

Meat on the Table

Providing meat on the table was far different in my generation than in my children's generation.

My parents' residential lot was really not much bigger than our Provo lot, but there were no zoning laws when I was a child, at least none that I was aware of. Many of our neighbors had a cow and some chickens and a vegetable garden to help supply food for the family.

Coming diagonally southeast to southwest from across a neighboring vacant lot, and forming the back border of our own lot, was a ditch that contained water all year long. At the end of the neighboring lot to the north this ditch joined another ditch that came from the southwest. Summers we watered our garden from this ditch without any concern as far as I can remember to "turns." Everyone seemed to have enough water, but probably there were "rights" and "turns" of which I was not aware.

Mother was an avid vegetable and flower gardener and she soon expanded into the vacant lot south of us, and even into the vacant lot west of us across the ditch. These lots were probably owned by the brickyard, which dug the clay for bricks. Keeping the weeds out of this huge garden was the bane of existence for the children of the family. We used various ploys to escape our garden chores, none of which were very effective with my mother.

Then, in the fall we had the additional pleasure of helping to can the tomatoes, carrots, beets, beans, etc. that were the products of this garden. Even though we did not enjoy this task (what children do?), as I look back on it now, much family bonding took place as we worked and talked while preparing the fruit for canning. Even the boys did not escape.

In addition, Dad would bring home endless bushels of apples, peaches, pears, etc. Mother believed in a "year's supply" (more like two or three). Our huge, full basement had a concrete ledge all along the north side that was three feet wide before it joined the outside foundation, and by the end of fall it was crammed with quart and two quart jars of home-canned food. These ledges were typical of basements added after the house was built. She also stored wheat, beans, honey, and sugar.

Mother pressure-cooked the vegetables, all of which I hated as a child, but she would use the water bath method of canning for fruits and tomatoes. To this day I dislike canned carrots.

Dad was a plumbing contractor and as anyone connected with the building trade knows, it is a boom or bust economy. Mother's well-stocked basement helped bridge the bust times, when were plentiful during the depression.

This brings us to the "meat on the table" part. At the west end of our yard, we had a chicken wire enclosed area we termed the chicken coop. There was a small old building included in this area that alternately served the chickens and/or my father as storage for his plumbing supplies.

It often fell to me to feed the chickens, a task that I usually quite enjoyed. I would call, "Here Chick! Chick! Chick!" and the chickens would come running toward me to peck the grain that I threw on the ground. I liked watching them scramble after the wheat, trying to get more than the next chicken. I often brought in the eggs, too. That meant trying to get the eggs from under a mother hen who wanted to "set" a family. I was somewhat afraid of these cantankerous mother hens and approached them with much apprehension.

In the spring, my father would bring home baby chicks from the local feed store, and he and Mother would rig up a homemade incubator with electric lights. I can remember that the chicks got their water from an inverted mason jar, which was screwed into a base that released the water gradually for their use. Rhode Island Reds and White Leghorns were the two types of chickens we kept. The Leghorns were kept for laying eggs (they produced white eggs) and the Reds were for fryers and stewing hens. The Rhode Island Reds produced brown eggs, which were somehow less desirable than the white eggs, but I couldn't tell the difference. One of my favorite meals was my mother's chicken with homemade noodles. I once invited Tracy to this favorite meal of mine only to find later that this was definitely NOT his favorite meal.

It was the killing part that I didn't like. Dad always performed this task, and hung the decapitated chickens head down to drain the blood. But the task of plucking the chicken fell to the children and Mother.

When I think of killing, I remember an incident that wiped out our entire flock of chickens. Once when Mother opened a two-quart jar of her canned carrots, they smelled all right and looked all right, but Mother thought the color was a little bright. So she decided to feed the carrots to the chickens and killed them all.

Mother would scald the chicken in boiling water to loosen the feathers and then we would pull the feathers from the flesh. I can still smell those hot chicken feathers. Yuck! Then mother would pull out the ends of the feathers (pinfeathers), which had stayed in the flesh, with tweezers and then clean the chicken. This involved removing all the insides of the chicken. To tell the truth, I doubt if we ever had a chicken we didn't prepare as I have described. But the unpleasant task of preparing the chicken for table use was soon overcome when we were faced with huge platters of my mother's fried chicken. Even the "Colonel" cannot beat my mother's fried chicken. I have never been able to duplicate it.

I was very relieved as a young bride to find I didn't have to clean the chicken. It came already cleaned from the meat department of the local grocery. Wonderful!

