

Dennis called this document Laida Memories; he created it on July 1, 2020

My mother was a passionate cook through seven decades of the last century. Laida Lois Fast was born in Oklahoma Territory in 1906. Her roots were six generations of German farmers (anglicized Faust was the family name), mostly in Missouri, dating back to Colonial times. She learned, without a say in the matter, the ways of the country kitchen and it was a hard-knocks schooling. Shuffled around the farms of older married siblings after she was orphaned at the age of six (she was the youngest of 11), she spent her childhood cooking for family and farm hands. Mom seldom spoke about those early years—she was 40 when I was born—except to say with typical reticence that some of her siblings treated her like a servant and that the hardest part was cooking for harvest crews.

She and Joe Manning Wheaton, also the youngest of a large neighboring farm family, were teenagers when married after only a partial elementary education. They survived in eastern Oklahoma sharecropping and picking cotton during the early years of the Depression after the family farms were lost, making do on beans, cornbread, wild poke greens, a little smoked pork, and whatever they fished out of the creeks or Dad shot in the blackjack woods (in his own hardscrabble adolescence, he was expected to go out hunting with two bullets for his rifle and bring back supper).

When the Dust Bowl happened, their life grew even harder and more complicated, but they hung on or else I might have been born like Merle Haggard out in central California near Bakersfield. Their firstborn son died at birth of an umbilical cord strangulation and they had a second son, my late brother Virgil, whose early childhood memories included being dragged along the rows of cotton atop cotton sacks while they worked. Dad got a job working at a filling station owned by the local Wild West show entrepreneur Pawnee Bill (not as well remembered as his one-time partner Buffalo Bill Cody but in the same racket) and Mom said she for a time made “genuine Indian drums” from coffee cans covered in tanned skins to sell at the station or at a Pawnee Bill’s trading post (unsure).

Eventually, Dad got a better job with Gulf as an oil field worker. They moved from Oklahoma to Indiana to work in the oil fields, considered an essential civilian job during WWII, then back to Oklahoma, where I was born in 1946 while they lived in a little boomtown (now a ghost town) called Whizbang, to New Mexico and West Texas (Odessa). By the time I was a child in the 1950s, Dad made an adequate living as a foreman at a small Phillips Petroleum Company oil pumping plant in the Texas Panhandle; I remember when we stopped eating beans and rice for supper twice a week.

Mom’s cooking was also molded by Dad’s Arkansas Ozark roots (for his whole life, his favorite parts of a fried chicken were the neck and gizzard—were those the parts allocated to the youngest?), by the native foods of the Pawnee and Osage tribes they were raised around and their kin married, and by living for decades in rural Indiana, West Texas and New Mexico. (As I footnoted in our article on Tex-Mex food, Mom often made stacked enchiladas in our Texas Panhandle home when I was a child. I suspect now that she learned the technique during the

years she lived in New Mexico in the late 1940s and early 1950s, since that style is native to New Mexico and almost unheard of in Texas outside of Marfa. She did make them with her own excellent Texas chili in a true Tex-Mex style creation.)

The home where I mostly grew up in the arid High Plains Texas Panhandle was one of a cluster of small plain whitewashed oil-company houses, called Canadian Camp and adjacent to the plant on ranch land a few miles north of the often barely flowing Canadian River five miles from a fading town—Stinnet—uncannily like the one portrayed in the Last Picture Show. There, surrounded by constantly pumping oil wells and separated from meandering Herford cattle by a barbed wire fence, we grew a big vegetable garden sustained between infrequent rains by the local water well.

Come spring, my job was to put on work gloves, grab a gunnysack, and walk out to the short-grass prairie dotted with mesquite, cactus, yucca, and the lingering indentations of wallows from vanished bison herds (when these wallows filled with water temporarily during summer rains, they'd soon be filled with fairy shrimp and tadpoles from local toads, which I found fascinating). I'd fill the sack with manure from the cattle and cowboy's horses sporadically grazing there. I'd drag back twenty or thirty sackfuls and Dad would turn it into the garden soil before Mom hoed the rows and planted seeds—saved from the previous year's harvest or ordered from the Sear's Catalog. It was a bountiful garden of summer squashes, tomatoes, okra, green beans, black-eyed peas, bell peppers, onions, and muskmelon and cucumber vines snaking beneath rows of sweet corn. Cucumbers, corn, and tomatoes were eaten minutes from the garden; much of the green beans and black-eyed peas canned for the winter.

