

Harvest Time

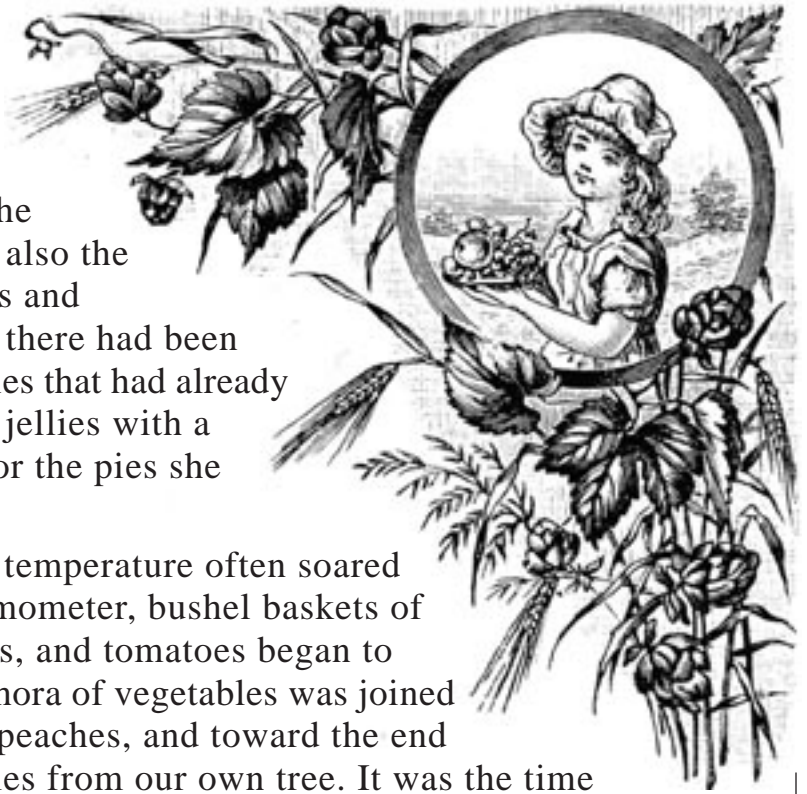
North Street Tales

August has a reputation as being the warmest month of the year. It was also the month when Dad's harvest of fruits and vegetables began in earnest. True, there had been strawberries, raspberries, and cherries that had already been made into mother's jams and jellies with a goodly portion remaining whole for the pies she would make all winter long.

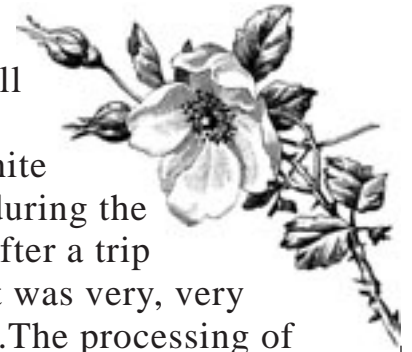
During the late summer, when the temperature often soared into the high numbers on our thermometer, bushel baskets of green beans, carrots, green peppers, and tomatoes began to appear on our side porch. This plethora of vegetables was joined by overflowing baskets of plums, peaches, and toward the end of the month early Macintosh apples from our own tree. It was the time for all to pitch in so that we would have good things to eat all winter. The depression still gripped the land. It just wouldn't let go. We could only afford to buy staples, such as flour, sugar, salt and coffee.

Early one morning mother called from the bottom of the stairs, "Mary Jane, Hope, Ed, it's time to get up." Morry was too young to get involved with sharp knives though he did like to turn the grinder when mother made relish. We all scrambled out of bed, dressed, and ate our breakfast. Hope and I went out on the porch with our paring knives to snip the green beans. There was a whole bushel do to. More would be harvested later from the garden. To our young eyes it seemed that we would never get through with this chore. After we snipped the ends from each bean we cut them into one-inch lengths into a big kettle filled with water. Meanwhile, mother and Mary Jane were washing the glass jars and tops, and the rubber rings to put around each jar so that there would be a good seal when the tops were put on. Water was boiling in a big kettle on kitchen stove for processing the jars of beans.

