarized his personal thoughts about eating liver in one word.

"Yuk," he said. "Mom did learn to cook it with onions and bacon though, and that gave it more flavor so we could tolerate it a little better."

Meat was the central focus of most meals, but many families in the Brownsville area were Catholic, which meant there would be a meatless Friday.

"On Fridays, my mother would sometimes make pirohis filled with potatoes and cheese, prunes and cabbage," said John Batovsky. "We also ate a lot of fish, mostly fried or baked whiting, cod, or perch.

"On special occasions, we had shrimp and oysters, served with a dip made of two parts mayonnaise and one part ketchup. My brother still makes it for dipping chips and pretzels. Try it sometime," John suggested, "it is better than it sounds."

At Lou Opall's house, his family enjoyed "Finnan haddie."

"It was smoked haddock," Lou explained. "This was prepared in milk, and I remember the golden fat floating in the sauce. My Scottish grandmother called it 'Finnan haddie.' And of course, there were 'blind robins,' a kind of smoked sardine that was found behind all of the bars in those days, along with pickled eggs."

Leftover meat or fish made great sandwiches for Dad's lunch bucket or the kids' school lunch, but quite often there were no leftovers, which made for some interesting sandwich combinations in the next day's lunch box.

"Spabama sandwiches," said former Allison #1 resident Christine Mattie, "were great. At my house, peanut butter spread between two pieces of toast with sliced bananas was a Spabama."

"Pickle and Miracle Whip sandwiches" was the recommendation of another reader.

"My favorite was fried sliced bologna," voted former Second Street resident Phyllis Barreca Grossi, "with sliced tomatoes and mayonnaise on Pasquini bread."

And let's not forget old reliable "chipped ham," another uniquely western Pennsylvanian treat.

"When I moved to the eastern shore of Maryland in 1974," said Brownsville native Jan Rowe, "there was no chipped ham to be found. Likewise in Delaware, where there were no fluffy piles of chipped ham available. The same is true now in Boston, where I live. There is no chipped ham, just sliced."

Whether meat, fish, or fowl, many of the foods we eat today are different from those eaten by our parents and grandparents. Next, our series concludes with a look back at what I call "concoctions" – unusual

mixtures of ingredients that combined every available scrap of food in the house into a single dish.

NECESSITY WAS THE MOTHER OF UNUSUAL CULINARY INVENTIONS

Some of history's most creative people have been women in aprons, staring desperately into almost-bare cupboards, who still managed during lean times to produce an evening meal for their hungry families. To pull off this domestic magic, these Houdinis of the kitchen learned to merge seemingly unrelated food items into a single dish that could sustain the family for another day.

For example, could water, bread, flour and grease be turned into a family meal? Rebecca Davis Pauley, who grew up in Washington County, recalls a meal with those ingredients that often appeared on her family's dinner table.

"My mother was a wonderful cook and baker," Rebecca told me, "but many of my growing-up years were rather lean monetarily. During those times, we ate what Mom called her Browned Flour Gravy. She would brown flour in a little grease of some kind, then add water, or milk if it was available, to the browning flour. The resulting gravy was poured over a slice of bread.

"It is funny how you thought you just couldn't stand to see it served one more time," said Rebecca, "but it was delicious, and I yearn for it even today. For some reason, however, mine doesn't taste like Mom's."

Gravy was a common ingredient in many of those culinary concoctions. Former Brownsville resident Prudy Cross Nicholson, who lives in Bentleyville, remembers how her mother stretched one meal into two in order to feed her family of six.

"My dad worked at the steel mill," Prudy explained, "and was laid off more than he worked. My mom often had to use a pound of ground beef as the basis for two meals to feed our family of six. For the first meal, she would add some of the ground beef to spaghetti for flavoring. Then without fail, for our second meal she would chop up the rest of the ground meat, fry it, and add water to make gravy. Then she would boil potatoes and spoon the ground meat and gravy mixture over two slices of bread or mashed potatoes. We had this meal nearly every week when I was growing up."

Sharon Jobes Stenner, daughter of Brownsville native Keith Jobes, described a dish her grandmother often served.

"My grandmother made something she called 'Slum,'" Sharon

reminisced. "It was a concoction of browned ground beef, a can of Veg-All, a large can of baked beans, and ketchup. My father, sister, and I still make this one often."

Richeyville native Richard Powis, Sr., now of Canton, Ohio, recalled, "When the mines were not working in the late 1940s, things got pretty tight for my mom and dad. My mother would make a sort of pudding using bread, some sugar, and home-canned tomatoes. That was the entire meal. Mom said that this was a staple during the Depression, and we ate enough of it that I got tired of it.

"But now that I have gotten older and my mom and dad are gone," Richard reflected thoughtfully, "I think that I would really enjoy it if I were to eat it one more time."