In the summer we picked wild sand plums to make jam. We ground our breakfast sausage. Mom made lye soap from bacon grease and other animal fats, the best thing for hand-washing Dad's oil-stained work khakis, and she did much of her frying in bacon grease (one of Susan's favorite keepsakes from Mom is a quart aluminum kitchen canister stamped with the word GREASE). When Dad became a foreman, we could afford a quarter steer every year—it might have fertilized our garden—and retrieved cuts as needed from the town butcher, who hung it to aged perfection. Some years we also had chickens in the back yard and I still cringe at the memory of Mom pulling off their heads under a hoe handle and the awful smell of scalding off their feathers in boiling water.

The only child in the house (Virgil, my only surviving sibling was 18 years older and long gone to make a successful career as an engineer for GE after being the first in our family to go to college at what was then Oklahoma A&M, now Okla. State), I was taught how to fry and bake, make chicken with dumplings, and preserve with a pressure cooker, how to make chocolate and divinity fudges, peanut brittle, and fried pies. Mom loved baking bread, pies, cobblers, cakes, and delicate puff pastry (I laughed in recognition at my first French bistro profiterole as a restaurant critic, inferior to her cream puffs). She could “whup up some biscuits” faster than anyone I've ever seen. I worked at those skills but could only equal her sour milk

biscuits and flaky pie crust when she was standing by my side, but by then she had almost a half century of daily practice behind her apron.

I found her obsessive fascination with cooking enchanting in that often bleak Bible Belt culture. One reason I was popular at my little country school was that my buddies hankered to be invited over for Mom's unequaled meals. Cooking endured for her as one of the few pleasures of a life marked by bouts of debilitating depression and even after a poorly treated broken ankle made it uncomfortable for her to walk and stand at a counter for half her life. Her kitchen craft may have given her more solace and reason to get up in the morning than her Bible. And she had high standards: I remember her slinging an only slightly tilted angel food cake out the back door screen to the foraging chickens—who had probably provided the eggs in the first place.

I learned more about the grimmer sides of food than plucking chickens and cleaning the fish we caught in the summer on visits back to Oklahoma. The crusty cattlemen who oversaw my 50-student elementary school organized a yearly class trip (I forget for which grades) to an Amarillo slaughterhouse 60 miles away, where we children watched the whole process from beast to burger, beginning with the bellowing sledgehammer deaths, eviscerations, and skinning, while standing on planks under which flowed streaming blood.

I was familiar with animal death besides watching Mom kill chickens: Dad taught me how to dress rabbits, doves, and quail and clean fish and make catfish bait from cow's blood, either made into dough bait with flour or simply congealed to hang on a trotline hook. But I was jolted by what I saw that day at the slaughterhouse. Yet to the adult Texans in my life, that field trip was as natural as for Wisconsin children to visit a cheese factory, a practical lesson about what was on the end of our forks and how it got there. Years later, memories of the blood and the bison wallows would mingle and surface in a coal-heated walkup Warsaw flat where as a visiting college student I supped on czarnina duck blood soup and cold zubrowka, the Polish bison grass-flavored vodka.

One late summer in the mid-1980s when my folks were around 70, Susan and I drove from Chicago to Pawnee County, Oklahoma, where they had retired. By then I was a budding ethnographer (not yet a restaurant critic) and couldn't resist making a few unobtrusive field notes about the food Mom set out the afternoon we and my brother's family arrived—I had no idea it would be the first of thousands of meals I would record. Mom welcomed us as usual with the aroma of baking oatmeal bread. Snacks were perfectly ripened apricots and native pecans from trees out back, Muscadet grapes from vines on the side of the house, and hand-cranked custard ice cream made with Alberta and Hale peaches bought at a roadside stand.

Supper (always supper, never dinner) began with a salad of bell peppers, tomatoes, and red onions just in from their garden. It continued with fried catfish and rabbit (Mom wielded her cane fishing pole like a magic wand over local ponds and creeks, and though that rabbit was raised by a neighbor, she often use to cook the cottontails and quail I hunted), crisp onion rings, and mashed potatoes. There was hominy of course (Mom's late sister Pearl, my favorite aunt, used to live in a nearby town named Hominy and therein lies a tale for another time), freshly picked green beans simmered with salt pork, and pumpkin-sized Indian squash boiled with

sorghum and butter the way another of Mom's sisters, Aunt Sadie, always made it for her husband, Uncle Haskell, the ceremonial chief of the Osage tribe, in their home in Pawhuska (therein lies another tale). Mom opened Mason jars of pickled peaches as well as yellow tomato preserves and plum butter from the cellar to spread on the warm bread. The meal ended with blackberry and apple pies. While the younger generations praised her cooking, Dad puffed on his pipe and observed in his laconic Okie drawl, "Not bad for a sharecropper."