

## **A TRIUMPH OF THE ART OF MAKING DO**

There was a time in our history that my own children never had to witness but perhaps can now comprehend, that time in Twentieth Century America when banks crashed and thousands of men lost their jobs, when hungry men were forced to stand in bread lines and women fed their families soup made from little more than water and a few kitchen scraps. The newspapers called it “The Great Depression,” but I think of it as the time of making do.

Officially, the Great Depression began in 1929. I was born in 1932, and while I was a kid in Toledo, Ohio, our family lived the lifestyle of our own Great Depression. Oddly enough, it had nothing to do with my father being out of a job. In fact, he was gainfully employed the entire time.

In fact, to the casual observer, “we had it pretty good” because my father worked for the Toledo Post Office and in the tradition of the Pony Express, the mail had to go through, Depression or no. That meant Pop was essentially guaranteed a steady job with a decent wage. He sorted mail by hand; not until much later were there were machines to do that job in the Toledo Post Office, although cancellation machines were already in use to cancel the postage stamps.

He read each and every address and placed each letter in its proper pigeonhole in a huge compartmented framework much like a wooden honeycomb. It was an entry-level service job beyond which he never managed to advance. He had what

I'll politely call an attitude problem toward his fellow employees. In retrospect I realize that with his quick temper, we were lucky he even kept his job at all.

Mom was, like most mothers in the 1930s, a stay-at-home, always there for my brother and me. Her job was to cook and clean, shop for food and clothing, and take care of us all. In order to do this, she had a household allowance provided by my father and that's where the story of our very own Great Depression began.

Pop was beyond frugal to the point of being downright parsimonious and he stashed most of his money somewhere, giving Mom so little that she was reduced to constantly "making do." She took it to such great heights I can truthfully say she turned it into an art form.

She had had practice as a child, growing up with her three siblings in the somewhat poor household of her railroad yard worker father and her stay-home mother. Grandma, as we kids called her, was a champion at making do. Mom watched and learned those lessons well.

Our two-story, wood-siding house cost \$900 at sheriff's auction. Pop also purchased the adjacent empty lot and turned it into a grassy yard bordered by flowering bushes and space for Mom to plant tulips, daffodils, chrysanthemums, daisies, asters and dozens of other colorful annuals and perennials.

All across the rear of our backyard Pop had planted fruit trees and a vegetable and fruit garden. Somewhere, he had heard about fruit tree grafting and tried his

hand at it. On the young golden delicious apple tree he grafted several other kinds of apples and several varieties of their cousins, the pears. Our peach tree also had a few branches that sported apricots and plums. He was so successful at it that the local newspaper, The Toledo Blade published an article about his hobby, complete with a photo of my skinny brother grinning next to one of the crazy mixed-up trees.

One of Mom's many jobs was to help maintain that "private produce store," in addition to mowing the lawn, tending the flower garden, cleaning house, cooking all the meals, doing dishes, washing and ironing clothes and occasionally walking many blocks to shop for absolute necessities at the grocery store, then lugging heavy grocery bags home in her aching arms.

For weeks every summer Mom harvested the backyard bounty with the help of us kids when we were old enough.

The cherry tree was the specialty of my kid brother and me. We were small enough to climb into it without breaking tree limbs or, hopefully, our own. Spurred on with the prospect of sour-cherry pie, we each held a bucket into which we dropped the shiny crimson globes, popping one in our mouths for every two or three in the pail. When Pop quizzed us, we blamed the birds for the cherry pit litter beneath the tree.

For Mom, and later for me, too, summers also meant a constant round of peeling, pitting, slicing, crushing, grinding or whatever other process was required to prepare the gifts of that garden for canning. Then, in the hottest and most humid time of the year, the kitchen fairly melted from the heat of the huge kettle of boiling water in which clean empty jars simmered, and later the filled jars were immersed to kill any bacteria that strayed into the fruit.

Sometimes Mom used the oven to process other jars of fruit – until the day when a jar exploded and effectively decorated the entire kitchen with broken glass and sticky peach jam. The air might have turned blue had we been able to read Mom’s mental comments about that cleanup job!

Proof of her skill as a preserver of food for winter was stored in our basement in what we called the fruit cellar where cool earth surrounded the little room beneath the breakfast nook off our kitchen. Shelves lined the walls and held rows of Mason jars filled with peaches, plums, apricots, pears, applesauce and red sour cherries from those trees in our backyard. More jars with strawberries, blackberries, red and black raspberries, tomatoes, green beans, asparagus, rhubarb, carrots, parsnips made their own rainbow on adjacent shelves. And then there were the jams and jellies that we knew would grace toast and pancakes later.

Nearly all my clothes and many of those my brother wore were the result of a needle and thread in the hands of my mother. Her household allowance barely

covered what food the garden couldn't provide, so store-bought clothes were a seldom luxury. Mom and a second-hand Singer treadle sewing machine were a team to be reckoned with. Mom could figure out how to cut out a garment from the amount of fabric specified by the pattern, and still have enough scraps left over to make a dress for my doll and some new potholders for the kitchen, padded inside with the good parts of old holey bath towels.

In those days, many dry products such as flour, sugar, and animal feed came in large cotton sacks printed with colorful flowers or geometric designs. Other people deemed them suitable for nothing more than humble dishtowels or pillow cases, but Mom turned the pretty cotton into pajamas for my brother and nightgowns for herself and me.

As my brother and I grew bigger, and needed larger clothes, neighbors gave Mom clothing they no longer could or would wear. With imagination and skill, Mom turned those garments into wearables for the three of us. But, I don't recall her ever making anything for my father; he bought his own clothes with some of the money he his from Mom.

Perhaps the most symbolic of Mom's skill at creating something from nothing came the day my brother tried to shave the back of his neck to forestall getting a haircut. The razor slipped, went a bit too high and his hairline sported a very

unfashionable scalloped edge. Mom whipped out the indelible pencil and patiently drew a nice new hairline on his skin, hair by tiny hair.

Mom never achieved fame, and certainly not fortune, but she took her lot as a housewife and mother, burdened with her own Great Depression, and turned it into a triumph of the art of making do.

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