We always said a little prayer for cool weather on canning days because the kitchen could become hot and muggy with the heat from the stove and the steam from the boiling water. Before we purchased an oil stove for summer use, the big, black, Home Comfort coal stove would be used. That stove was only a comfort during the winter months! It was torture to stay near that range for very long, but it had to be done. The oil stove wasn't as big as the Home Comfort and it wasn't as uncomfortable to work near it. There were problems with oil stoves in those days. They burned kerosene, a cheap though highly combustible fuel. The burners had to be lit with matches. Our stove also would suddenly



flare up filling the kitchen with black oily smoke. The smell of kerosene lingered for days when this happened. What a blessing it was when we were finally able to purchase a white enamel electric stove. To be sure it wasn't as comfortable during the winter, and it didn't dry our wet mittens or warm our feet after a trip to the ice skating rink during the cold weather. However, it was very, very comfortable to work near during the summer and early fall. The processing of fruits and vegetables never seemed to end. Fortunately, during the early harvest my sister Hope and I were still on summer break from school. As August wore on, the work increased. There were peaches to be peeled and pitted, hundreds of those wonderful, juicy, golden orbs that came from our trees were eaten fresh, or made into fresh peach pies. There were also quart jars filled with peach halves "put down" for the winter. Even more were made into peach jam for our morning toast. Plums were given the same treatment as the peaches, though apples were easy and we liked doing them.

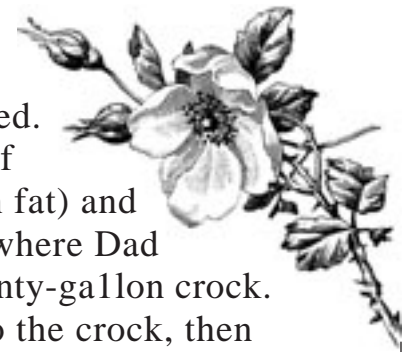


Mother made some into applesauce which went into pint jars; most of them went directly from the tree to the cellar in big bins next to the potato bin. It was tomatoes that elicited groans from us. Those red, plump fruits (some folks call them vegetables) had to be dropped into boiling water to loosen their skins, and then peeled before they cooled too much. That was a messy task that I dreaded. However, the real problem we had with the tomatoes came when they were still green. Dad would keep watching his fifty or so plants so that he could spot tomato worms before they could do any damage. Those worms could reach a length of several inches and were as big around as one's finger. At the end of this green length of worm was a small hook made of some hard material. I don't think it had any useful function other than to scare predators away. A tomato worm could devour a good half of a green tomato overnight. Therefore, when Dad saw them appearing, Morry and I had to go out and remove them from the plants. We quickly learned to knock them to the ground and kill them with a sharp stick. They were green all the way through, ugly creatures indeed! In reality those green creatures were not worms at all. They were caterpillars who would turn into white butterflies. Mother canned about seventy-five quarts of tomatoes every year, made green tomato mincemeat, tomato conserve, and green tomato pickles. The late harvest of potatoes, squash, beets, carrots and cabbage came in September. Dad dug the potatoes, three long rows that stretched from one end of our garden to the other. He would dig several hills a day after he came home from work at the salt mine. He loved potatoes. He used to say, "There's nothing like a good boiled potato." After the potatoes were dug they had to be picked up, put in bushel baskets and carried to the back yard. Dad spread them out on the grass and then he washed them with a light spray from a hose. After they dried they were carried down cellar to the potato bin. That cellar had a dirt floor and stone walls, an ideal place to store squash, carrots, beets and other root vegetables such a vegetable oysters.

