

Supper

Daddy grew up on a farm where he and his family ate dinner at noon and supper in the evening. After he was married and had been away from the farm for a long time, he only occasionally referred to our noon meal as "dinner." He often called the evening meal "supper," but our entire family used those terms for our Sunday meals, when we had a traditional family dinner in the early afternoon, usually around one or two and then, our supper in the evening, sometimes more of a snack than a meal.

I have many fond memories of those Sunday night suppers, in the summer often watermelon in the backyard but especially the ones we had during the late fall and on into early spring. Sometimes the meals might be sandwiches based on dinner leftovers, such as cold, sliced roast beef or sliced chicken. When the weather was especially cold, we had my favorite suppers.

We might have popcorn and hot chocolate. Daddy always popped the corn in a large aluminum pot with a long handle and a closely fitted lid over a gas flame on the kitchen range. That operation called for considerable patience and some strength for it demanded that the pot be kept in constant motion. When the popping action became vigorous, Daddy had to keep one hand on the lid with its wooden knob. I enjoyed the crescendo of sound as the popping progressed from the initial pop of a single grain, gradually increasing popped grain by popped grain until there was a glorious climax of constant bombardment on the sides of the pot, followed by a diminuendo of popping calling for judgment of when the last pop had happened but before the bottom layer of corn began to scorch. Daddy prided himself on leaving very few "widows" unpopped, occasionally even achieving a goal of a one hundred percent fluffy, snow white puffs. The whole operation had begun with a judicious amount of butter in the pan, so he poured the gorgeous, aromatic corn into a large bowl and shook a few grains of salt on it before we all gathered around the bowl, sometimes at the breakfast room table and sometimes on the floor of the living room in front of the glowing gas space heater.

By the time the corn had cooled, only a few grains remained, and Mother appeared with her contribution - steaming hot cocoa, which she had made with whole milk, sugar, and cocoa dissolved in a bit of hot milk. She always served the hot cocoa in her graceful chocolate set, a china pitcher of white porcelain decorated with dainty blue and gold flowers. The small matching cups always began with a single marshmallow in them. Because the cups were small, each of us enjoyed several cups. The strategy was to make that one marshmallow last through at least three cups of cocoa, followed by searching out the melted remnant of the marshmallow, tinged with a drop or two of rich cocoa. What a memorable mouth-watering morsel that last taste was! It was a taste which I was able to return to in my mind during the following week.

The popcorn and hot cocoa nights did not occur every Sunday night; sometimes we had Daddy's favorite supper of cornmeal mush. I enjoyed watching Mother stir the bubbling mixture as it simmered and popped, getting thicker and thicker. The mush was served in

shallow soup bowls with butter and milk, a delicious contrast of hot mush and cold milk. If we didn't lick the pot clean, the remnant was refrigerated and served in a night or two in sliced, fried form. I don't know which I enjoyed more. When I tried to duplicate the two dishes years later, I found that I did not enjoy the necessity of constantly stirring the mush until it thickened and I decidedly did not like to clean the range top after frying the cold slices. I soon was willing just to remember the lip-smacking goodness of both dishes; I didn't provide my children with memories to match mine.



But perhaps the best supper was a rarer one. The coldest Sunday nights were reserved for hot tamales. My anticipation of the taste of that dish was always whetted by one or two of us accompanying Daddy in the car down Greenville Avenue past the Arcadia Theater, our neighborhood movie house. Then we started looking for the hot tamale man, always located on the corner of one of the next two or three streets. He had a cart with large wheels on the back and two smaller ones on the front for easy wheeling from the section of town known as Little Mexico to our neighborhood. When Daddy ordered our two dozen tamales, the old gentleman would open one side of the top of the cart, releasing delicious-smelling steam into the frosty air. He would place several layers of opened-out newspaper on one leaf of the cart, onto which he would line up and then stack up the tamales. He would then wrap the newspaper into a neat rectangular package around the hot tamales, followed by another layer of newspaper to lock in the heat. We would hurry home, enjoying the warmth and tantalizing aroma of the package. In the house, the tamales, each one neatly wrapped in several layers of corn shucks, colored orange by the sauce, were placed on our plates, three or four each. Unwrapping the shucks from the tamale was a cherished ritual, an important part of the taste to come, for it involved getting fingers messy and greasy. Each tamale revealed itself in its slightly orange cornmeal edible inner wrapper, the anticipation of the taste delight became almost unbearable. Sometimes, I wiped my stained hands on a paper napkin and used a fork to cut through the firm meal cover, revealing the meaty interior, but generally I held the succulent cylinder and ate it from my hand. I don't remember ever having enough of those hot tamales, and since then I've longed to return to that tasty experience. No Mexican restaurant in Dallas or anywhere else ever served tamales the equal of those sidewalk tamales. We've tried canned tamales, but they're wrapped in a piece of parchment, no substitute at all for the corn shucks. Occasionally we've tried tamales in Mexican restaurants here in Richmond. They're a pale imitation of the real thing.

As a matter of fact, Paul and I have never been able to recapture the magic of Sunday night suppers. When the boys were young, we all seemed to fare better with a routine Sunday lunch followed by a prosaic Sunday dinner in the evening. I guess the real taste of all those Sunday night treats will have to remain a nostalgic memory of an idyllic time in my childhood.

