

PINK CHICKS AND ONION-DYED EGGS REMEMBERING EASTER TRADITIONS

Easter week in southwestern Pennsylvania is abundant with ethnic traditions, and current and former residents are happy to share pleasant memories of their families' Easter traditions.

"My parents kept a strictly Italian home," said Norma Ryan of Brownsville. "I remember making a cross out of a palm on Palm Sunday and wearing it on my clothing on that day. I would keep it in my bedroom until the next Good Friday, when my parents would burn the palm. I was never allowed to throw it away.

"My grandmother, whom we called 'Nonna,' felt that on Good Friday, the entire ground was sacred. On that day, we were never allowed to play games that pierced the ground. We honored her wishes because she was so sweet. Besides, we wanted to please her, because we knew that she would allow us to have the end slice of the fresh bread she baked in the outdoor oven and spread with her homemade butter that melted right into the bread!"

Many stores were closed from noon until three o'clock on Good Friday, when the community's religious services were held. Hannah Millward Fisher of Corona, Arizona, remembers those services.

"Central Presbyterian Church always seemed to be the host church for the three-hour Good Friday services," Hannah said. "Different ministers would preach a portion of the service, and people would come and go during those three hours."

Maundy Thursday and Good Friday religious services are an integral part of the Easter tradition. Other Easter customs are related to the ordinary egg, symbol of birth and new life. During Easter week, eggs take center stage.

"My two brothers and I would watch spellbound," said Norma Ryan, "as our dad patiently wrapped fresh eggs. He would wrap the green stems of onions in two different directions around each raw egg, then place the wrapped eggs in one layer in a wide pot.

"Next he would place the yellow-brown onion skins on top of the

eggs, cover them with water and bring them to a slow boil. When the eggs had boiled for five minutes, he carefully drained the water, poured on cold water, then removed the onion stems. Where the stems had been, there were white stripes going around the egg in both directions, while the rest of the hard-cooked egg was colored brown from the onion skins.

“There was another way Dad used to color eggs,” Norma added. “In those days, wool yarn was not colorfast. Dad would wrap colored yarn around the egg in many different directions. When boiled, the eggs would take on the color of the yarn he had chosen, and where the yarn had stayed attached to the egg, there would be white stripes. I never even heard of manufactured Easter egg dyes until I visited school chums and noticed their very differently colored eggs!”

Eggs were not the only things that got colored at Easter time in Brownsville. Imagine the thoughts that went through the minds of wide-eyed youngsters who, after dyeing Easter eggs pink and blue, got their first look at the pink and blue colored chicks that were sold at the G. C. Murphy Five and Ten Cent Store! Gwen Marcus Wright of Washington, D. C. remembers those pastel peeps.

“Toward the rear of the ‘Five and Ten,’” Gwen told me, “there was a large display of live baby chicks that had been dyed Easter colors, blue and pink, with some left their natural yellow. My parents, Sam and Rose Marcus, bought me two chicks that we took home, but they died within a day or two.”

Bonnie Bryan Magee of Erie, formerly of Brownsville, had better luck than Gwen did.

“My parents, Jim and Sally Bryan, never let an Easter go by without a trip to Murphy’s,” Bonnie said, “where we would buy a few colored baby chicks. I can still visualize the small brown paper bags that held the chicken feed. The bags accompanied these defenseless little chicks to the homes of children who played with the birds like toys.

“Their life span at our house was only a few days, until one year my father discovered that by placing a small lamp in their cardboard box, enough warmth was provided for them to survive. After that, I had chicks that actually lived long enough to be passed on to local chicken farmers. I remember begging to be taken to these farms to visit ‘my’ chickens.”

Dyed eggs and colored chicks were definite signs that Easter was near. Eggs of a different variety were a mouth-watering delight for many local residents. Handmade chocolate flavored eggs were a fund-raising specialty of St. Andrew’s Lutheran Church of Brownsville.

“The church always took orders for Easter eggs,” remembered Hannah Fisher. “That was how they raised money for years. A friend

sent me one of those Lutheran-made eggs about four years ago, and it was luscious!”