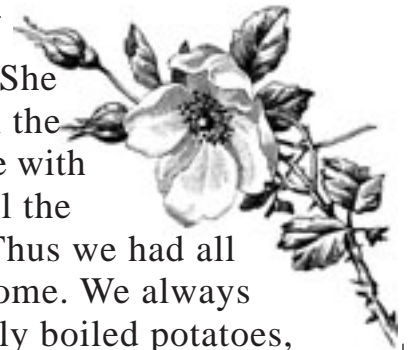
The last thing that was harvested were the cabbages. Dad pulled them up roots and all and piled them in the wood shed. Some would stay there, covered with an old blanket most of the winter. Mother made cold slaw, fried cabbage (in bacon fat) and boiled dinners from them. A great many went down cellar where Dad would take a mandolin and shred the cabbage into a big twenty-gallon crock. Every once in a while he would throw a handful of salt into the crock, then continue with another layer of cabbage. Once the crock was full he would put a clean round board on top of the cabbage and weigh it down with a stone. Now the fermenting began. That crock of cabbage spread its perfume all around the cellar. It wasn't a pleasant smell. However, that sauerkraut was delicious when mother cooked it with either wieners, ham, or pork chops. Once the sauerkraut was put to ferment we knew that the harvest was finished. I used to go down and look at the array of fruits and vegetables that mother had canned. They were all arranged on shelves near the bottom of the cellar stairs. There was a rainbow of colors from the reds of cherries and tomatoes, to the greens of the beans, the orange of jars of carrots, and the yellows or summer squash and the dark ruby of tomato conserve, all arranged in neat rows. Then I would glance over at the bins of apples and potatoes, and finally at the coal bin after Dad had a load delivered. We wouldn't be hungry or cold during the coming winter. That gave me the feeling of comfort and security. In those far off days even children felt the anxiety their parents had over all the troubles generated by the depression. That food stored in our cellar helped ease that awful insecurity.

As September gave way to October, then November Dad would announce that it was time to butcher our two pigs. There was a man who came to help Dad kill the pigs. Morry and I had to help herd the pigs, one at a time, into the shed where they were butchered. The man who came to help killed the pigs in a way that I won't describe. Then the pig was hung up by its hind legs on a pulley so that it could be dipped into a big drum of hot water. This loosened the bristles on the skin so that they could be scraped off. After that the pig was gutted, the head was cut off and the pig was taken to the woodshed to hang for two or three days before it was cut up into chops, ribs, ham and other cuts of meat. Then, about noon, the second pig was brought out and the same process began all over again.

Dad liked headcheese. The rest of us wouldn't touch it. He had a big kettle into which he put the pigs head and some spices. It simmered at the back of the stove until all the meat fell off the head. Then Dad packed the meat tightly in bread tins, poured fat (lard) over the top and put the tins in the screen shelf down cellar where they would keep all winter. Dad and mother also made sausage, which was great to eat for breakfast when mother made pancakes. The hams were taken to Brown's smokehouse out on the Lakeville Road. Slow burning corncobs and a few hickory chips produced delicious hams which, with



mother's magic touch produced many meals for our family. She also took the pig fat and rendered it in a big dripping pan in the oven to produce lard. Cakes, pies, and homemade bread made with that lard gave these things a taste that is yet to be beat by all the vegetable shortenings and cooking oils of the present day. Thus we had all the ingredients, except for a few staples, for the winter to come. We always had potatoes for supper (dinner was at noon!). Dad liked only boiled potatoes, though on Sunday he would eat them mashed. Mother always peeled more potatoes than we would eat because those cold leftover potatoes would feed the family the next day. She cut up the leftovers into a frying pan with melted bacon fat, added a chopped onion, and then let her famous fried potatoes heat through. There are those of our family who have very fond memories of those home fries.



What to have for a vegetable was an easy choice. Mother would send one of us down cellar for a jar of green beans or whatever she had in mind and then would call down to us to bring up a jar of mustard pickles and jar of sweet cherries for dessert. If she asked for elderberries we knew we were going to have an elderberry pie for dessert the following night.

It took work to produce our own food. However, my parents had ten children and two adults to feed. Money was in short supply so they did what they had been taught by their parents, grow your own. Well, the work didn't hurt us though we thought it did at the time. The bonus we got was food that was good for us and tasted so much better. Indeed those were the days.



Edward Barkley