Bob Rinehart, who grew up in West Brownsville in the early forties, observed that his family's poverty and his friends' similar circumstances did not register with the kids.

"I guess most of us were poor and did not realize it at the time," he remarked. "My brother and I hunted and trapped animals, and it seemed that anything we brought home, my mother would prepare for a meal. On paydays, the meal was wieners, baked beans, and cottage cheese. I still make that when I am pressed for time or can't think of anything else to make, but I have not eaten groundhog, rabbit, possum, or raccoon in fifty years!"

Reminiscing about childhood meals stirred up a delicious memory for Rick Kelley of Middletown, Delaware.

"I remember as a child," he told me, "when we lived with my grandmother at her farmhouse on West Bend Road, she would serve each of us a big piece of home-baked yellow corn bread smothered in homemade chili. We spent the entire day smelling that corn bread baking and chili cooking, and as dinnertime neared, fresh coffee brewing on the black potbellied stove in the kitchen.

"By the time dinner was ready, I couldn't wait to dig in. My grandmother never told anyone the ingredients she put into her chili. All I know is it was great smelling and great tasting, and we all ate until we were stuffed."

Some of our readers had plenty on the dinner table when they were children, while others can remember long stretches of their lives when there was not enough to eat. For the final word in this series about foods from the past, I will share with you the thoughts of eighty-seven-year-old Grindstone native Lida Martin Marin. Lida sent me a handwritten note in which she described her widowed mother's struggle to feed her family during the depths of the Depression.

"The one thing that stands out in my memory most," Lida wrote, "is

that I was always cold and always hungry. I am now 87 years old, and I wish that I had got to go to school more than four years. My mother worked hard to bring up us seven children, and food was mighty scarce. So as each of us got to be school age, we tried to find work to help out.

"There never seemed to be enough to eat. I can remember my older brothers and sisters putting lard on their bread and sprinkling salt on it and taking it to school for their lunch with a couple of tomatoes. My mother baked all our bread, and beans were about all we could afford.

"Meat was something we just dreamed about, but we still had gravy all the same. Put some lard in the skillet and flour to brown, then add water and keep stirring until it got thick. That's what we put over our bread to eat for supper. Another thing that wasn't too bad was to fry onions in a big skillet, then dampen some bread with water and add it to the onions. I think children today would frown on meals like that, but I was taught that if you're hungry, you'll eat it, and if you are not hungry, you don't need it."

Food was scarce in Lida's family, but love was plentiful. Enclosed with Lida's note was a handwritten poem that she wrote years ago as a tribute to her father, whose untimely death in 1920 left her mother a widow raising seven children. Lida's poem is simple, heartfelt, and may cause you to reflect on all that you have to be thankful for during this holiday season.

To My Father, Who Died In 1920

The memory of you, my father,
I don't much recall.
You died when I was only four
And you left seven of us in all.

First there was sister Lizzie;
She was the first of the tribe,
And she helped take care of us
After you, our Daddy, died.

So being the man of the house
Fell on the shoulders of brother Roy.
A job like that for a 10-year-old
Couldn't have been much of a joy.

Willard came next in line
But when you're eight, that's still small.
So all the evening chores
Were divided among us all.

Then came sister Emma
With her blond curly hair so fine,
And after her birthday,
I knew the next one was mine.

Wallace was the name
Mother chose for the next boy,
And then we had our last one,
George was a bundle of joy.

Daddy, you never got to see him;
You had already passed away.
Mother and Roy have gone now too,
But we'll be a family again someday.

Raising your family wasn't easy, Dad,
But we stuck together through thick and thin.
The clothes on our back, food on the table,
Sometimes was mighty slim.

Mother took in washing in daytime.
At night we would go to the coal pit
Carrying a carbide light on our heads,
Over our shoulders a shovel and pick.

It was a long, hard road to travel,
But somehow I think you knew,
And was trying your best to guide us
In all the hard times we had to go through.

We are all grown up now, Daddy,
And our children have some of their own.
All we can do is show them pictures
Of a great-granddad they've never known.

I've tried to follow your golden rules;
I'm teaching my grandchildren one of these,
That before you get up on your feet to walk,
You should first get down on your knees.

Look after Mother and Roy, Dad,
You couldn't miss them if you tried.
Just look for a man who looks like you,
He'll be with a woman, walking with pride.

I know you're going to be proud of them,
As we were before they went up above.
Oh, no, they weren't perfect, Daddy,
But you can't see faults where there's love.

Your youngest daughter,
Lida

The ties that bind a family together in love are strengthened, not weakened, by tribulation. At this special time of year, Lida's poignant tribute to her father should cause us to pause and reflect upon our own lives – and to count our blessings, one by one.