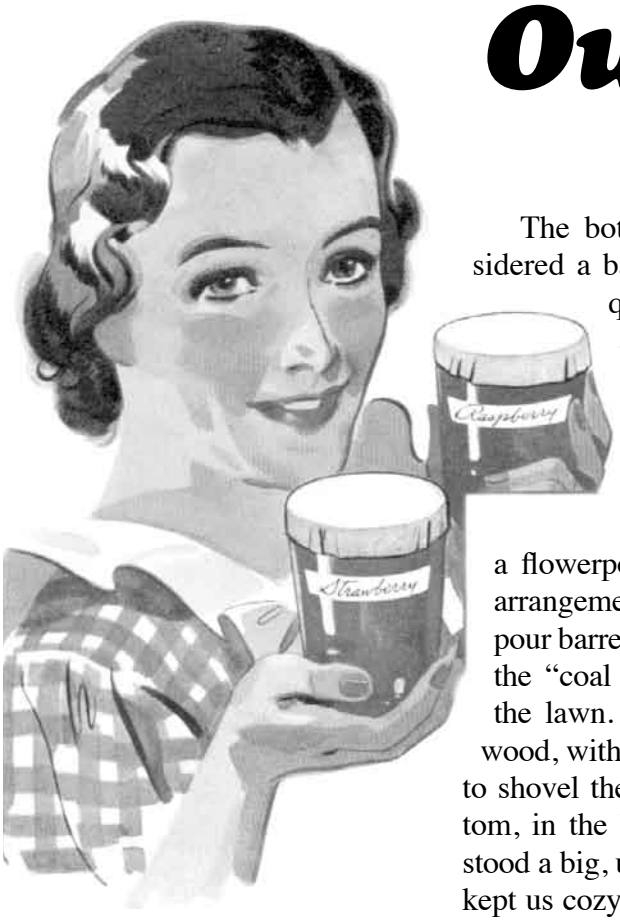
# Our Basement

*By Eileen Higgins Driscoll*




A basement doesn't sound like the kind of place that would carry many good memories from your childhood, does it? But mine does.

It wasn't really a basement. It was at street level, with a door to our back yard. We grew up in brick row houses in Brooklyn, N.Y., from the 1920s until the end of the 1950s. Row houses like ours had three stories.

The bottom level was considered a basement, with living quarters above that, and bedrooms and a bathroom on the top floor.

Our front lawn had a hole in it with a trapdoor and a flowerpot to protect it. This arrangement allowed men to pour barrels of coal into it to fill the "coal hole" directly under the lawn. It was paneled with wood, with a space to allow you to shovel the coal out at the bottom, in the basement. Next to it stood a big, ugly coal furnace that kept us cozy warm all winter and heated our hot water.

The steps from our kitchen led down to the basement. The cement floor was covered with a rug that kept our feet warm when we played down there.

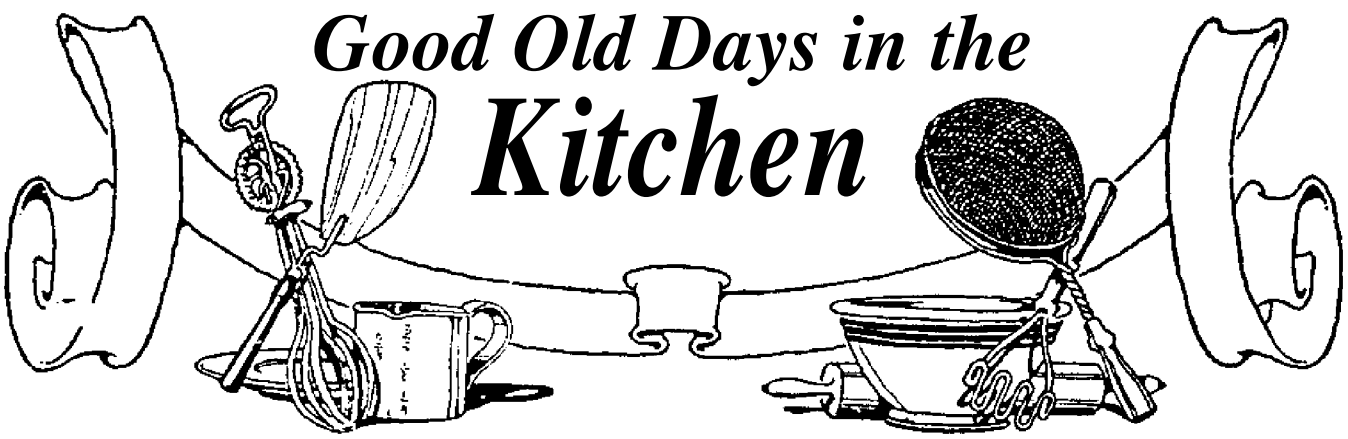
A large, round dining room table and chairs sat in the middle of the room. We never had our meals there, but that table has many stories to tell. We always had a jigsaw puzzle going, which we did together. When we finished a puzzle, Dad would fit a piece of wood to it and let us shellac our puzzle onto it. The walls in the long, narrow part of the basement were lined with our puzzle pictures.

