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Daddy's Biscuits

For several weeks, I've been noticing a notation I made casually during one of my classes. Such notations are not unusual; as I hear the stories read in class, I frequently am reminded of some subject I'd like to write about. Right now, the cover of my class folder reads something like this: "Daddy's biscuits," "prison stories," "Montreal with Ro," "menopause," "sailor to N.Y.," and "W.Va. by plane." Eventually, several of those topics will result in a story. The one I've been particularly mulling around is the first one, "Daddy's biscuits." I don't remember what evoked that particular topic, but today as I tried to recall, I had to admit that I didn't remember any biscuits, although the color green persisted. Green biscuits?

Daddy had many fond memories of growing up on a farm in north central Texas. A good many of them had to do with food, which was always better than the "modern" food, although he always hastened to add that "Your mother is a wonderful cook." But I kept reviewing what I remembered about Daddy's rare cooking adventures. I thought about the time he made some peach "leather," trying to capture a bit of his youth. He peeled and mashed a large number of peaches, maybe as much as a peck, adding a bit of sugar to the mixture. This semi-solid he slathered over the only large flat surface he could find, which was a sheet of zinc-coated metal he had used for the bottom of a makeshift sled he had made for us kids. He positioned the gooey mess on a table in the backyard, so that the peaches could dry in the sun. Unfortunately, the peach mixture reacted chemically with the metal, and the whole mess had to be discarded. I was not surprised a few years ago when someone remembered this old farm-days dried fruit and brought it back commercially as "fruit roll-ups." Now, of course, it has a whole mess of chemical additives.



Mother seldom missed cooking a meal. On the very rare occasions when she was not present to prepare our meals, Daddy would sometimes pinch-hit with varying success. It was one of those occasions I was trying to recapture. I asked myself if the biscuits were really green. That question brought it all back to me. He didn't make biscuits; he made cornbread.

To begin with, he always insisted that the cornmeal that our grocery store supplied was not "the real thing" and would not make proper cornbread. On his frequent trips to West Texas, he found a real grist mill and brought home some "genuine stone-ground yellow cornmeal." I can hear him now, "genuine stone-ground yellow cornmeal."

He had other criteria for "good" cornbread. It had to be made wholly from cornmeal - no flour should sully the texture of the meal. It could not be sweet - no sugar in the recipe. Cornbread containing flour and sugar was made, he said, by misguided northerners. On the occasion I recall, he happily stirred up a treat for us children in Mother's absence. In my youthful innocence, I looked forward to this treat. When he brought the steaming plate of cornbread to the table, we kids questioned its appearance: it was very coarse looking, and it was green.

Nevertheless, we each accepted a large, thick, crumbling rectangle of Daddy's masterpiece and applied a generous square of butter (this was long before our family began to use margarine), and bit into our treat. It was no treat. It was harsh and bitter, so bitter, in fact, that the three of us refused to try more than our first bite. I don't remember what else Daddy served us at that meal. I'm sure we didn't go to bed hungry that night, but we were adamant about not eating any more of that green cornbread. He insisted that nothing was wrong with the taste and ate a large piece without impressing us.

Days later when I asked Mother what had gone wrong with Daddy's cornbread, she speculated that Daddy, whose mother always used buttermilk to make cornbread, had recalled her use of baking soda for leavening and had done so, too, but had used sweet milk. Also, he had no recipe (after all, his mother didn't use one) and had probably used far too much soda in proportion to the cornmeal. Mother could only speculate, for she had not seen the product. He had disposed of what he had been unable to eat and refused to discuss the matter at all. He was not amused then or later when we reminded him of his green cornbread. We reminded him often, sometimes generously refraining from mentioning the color.