

## American Pie

One of the distinctions of Doc's Tribe was the large quantities of great food mom prepared when we were growing up. Even if our clothes were hand-me-downs, we didn't travel in style, or we hardly ever ate out at restaurants, mom always cooked wonderful home-styled food for our family of eight. The refrigerator was always full, canning jars stocked the pantry, and fresh vegetables from the garden were served in season.

Food was the center piece of the Vardiman family, particularly sweet food. Plentiful food filled the table for breakfast, lunch, and dinner; for birthdays, graduations, and funerals; any other special occasion when guests visited; and at Thanksgiving, Christmas, and Easter. Food was used to celebrate occasions, to comfort in times of illness, to substitute for activities our family couldn't afford, or to draw the family together.

Mom and dad grew up on the farm where food was plentiful. Even if a farmer was poor, he could normally feed his family well. Our family inherited a farm-like mentality, although we only lived on a farm for about four years. Mom told us frequently of her experiences as a child helping her mother and the neighborhood wives feed the threshing crews when they came to cut wheat each summer. Threshing crews were a common experience for Midwestern families at the turn of the century but have now been replaced by traveling combining crews. The combining crews today don't expect to be invited to a table overflowing with food--the crew chief's wife generally prepares the food in a traveling kitchen or the crew just eats in a restaurant. My brother, David, worked on a combine crew during most summers to pay for college.

In the early 1900's a threshing crew with a steam tractor and threshing machine would set up shop on a farm in a local neighborhood for a week or more to separate the wheat from the chaff by running bundles of freshly cut wheat through their machines. Large crews of men would work long hours from early in the morning until after dark at night. The wheat was cut and brought to the threshing machine by the farmers cooperating in the neighborhood.

At breakfast, lunch, and dinner each day the crews of dozens of men had to be fed. The women in the neighborhood prepared pancakes, coffee, bacon, sausage, and eggs for breakfast; casseroles, slabs of pork and beef, chicken, gravy and biscuits, vegetables, and pies for lunch and dinner; and gallons of ice tea.

Mom treated our family like a threshing crew, particularly at holidays. When she purchased a large dining room table from her friend, Queenie, in St. Louis, mom was at the peak of her food preparation days. I recall several Thanksgivings and Christmases when the table was overloaded with dishes of food and the surrounding sideboards covered with pies, candies, cakes, and tarts.

Mom's favorite meal was probably fried chicken with mashed potatoes, green beans, gravy, and biscuits followed by some type of fruit cobbler with ice tea or cranberry juice. She wasn't satisfied to just throw the food on the table, but elaborately presented it with beautiful tablecloths, napkins, and her favorite china, crystal, and silverware. The meals were truly a feast fit for a king.

Of course, the preparation for a holiday meal took an incredible amount of effort. She would start days ahead with shopping, baking pies and cakes, gathering and cleaning vegetables from the garden, baking the biscuits, boiling and mashing the potatoes, frying the chicken, and making the gravy. During the final stages of preparation, the table was set, and chairs brought from all over the house. Much of the work was done by Doc's Tribe under the rigid discipline of Captain Mom. The atmosphere was generally positive, but occasional reprimands caused some unpleasantness. Dad just stayed out of the way.

A few extra comments should be made about mom's pies, cakes, and candies. My favorite dessert that mom made was a delicacy called Charlotte Russe. It's a concoction made of whipped, vanilla-flavored gelatin poured between two layers of crumbled graham crackers, aged for 24 hours, and served with a dab of whipped cream and a maraschino cherry on top. Wow!

My second favorite was one of her fruit cobblers—apple, cherry, or peach. She made these with a pastry bottom and cross-laced top sprinkled with cinnamon in a large casserole dish. Typically, the hot, sweet liquid from the pie boiled over slightly onto the top pastry and down the side. Outstanding!

But, mom was also known for her angel food cake. She didn't use a box mix--she made it from scratch with thirteen egg whites! And, her cakes rarely flopped. Occasionally, she would make a chocolate angel food cake. That sounds strange, but they were good.

And, of course I can't leave out the candies. At Christmas mom would venture into candy making. She learned some of her techniques about making chocolates from her friend, Queenie, who lived next door in St. Louis. The most exotic were cherry-filled chocolates poured on a marble slab that cooled her dainties quickly.

But, the sweetest of all her desserts were the pralines. These were made with brown sugar and pecans and fashioned after candies made in Louisiana, probably by her brother Frank's wife, Mary. They were so sweet you could feel your teeth rotting as you ate them.

This style of food and food preparation has stuck with me until today. For most of my life when mom wasn't around I have assumed command of meal planning and preparation for holidays and special meals at my house. Our family also had a set of china, crystal, and silverware; tablecloths and napkins and a routine for setting up the dining table for dinners. We had similar types of food as mom had—heavy, plentiful, and sweet. It gives me great pleasure to think back to the good times when food covered the table as our large families prayed and "Broke Bread" together.

Unfortunately, there are downsides to the eating traditions mom passed on to us. Although the emphasis on vegetables was good, the tendency toward large quantities of food and sweet desserts was not. The habit of eating large portions is difficult to break. And, the taste for sugar is particularly toxic. I have struggled all my life with keeping my weight down. Although, obesity apparently runs in the Vardiman family (e.g., our well-known ancestor, Jeremiah Vardiman, weighed 300 pounds when he died), the habit of eating large quantities of heavy foods obviously doesn't help. The tendency to drink tea, coffee, and lemonade, etc., sweetened with sugar or sugar substitutes and to overeat cakes, cookies, pies, and candies contributes not only to overweight, but to health problems.

Our family has a significant frequency of obesity, diabetes, heart disease, and cancer. It's likely many of these diseases are caused, or at least enhanced, by the love of food passed down through the family by tradition on holidays. I reluctantly suggest that our family needs to learn some new holiday traditions. For example, instead of filling the sweet potatoes with marshmallows and brown sugar, add almonds or raisins. Instead of putting two cups of sugar in the apple cobbler, put only one. Or, instead of drinking sweet tea, learn to drink it without sugar. These things aren't easy to change, but unless we do, we may not have many older members of Doc's Tribe left to celebrate family traditions down the road.