Usually we had chicken for Thanksgiving. Occasionally Dad would get a goose for Christmas, but I can remember one wonderful Thanksgiving when we had a huge turkey that my Aunt Vivian had sent up from Arizona.

As long as I lived at home, we had a cow. We drank the milk raw or not pasteurized. Generally, we had a Jersey cow because we enjoyed the rich milk. We had cream on our cereal, in our Postum and hot chocolate, and on our fruit. We thought cream was good for you and certainly did not worry about its fat content. That was one of its virtues.

Often we would watch Dad do the milking. When the boys grew older, they helped him with that chore. Fortunately, Dad thought that girls should not milk cows, but he seemed to enjoy having me watch him milk the cows when I was small. We almost always had cats around and Dad would squirt milk toward the cats and often they would catch the milk in their mouths. He would bring the milk pails in and mother would strain the milk to remove the visible impurities and then put the milk in large, shallow round pans on the sideboard to let the cream rise to the top. Some of the milk would be put in two-quart jars and then put it in the refrigerator for drinking. When the cream was congealed on the surface of the milk in the pans, she would skim it off with a large spoon and put the cream into quart jars in the refrigerator to use with cereal, etc. If she had a large surplus of milk, she would let the pans sour on the sideboard and skim off the sour cream to make butter. Guess who got to churn

the butter? The children would, of course. The remaining sour milk would then be made into cottage cheese.

When too much sweet cream accumulated we would have homemade ice cream that was delicious. In the winter we would use icicles for the ice. In the summer we would buy ice from the iceman who delivered ice to the neighbors who had iceboxes. This was the closest thing many of our neighbors had to refrigeration. There was a big box in the top of the icebox, which contained the ice. The ice melted and ran to a pan in the bottom of the icebox. The melting ice kept the food inside the icebox cool. The children of the neighborhood always ran out to follow the iceman as he made his rounds, because he almost always gave each child a small piece of ice to suck on.

Occasionally the cows would have a calf and come fresh. I never quite understood this cycle. It had something to do with the cow having a calf and the milk coming in fresh. For this period we would have to buy our milk and we didn't like the taste of the pasteurized milk. When Dad milked the cows during this period, he would feed the milk to the calf and to the chickens. Soon the cow was back in business furnishing milk and cream for our family.

We always hoped the calf would be a male calf. The heifers were never eaten but sold to farmers for milk cows. When we had a male calf we sometimes grew the calf for beef, but most of the calves our cows had were heifers.

I'm sure Mother supplemented our meat from the local butcher shop because I can remember wonderful beef stews and pot roasts, but probably the reason I remember them was because the use of purchased meat was an unusual happening.

Every summer when the salmon run was on, Dad would know where to buy it and bring home a half or a whole salmon and we would have a feast. Dad was always going to supplement our diet with trout, but somehow never found the time to go fishing. Sometimes we would get a gift of a meal of trout from an uncle. That was a treat!

Once Dad decided that we needed to have some mutton in our diet. He knew some farmers who had sheep so he and mother went out to buy a lamb. It was early spring and mother fixed a place downstairs near the monkey stove that heated our hot water so the lamb could sleep out of the cold. The lamb was so little that we children had to feed it with a bottle. Needless to say, the lamb became a pet. It followed us everywhere we went and sometimes had a hard time understanding why it could not follow us to school as in "Mary had a Little Lamb."

The lamb became a sheep and it was time to make lamb chops out of him. Of course you know what happened. Even Dad couldn't stand to kill our pet. He ended up giving it back to the farmer.

We also grew rabbits for meat. Rabbit meat is really quite tasty. The flavor is very much like chicken. The trouble is that baby rabbits make such cute pets. After Tracy and I were married, I noticed that rabbit meat was available in the local supermarket, and I suggested we get some. Tracy didn't like the idea. I once bought some and was going to see if I couldn't pass it off as chicken, but I "chickened out" and told him. That was the last time we had rabbit.

I guess I am glad that putting meat on the table as we did when I was a child is a thing of the past. There were remnants of those days in the extensive fruit bottling I did when our children were growing up, and which they were involved with as well. I observe that my own children do not can fruit as extensively as I did. They are finding out, I expect, that

unless the fruit is grown in your own yard, it really does not pay in expenditure of time and money to can it. It may be that when our grandchildren have families that they will feel quite virtuous if they occasionally make some homemade jams and jellies. Let's face it. How would we handle it in urban America if every family had cows and chickens? There is reason in progress.