Bonnie Magee was sorely tempted by those delicious eggs.

“Folks got their orders in early for those eggs, which were made by the ladies and gentlemen of the church,” she said. “Every Monday evening, my mother would join other members at the church, where they would concoct these much sought-after Easter treats. I waited at home for a taste of whatever delicious flavor they had worked on that week! Imagine the level of temptation at our house, where my mother kept box after box of those eggs waiting for pick-up!”

Local confectioneries also sold chocolate Easter eggs, often personalizing them by writing the recipient’s name across the top with icing.



Mitchell's Nut Shop in the 1950s

“The drug stores always had candy and chocolate eggs for sale,” said Hannah Fisher, “but the place I remember best was the Nut Shop, which was almost diagonal from the National Deposit Bank. It was at the south end of the cast iron bridge. The shop’s windows were always decorated for each holiday, such as Valentine’s Day, when there were huge hearts covered in satin and filled with candy.

“At Easter time, the store outdid itself. They had chocolate rabbits and Easter eggs of all varieties in the window, and if you purchased an egg, you could have someone’s name written on it. Children at school would frequently take up a collection to buy their teacher a personalized Easter egg from the Nut Shop.”

On one particular Easter, young Bonnie Magee’s eagerly anticipated personalized egg somehow slipped by quality control despite a serious flaw.

“I was devastated,” she said. “My chocolate egg had my name misspelled! That Easter, I was ‘Boonie’ instead of ‘Bonnie!’” A few years later though, Bonnie found herself on the opposite end of the Easter candy supply line.

“When I was in high school,” she said, “Betty Ann Miller, daughter of the manager of Murphy’s, and I were given the job of preparing the prepackaged Easter baskets that were sold in the store. We worked after school in the cold basement of the store, and we were given specific directions for the construction of these baskets. We made a false middle in the basket by mounding up newspaper, covered the newspaper with colored cellophane straw, and placed a hollow chocolate rabbit on top.

“We added jelly beans and marshmallow chicks, wrapped the baskets in brightly colored cellophane, and they were ready for sale in Murphy’s candy department. If we filled the baskets too generously, they had to be undone and filled again. The bonus, however, was that we could eat any broken chocolates, so that was probably the sweetest job I have ever had!”

In every Easter season, a few star-crossed chocolate bunnies are not destined to be enjoyed by their intended recipient. Jan Rowe, who grew up on the South Side, remembered one such unlucky rabbit.

“One Easter,” Jan recalled, “my parents, Robert and Betty Jane Rowe, selected a nice chocolate bunny for each of their daughters. All of us were tremendously delighted with our chocolate rabbits.”

Any reader who grew up with siblings can probably guess what happened next.

“One of the chocolate bunnies,” Jan reported, “turned up with his ears missing.”

An investigation was immediately launched.

“My sister and I knew that our older sibling, Bobbi, had eaten the ears of a bunny that was not hers, even though we had not actually seen her commit the crime.”

And what clue gave away the identity of the culprit?

“She had bigger teeth than we did,” Jan declared, “so we could tell she was guilty by the marks she left behind at the base of where the ears

had once been!”

Jan Rowe now lives in Boston, far from Brownsville, but she is proof that those who leave the area take their traditions with them.

“Even though I live in Massachusetts,” she told me, “I still order Sarris and Redstone candy for myself and others every year at Easter time.”

Your thoughts of Easter Past may be of sunrise services, new Easter clothes, or perhaps a family gathering for the traditional Easter feast. But for the Brownsville resident in the next story, Easter Sunday included participating in an unusual family competition.

UNUSUAL FAMILY COMPETITION WAS AN EASTER TRADITION

The children, still wearing their new Easter outfits, stood in the yard behind the farm house. They chattered excitedly and pointed toward the bowl of yellow-brown Easter eggs on the lawn. The fresh eggs, courtesy of the hens in the chicken coop, had been boiled and dyed with onion skins in the old Italian style.

