1950s Flashbacks

By Betty Grafwallner

was a 1950s stay-at-home mom with three young children. The carrot sticks I scraped with my dime-store vegetable scraper would have stretched for miles if laid end to end. I peeled and cored bushels of McIntosh apples for the kids' snacks. We ate only whole-grain bread. I was determined to provide nourishing meals for my family.

I fondly remember our Friday night suppers, often the good old standby of tuna noodle casserole, put together with Campbell's mushroom soup and topped with crushed potato chips.

Friday meals were usually hurried affairs due to my strict routine of scrubbing and waxing the kitchen and bathroom floors on my knees, using my O'Cedar waxer to spread glossy ribbons of Johnson's wax. I would finish off dust-mopping the bedrooms (how I wished I could afford wall-to-wall carpeting!), getting the fuzzy "kitties" from under the beds.

I was tired on those Fridays and would often take a box of Chef Boyardee pizza mix from my cupboard, roll the crust out paper-thin, spread the little can of tomato paste on top with the enclosed packet of Parmesan cheese. A can of Starkist tuna was our protein, along with Del Monte sliced pears, the ever-present carrot sticks, and cookies for dessert.

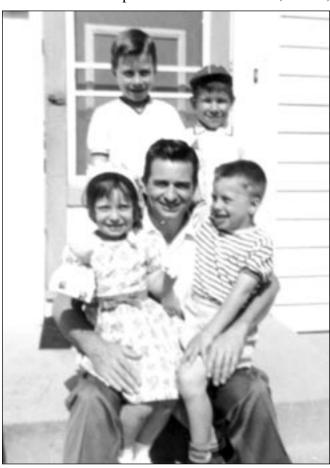
We ate a lot of cookies. Back then, we could go to the Johnston cookie factory, which was located nearby, and purchase a 5-pound bag of assorted broken or misshapen cookies for 50 cents. They were oh so fresh!

One time, I took my children on a tour through the cookie factory. At the tour's end, we received samples of chocolate-covered marshmallow cookies right off the assembly line. The marshmallow was so creamy and soft. We thought they were the most delicious cookies we had ever tasted.

During those years, I purchased a Mirro-matic pressure cooker. It was a heavy aluminum 4-quart pot equipped with a rubber gasket that fit snugly into the cover's rim. A small round valve that allowed the steam to escape fit into the lid. While cooking, it would jiggle up and down to the ominous hiss

of steam as it was released. Some of my friends thought I was quite brave to keep such a menacing appliance in my kitchen.

I must confess that there were two occasions when my pressure cooker did frighten me. The first accident was a recipe with stewed tomatoes, which,



My husband, Lawrence, with our children. Ann and Steven are on his knee; Michael is standing behind them. A little friend is on the right.

to my horror, ended up on my kitchen's white ceiling. I did not put enough liquid in the pot, and the little safety valve blew out, emitting hot, steamy tomato juice straight up in the air. The second time it was a nice beef roast. All of the succulent juices that I could have used for gravy met the same fate as those tomatoes. These incidents, however, did not deter me, and I completely mastered and tamed that cooker over the years.

Most of all, I like to bake. My husband's favorite was my grandma's date-and-nut cake, and I always baked it for his birthday. The sweeteners in it were dark Karo syrup and brown sugar, the liquid was brewed coffee, and I cut large pieces of dates and walnuts into the rich batter. Cinnamon and vanilla were the flavorings, and I covered all that goodness with buttercream icing.

When I was a young bride in the 1940s and baked this cake for the first time, I followed the directions conscientiously. Then I waited anxiously for one hour until it was done. I was so proud as I started to cut the first slice for my new husband.

Well, imagine my shock when I saw the completely raw batter inside! It had risen nicely and looked normal on the outside. Our new honeymoon apartment had a small electric stove, and I was only familiar with my mother's gas oven, which baked quite differently. I didn't shed any tears over it, but I didn't attempt another one for a long time.

Another time, a friend asked for the recipe to Grandma's special cake. I wrote down "1 cup of coffee." My friend, a young bride herself, used 1 cup of ground coffee right from the can!

I felt terrible about that, but later we both had a good laugh. But all those good expensive ingredients gone to waste! Oh, we were so young then.

I don't recall if we had a government-approved food pyramid as a guideline for proper nutrition, but my mother was my guideline. She always served one or two vegetables with meat, a potato and salad.

And Mother always made the dinner plates look attractive. She knew about "presentation" even before the word became popular. When Mother was along in years and living alone, she still prepared a nutritious noon dinner for herself. And she always used nice china and cloth napkins.

I now reside in a nursing home and our community meals are served in a large, cheery dining room. Some of my friends and I like to read the tasty-sounding recipes in magazines or the newspaper. This brings about a yearning to get into a kitchen to stir up a meal or bake some cookies, but those days have passed.

There is a plus side, though: We don't have to wash dishes, clean up the kitchen, and then start all over planning the next day's menus! �