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## Bread

Bread, that all-important "staff of life," has undergone some interesting changes during my lifetime. My bread memories go back to early childhood.

These memories are intertwined with where I was and/or who the cook was. Mother usually prepared hot breads only on Sundays or occasions when we had company. (More about her hot rolls later.) On Sunday mornings if we weren't having waffles or pancakes, she frequently made wonderfully light biscuits. We ate them greedily with butter - real butter - and some of her plum, crabapple, or grape jelly. On cold winter evenings, she would make cornbread to serve with great bowlsful of her vegetable soup which had been sending tantalizing messages as it simmered all afternoon. She always used yellow cornmeal, generally coarse-milled if Daddy had been on a trip that took him near a country grist mill, which were beginning to decline in number even then. Daddy could be counted on to compliment her on not contaminating the cornbread with white meal, flour, or sugar, additions which he considered evil Yankee influences.

Years later after we were married, my sister Martha and I both tried unsuccessfully to copy Mother's cornbread. We had used the same kind of heavy, black iron skillet which had to be taken from the hot oven with piping hot bacon grease which sputtered when the cornbread mixture was poured in, but all we got was bread so crumbly that we needed a spoon to eat it. While Mother measured her ingredients the old way - a handful or splash of this, a pinch of that - we tried to convert the measurements into standard cups of cornmeal and milk and teaspoons of salt and baking powder. The eggs were easy; they came pre-measured. At home we tried the new recipes, but to no avail. We returned to Mother to re-measure, although her measures were different from the ones before, the results were the same. Another test, another re-measuring, but no success. We also tried our own handful/pinch method, but that didn't work either. I've since been able to produce moderately successful cornbread using self-rising meal, which Mother would have found appalling. Actually, my best results are with cornbread mixes. I can picture Daddy protesting from the grave at the inclusion in those mixes of FLOUR and SUGAR. Oh, the disgrace of it.

Back to my childhood memories, I recall that routinely we had bread from the grocery store. Mother carefully folded the waxed paper bread wrappers for conserving leftovers in the refrigerator. In the years before the invention and use of slicers, the bread itself had to be sliced. Woe to the inelegant slicer who produced pieces thick on one end and almost nonexistent on the other. Not only was the piece of bread unsightly but the remaining loaf was a disgrace. A highly valued skill was the ability to slice evenly and straight. A sharp knife was required for this operation; I don't remember the advent of serrated-edge knives until many years later, even after sliced bread was customary. Mother's favorite knife was a well-honed, wooden-handled knife whose blade was in danger of disappearing it had been sharpened so often. She usually sharpened it before each use, and periodically Daddy would give it his special sharpening with a whetstone. It could cut bread evenly and perfectly if the right person wielded it.

At breakfast, one of us children was assigned the task of operating the toaster, a non-automatic affair that had two doors hinged at the bottom on either side of a heating element. This operation required vigilance to open the doors at precisely the correct time to slide the two pieces of half-toasted bread down the door. The door was then re-closed without removing the half-toasted slice, and the other side of the bread received its golden-brown toasting. Again, vigilance was required. Toast left too long became an ugly dark brown, or even, heaven forbid, black, and had to be laboriously scraped in the sink, a disgusting procedure which looked awful, smelled terrible, and didn't make very tasty toast, either. The child who had successfully operated the toaster would put the two pieces on a small plate and bear it to the breakfast table, where each piece received a coat of butter applied by the consumer, while the toaster-designate returned for another round of judging the proper time to flip the bread.



Sometimes on Saturday mornings, Mother would toast the bread in the oven after she had applied softened butter, sugar, and cinnamon to the top surface. Those were wonderful, mouth-watering creations and usually required the purchase of a fresh loaf of bread afterward because of our hearty cinnamon-toast appetites. I loved to walk the block and a half to the neighborhood grocery store to get a fresh loaf for a nickel.

After we started to school, part of the breakfast routine involved Mother's making sandwiches for school. We would eat them at our desks during the lunch break until the new school with its separate lunchroom was built. Even then, we seldom bought lunch at school because Mother's sandwiches were so varied and so good. Among my favorites were a ground carrot and raisin spread, a date and pecan filling, and peanut butter with sliced banana. The sandwiches were wrapped in waxed paper and placed in a brown paper bag along with a banana, an apple, or, very occasionally, a frosted cupcake. I considered my lunches the best in my class, but I did envy Delno Swartz whose lunches were neatly wrapped in a sheet of newspaper so ingeniously folded that the package never came apart. I could not understand why Mother considered newspaper a poor container for lunch. It served as a wonderful tablecloth after Delno unfolded her package

and laid out her sandwich and fruit, much more serviceable than our torn and open-spread brown bag. Most of us carried small thermos bottles of milk until we lost or broke them. Then we bought milk at the cafeteria - a half pint in a miniature glass milk bottle, since new thermos bottles were purchased only in September.

Bread was a different and exciting matter when we went to visit Daddy's sister on the outskirts of Gainesville. Aunt Nannie lived on a small farm where there were wonderful sights and activities available. I found mealtimes especially exciting. Three times a day Aunt Nannie baked a great batch of large hot, flaky biscuits for her numerous family members and the many guests always present. These were eaten with freshly churned butter and thick molasses or with gravy at dinner or supper. In the center of the table were three very old, ornate pewter servers, each about six inches high and three inches in diameter. They contained sugar, molasses, and a supply of spoons. The one with the molasses had a pouring spout but was otherwise identical with the other two. I always thought they were beautiful. The last time I saw one of my cousins I asked her what had happened to those pewter pieces. Sadly, she didn't know and apparently did not feel about them as I did. At the same time, I learned that while we Hickman children looked forward to the hot biscuits at Aunt Nannie's, her children longed for the visits to Dallas so that they could have "store boughten light" bread. They thought of us as rich because we did not have to eat home-baked bread!

Another bread memory belongs to the large family gatherings at our house, frequently Thanksgiving or July Fourth, Mother's birthday. She usually made her delicious refrigerator rolls, a recipe which I have and can successfully reproduce. As a child, I loved to be present when she stirred together the flour, milk, and yeast, kneaded it, and placed it in a large, covered mixing bowl in the refrigerator. The day of the feast, the bowl came out and we carefully pinched off pieces of dough which we rolled and oiled and placed in pans to rise and to be baked piping hot for the meal. Pan after fragrant pan traveled from the oven to the table to enthusiastic diners. The recipe was large; there may occasionally have been leftover rolls, but I don't remember any. The leftover rolls do taste fine, I have discovered, when they are carefully reheated the following day.

My children may remember Mother's rolls and cornbread, but alas, Aunt Nannie was no longer around to prepare her fabulous biscuits for them. I've made biscuits from scratch, but not often. I hope they have other memories.

My grandchildren may be able to talk about baking bread with this grandmother, for I am the happy owner of a bread machine. Even the youngest child can choose among various ingredients and put together his or her very own loaf of home-baked bread. The smell is just as alluring as the rolls Mother made though it results from a different procedure that omits the hand kneading, greasing pans, and hot oven. Perhaps they will look back on the great days when grandmother made her own homemade bread in that ancient, antique bread machine.