The back door of the farm house opened. The ladies of the Italian-American family, also in their Easter finery, streamed from the kitchen door, laughing and talking as they walked toward the grape arbor. Ah, what wonderful homemade wine the grapes from Nonno’s arbor produced every year! The women walked toward the part of the yard just below the arbor, where the competition was about to begin.

The men had already gathered in the yard. When it appeared that everyone was in place, Nonno gave a signal. The children grew even livelier as one of the men smiled at them and jingled the change in his pocket. What a lot of noise it made! Soon some of it would be theirs!

All eyes turned toward the youngest girl. She shyly walked over to Nonno and handed him the Easter egg she had selected from the bowl. Thus chosen by the child to be the first competitor, the old gentleman accepted it from her. Then he slowly walked over to a spot in the yard where the terrain began sloping upward toward the grape arbor.

Nonno bent over and set the Easter egg down in the grass. It began to slowly roll down the slope. Nonno stopped it, fashioned a slight indentation in the damp soil to hold it in place, then replaced the egg in the depression. Satisfied that the egg would remain stationary, he stood up and rejoined the men.

He reached into the pocket of his trousers and pulled out several pennies. As Nonno stepped up to the “official” mark that had been made in the grass, some of the men shouted light-hearted encouragement to him. He looked at the little girl and smiled, and she grinned and put both hands up to her mouth.

Nonno laid the pennies in the palm of his left hand, then chose one of them. He gripped that penny between his middle finger and thumb, with his index finger on its edge. With all eyes upon him, he glared at the egg for a moment, then drew back his arm in the fashion of a baseball pitcher and forcefully fired the penny at the egg.

The coin missed its target, causing the children, women, and the rest of the men to shout “One!” in unison. The girl who had chosen Nonno jumped up and down and clapped with delight.

Three more times Nonno threw; three more times the egg remained pristine. Finally, on the fifth attempt, the flying penny struck its target with great force. The coin’s edge broke the shell, and the penny remained lodged in the Easter egg.

Loud cheers and clapping erupted from the spectators. Nonno smiled and stepped away from the mark in the grass. Some of the men patted him on the back and congratulated him; others offered good-natured opinions that his score wouldn’t hold up for long.

Meanwhile the little girl dashed forward toward the penetrated Easter egg, picked it up, and removed the penny from it. She ran over to Nonno and handed him the egg. He immediately peeled it and began to eat it. The girl hurried back to the spot where the egg had been and searched in the grass. She found the four misfired pennies, carefully dropped them into her little brown paper sack, and happily rejoined her cousins.

Now it was the turn of the next youngest child, a boy, who stepped forward and handed his uncle an egg. The new contestant would attempt to hit the egg in fewer attempts than Nonno had needed, aware that the penny must “stick” in the egg to count. With each pitch of a penny, the spectators tallied the misses . . . “One! Two! Three!” The loudest voice belonged to the child who would get to keep those coins that missed.

The story of that egg contest was shared with me by one of those excited children from many years ago. Norma Ryan, one of several readers who offered to share their Easter memories with us, collected a treasure trove of pennies on her Grandfather Persello’s dairy farm near Perryopolis.

“We all tried to ask the oldest man to throw at our egg,” Norma said, “thinking it would take him longer to hit the egg and we would get

more pennies. As I got older, I realized that if one of us did not get many pennies, some of the men would intentionally miss to give us more pennies. But of course, there were also those macho men who wanted to be the winner with just a couple of pennies!”

How hard were those pennies pitched?

“On rainy days,” said Norma, “the pennies were thrown with such force that we had to dig them out of the wet ground.”

After all of the Easter eggs had met their fate at the Persello farm, the children would count their pennies, the men would play Italian card games or bocce, and the women would spend Easter afternoon chatting, often doing needle work while they talked.

For those in the Christian community, Easter morning had begun with attendance at church services. Former resident JoAnn Wingrove Powers, now of Wichita, Kansas, remembered that those services started very early.

