

Camping Out

The aroma of cooking bacon last Sunday at our church breakfast took me back to my childhood Saturday mornings when an assortment of two to five neighborhood children used to "camp out."

We lived in what was then "far North Dallas," a term that now defines space that extends a good many miles toward Oklahoma. McCommas, the next street to the north, had only one house, a large, well-preserved old brick house located in the middle of the block and surrounded by a cyclone fence. East and north of that block were extensive open fields, untended and treeless except for a single mesquite tree, wonderful territory for seven-to-eleven-year-olds to explore and use for their own purposes.

My sister Martha and later our brother Willett, together with whatever neighbor children we had been playing with on Friday -- sometimes Rodney Derby and Jane West, or Grady Vaughan, or Ann Jacobs, or whoever (we weren't at all exclusive) -- would gather breakfast materials from our respective kitchens, with the knowledge and permission of our mothers. Our standard equipment was a frying pan, a fork, a knife, and a box of matches. The food consisted of as much bacon as we could procure, at least one loaf of bread, and frequently eggs, one or two apiece. Everything went into a large bag which we took turns carrying during our exploration of the territory, seeking the perfect spot to have our breakfast.

We left as soon as possible after sunrise; these were the days before daylight savings time, so that was around 6:30 or 7:00. The land was flat and easy to hike over. We always got far enough away that we couldn't see any of what we termed "civilization." By the time we gathered twigs from low bushes and the mesquite tree, cleared a space to build a fire, and got the fire started, we were all ravenous. The designated cook began frying the bacon, which cooked tantalizingly slowly while part of the crew gathered more fuel for the fast-burning fire. We were so hungry after our hike that that we ate the bacon as soon as the cook could fork each piece crisply from the pan. That explains the lack of plates. I think we were mostly scrupulous about dividing the pieces evenly because I can't remember a single fuss over who got the next piece.

A new cook always presided over the eggs, if any, which were dropped into the pan, fried hard, and eaten with our fingers, sizzling from the pan, messy for faces and hands. When the bacon drippings were piping hot, the next cook put the bread piece by piece into the pan, turning it quickly so that it could brown lightly on both sides. The bacon-toasted bread was the climax of the meal. We could consume three or four pieces each, although each successive toasting was less greasy than the early ones. From start to finish, we savored the perfume of the bacon, first as it fried and then as its fat flavored the eggs and the bread.

Well instructed by parents and by other adults who heard about our summertime expeditions, we extinguished our fire, scattered the ashes, picked up the paper which had packaged our raw materials, and shoved our cooking utensils into the bag to carry home. Usually, our outing ended with the cleanup, for the entire strenuous operation had taken us into the hot, sun-baked, breezeless phase of the summer morning. We trudged home, generally to be greeted by adults urging us to clean up quickly -- scour our utensils, take a bath, and wash our hair in order to rid us of the smell that we had so thoroughly absorbed with all our cooking.



But the beautiful smell of bacon still lies in my memory to be evoked less and less often these cholesterol-conscious days by someone else perfuming the atmosphere with the its scent.