That's the same table they put me on when I cut the whole bottom of my foot while playing under the hose shower in our back yard. I stepped on a sharp coffee can, and that was a big mistake for a little kid. The doctor came to the house to put stitches in it. I think my reward for not crying was ice cream.

The stitches were fine, but I got hives from the tetanus shot. Unfortunately, the treatment for hives back then was castor oil. The drugstore man put it in chocolate and soda, but the taste was still bad—and so were the effects.

When we had a barbecue in the back yard, that same table served as a holding area for lots and lots of good things to eat.

When our grape arbor out back was full of ripe fruit, Mother made jelly in the basement. She

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cooked it on the extra stove near the door and lined up the jars on the big table. She let me pour melted wax on top of the jelly in the jars to preserve it so that we could eat it all winter. We preserved fruit from our peach tree in the same way.

Dad also made his wine in the basement. He hung cheesecloth on the clothesline that ran the length of the narrow part of the room. Big buckets were arranged under it. Then he paid us kids movie money to squeeze the grape juice through the cloth. That probably wouldn't be allowed today, but we didn't mind.

One day, a washing machine was placed next to the two big cast-iron sinks down there. It had a wringer on top, and we were all taught to be careful not to put our little fingers into it. No more scrubbing on the washboard!

On good days, we carried the clothes upstairs to the back porch and hung them on the clothesline that ran the length of the back yard. On rainy days, we hung the clothes on indoor lines.

I vaguely remember my grandfather living in our basement temporarily during the Depression. He had his bed and a freestanding closet. He came and went through the back door, which was never locked. I'm sure he had his meals with us.

Unfortunately for him, somebody died, and he was the one that had to mind me the day after I got my first pair of roller skates. That's the day I learned how to skate. I don't know how he felt that evening, but the poor man must have been up and down those basement stairs with me a million times that day.

When Dad retired, he started a hobby making clocks. He had bells, chimes, bongs, cuckoos and anything else that counted the hours on shelves down in the basement. Some of the clocks had flowers painted on their faces, and ornate gold cabinets.

He also built model planes that he hung from the ceiling of the living room upstairs. At one time we all had to zigzag through the living room because there were so many planes hanging from the ceiling. I suspect Mother encouraged Dad to move them downstairs, since no one else we knew had similar decorations in their home.

Model sailboats and paddlewheel ferryboats also seemed to find their way upstairs for display. Many of them were beautiful, with intricate details. I think Mother was more tolerant of the boats than of the flying planes.

More than one dog made his home down in our basement, too. And they all seemed to thrive in spite of the fact that they never saw a veterinarian. We had just about enough money for the kids in our house, so the dogs, rabbits, roosters, ducks and any other creature had to catch as catch can. They all seemed happy, however, and none of them ever complained. They just ran around with all of us, enjoyed the attention, and ate and slept well.

There are many more stories that that old basement could tell. Thinking about it takes me back more than 50 years. I remember that our basement was cozy, busy and fun, and that it served our whole family well. It managed to serve a lot of assorted neighbors, friends and relatives, too. ❖

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