“When I was twelve,” JoAnn recalled, “I joined the Methodist Youth Fellowship group at South Brownsville Methodist Church. Each year the MYF, along with our sponsors, would meet in the church parking lot at around 4:30 a.m., and we would travel to Jumonville for the sunrise worship service. Those services were always very meaningful to me, and I was amazed at how many people got up so early to attend.”

Pastors at church services conducted later that morning looked out upon pews crowded with families dressed to the nines in the newest spring fashions.

“My dad would always bring home a pretty corsage for me to wear with my new Easter outfit,” said JoAnn.

“And those patent leather shoes we would wear!” said Bonnie Bryan Magee, Brownsville-born and now residing in Erie. “I can still remember what ‘real’ patent leather smells like. We would go into Claybaugh’s shoe store, and I would put my foot in the ‘x-ray machine,’ which they said would assure a good fit.

“After purchasing our shoes, we would move on to other stores in town to complete our outfit. In the fifties, that meant looking for a waist-length spring coat called a ‘topper,’ made of a light pastel wool. And of course, nobody thought of attending church without white gloves and a new hat. The churches on Easter Sunday were a sea of lovely, flower-decorated straw.”

“Johnston the Florist and Lunden’s did a large business at Easter time,” commented reader Hannah Millward Fisher, “since almost every woman who went to church wore a corsage. Kart’s, Goldstein’s, and Sidler’s all had large hat departments, and the Nola Shop and Ash Hat Shop also carried hats and accessories.”

During church service, a few ladies might be caught glancing at their watches. The reason, of course, was that there was ‘a roast in the oven’ at home, because many families went directly home from church to partake of a delicious midday Easter meal.

“My mom would prepare lamb,” said Norma Ryan, “and of course, there was always homemade pasta or gnocchi, and perhaps soup, with all the Italian trimmings.”

“During World War II,” said Hannah Fisher, “there was gas rationing, so my dad would often drive a car full of men with him to the mine. At Easter, the riders would always give him nut rolls to take home to his family. Some of the rolls were filled with apricot, poppyseed or nuts; other folks gave us nut or poppyseed bread, which was equally tasty. My mother started making those rolls for Easter. It was a labor-intensive chore, but they were delicious.”

“After our family’s customary Easter ham dinner,” said Bonnie Magee, “our family and friends would visit into the evening, sharing the remnants of the Easter ham and all the baked goods that my mother made for the holiday.”

Searching for hidden Easter eggs is a custom observed in some families, including my own. Nancy Lee Davison Barnhart, who grew up on Baltimore Street and now lives in St. Petersburg, Florida, wrote to me about her memory of visiting my grandmother’s house on Easter.

“I’ll always remember going to your grandmother Mabel Tunney’s house in Blainesburg,” Lee wrote. “Mabel would hide dozens of Easter eggs throughout her house. Many members of the Tunney family would come there on Easter, and each had an egg hidden with his or her name written on it in pencil. No matter who came to Mabel’s house, there was always an egg hidden for them.”

Of course, if you found someone else’s egg before you found your own, you had to put it back. Later, when that person showed up to search for his egg, coaching him was as much fun as searching for your own had been. Refrains of “You’re hot! Cold! Burning up! You’re freezing!” echoed through my grandmother’s house all evening as children searched under furniture, inside lamp shades, and in other hiding places for the elusive egg with their name on it.

One year an Easter egg was hidden in plain sight on the keyboard cover of my grandmother’s upright piano. Along came a would-be pianist who didn’t notice it there, opened the keyboard cover, and either didn’t hear or chose not to mention the loud thump that resulted when the cover was flipped up. Weeks later, a telltale odor originating inside that piano revealed the location of the one Easter egg no one had found.

As I think back to Easters Past, I wonder if memories of the

holidays we spend with family become even more special than the original events seemed to be at the time! I think they do.

As you and your family observe your Easter traditions this year, keep in mind that you are creating a new “Easter Past.” You are fashioning the memories upon which your family will fondly look back many years from now.