

Stocking the Larder

Kathy Wright-Wainer

The following short story contains accountings from both Harold Paul Wright's childhood experiences and our family's visits to the homestead in Ava, Missouri.



In the autumn, one way that Grandma *put up* provisions for the winter larder was to dry apple rings. After washing and drying apples that they had harvested from their own trees, she carefully cored the apples and then sliced them into rings even in thickness. Once done prepping the rings, she climbed up a ladder whence she laid a clean sheet upon the roof of the house; then, she gingerly made her way back down to retrieve her sweet smelling and juicy apple rings. Back up the ladder she would go to neatly arrange the beautiful fresh apple rings out in a single layer. The apples were covered with another clean sheet to keep away insects and dirt while left to dry by bask in the warm sun with gentle breezes. Periodically the apples were turned to aid in even dehydration. After the drying process, the apple leather was placed in sparkling clean Mason jars and stored in the root cellar.



Examples of root cellars.

The home in Ava had a root cellar where I had the opportunity to visit frequently because Grandma would send me to *fetch* various produce such as new potatoes or onions. Each time I was told to do this, final instructions were given to watch out for a snake lying just inside on the top step of the door stoop. They occasionally encountered a three foot or so copperhead sleeping there. Bounding off toward the door, I would always confirm Grandma's instructions, "Yes, Grandma, I will be careful."

As soon as I opened the root cellar door, I most certainly peered around intensely throughout the whole cellar before I stepped in. Even though I only saw a baby copperhead one time in my entirety of visits to Ava, I never liked snakes and she did a wonderful job of instilling a healthy fear of those plus cottonmouths into us. Let me just say that not only did she have me scared to take a step into the root cellar without

maintaining a watchful eye, but she also talked, and wrote us, about those deadly snakes so much that I was afraid to even use the outhouse for fear of being bitten in the rear!

Many a letter sent to our home expounded in detail of how her dog Butch was the fearless snake killer. He was a mixed breed with long shaggy brown hair, beautiful compassionate brown eyes, and a gentle spirit except when it came to protecting my grandma against snakes! He showed them no mercy and was quite proud of himself in taking one to task by exterminating the threat. Like a cat, he sometimes would bring a dead snake to the stoop of the house to show Grandma he was a good boy and did his job. To her, dead or alive, a snake was truly loathed and most emphatically not welcome at the door!



Butch in Ellie Mae's Pond – Photo by Kathy Wright-Wainer

Returning to the root cellar...The wonderful smell of the fresh earth and vegetables filled my nostrils. Slow deep breath in....Ah....such a wonderful primal aroma! Unlike my dad in his youth, I simply had to flip on a light switch and not poke around in the low light of an oil lamp. My eyes beheld gorgeous red, white, and yellow potatoes of all sizes from the diameter of a golf ball to what almost looked like a small football! They had boxes of different onion varieties too such as robust deep hues of reds plus white cooking onions. On shelves, jars of vibrant fruits and vegetables which included peaches, apple butter (which Grandma especially relished), green beans, corn, peas, carrots, and so much more shimmered where the light reflected from the glass! This sight jogged my memory of letters she wrote home telling us of her recent work which detailed each item and quantity of jars that she had processed. Besides the smoke house on the other side of the root cellar, this grass covered mound was one of my favorite spots to go and cool off for a moment! If I lingered too long, I would hear my mother holler from the house, "Kathryn Ann! Get yourself in here! Grandma needs that onion!" Or, whatever item that I was to fetch.



Example of a Smoke House

Even though the smoke house was not in use during the times I visited, I could still smell the smoke that once wafted through and permeated its siding. What another wonderful fragrance that was so fundamental to life. My dad told us frequently that when he was a kid, it was his job to keep the fire going and he *caught hell from Grandpa* if he let it go out. He did not tell me how many times he let a fire fail; nonetheless, he certainly implied that it was more than once but probably not more than two or three times as Grandpa meant serious business about the consequence.

Within the smoke houses from Dad's upbringing would be fresh meats that they had slaughtered which ranged from hanging hams, ham hocks, bacon, beef jerky, fish, turkeys, and small game. When I was small, both he and my mom, who also grew up on a farm, talked about butchering their livestock; however, they never went into details. Although, my mind often wondered how a hog or steer met its demise.

One day prior to my dad's passing, he was reminiscing with me once more about his childhood days and the smokehouse along with the butchering of animals. Finally, I had an opportunity to speak up and ask him just how they accomplished this. I think I asked him something like, "How did you kill an animal out in the pasture or barn and get it up to the house? Did you just shoot it out there or stab it with a knife or what?" Well, that simple ignorance put a smile on his face as he let out a chuckle and replied, "No, dear daughter. That's not how we did it. Grandpa or I would lead a cow (pig or lamb) up near the back of the house and tie it off. Then grandpa would take a ball peen hammer and strike it in-between the eyes which killed it instantly." They then processed it there nearby the house and smokehouse.



In the late winter, Grandpa prepared for planting his springtime garden by sprouting seeds in a window box which was located in one of the front corners of the garden. This was an area outlined with blocks which contained fresh dirt blended with horse manure followed by glass panes set atop. A variety of seeds, including tomatoes, peas, sweet bell peppers, and string beans to name just a few, were nestled into this mix not only to gain nutrients from the soil and manure but also heat! Along with the sun, the horse

manure provided a much needed source of life sustaining heat inside this earthen greenhouse. Shortly thereafter, as the fear of frost was nearly passed, the seedlings were first “hardened” by short venting intervals of the glass elevated slightly for exposure to the fresh air which graduated to longer stints to fully open air. Soon, the garden soil was tilled and smoothed out ready to receive these quickly growing plants.



Plump and juicy dark black berries and brilliant red raspberries grew in the garden too. My brother and I were often sent out to pick them to enjoy with fresh cream from Ellie Mae as our dessert for the evening. We both were so excited to complete this job as we delighted in the play of fitting them on each of our ten fingers. We were certainly in competition to find the biggest ones to adorn our fingers...always trying to outdo each other; we would hurriedly eat them and attempt this contest all over again. We raced down the garden row filling the buckets and our bellies all the same.

As we kicked up the dirt scuffing around the berries, I pointed out a funny looking earthworm to Jim. He said, “That ain’t no worm, that’s a copperhead!” With that, he did the big brother thing and eliminated the danger. Whew! Was I ever thankful for that and didn’t have to pause any further to say, “Let’s get outta here!” We ran as fast as our feet would carry us toting our buckets of raspberries and blackberries to the house. Busting through the back door, we both were out of breath and shouted, “Grandma! There was a baby snake in the garden!” The alarms went off within Grandma. As I mentioned earlier, she had a healthy fear of them. She made us detail where it was, it’s size, color and “Are you sure Jimmy killed it?” Followed by, “That sure enough was a copperhead. Eldon, go down yonder and make sure that snake is dead!” which he promptly did.

Now that the snake issue was settled, she turned her attention to take inventory of our buckets. “What happened to all of the berries?” Simultaneously, we both said, “This is all that was there.” With a frown on her face, she pressed us further to find out what happened as this farming lady who tended that garden knew exactly what the status was of her crops. As she inspected our purple and red stained hands, she was none too happy by our gleeful recounting of exuberance in our berry outfitted fingertips. Of course, mother was standing right there and now it was her time to chime in on how our playtime took away from the dessert plans for all to enjoy after dinner. Especially for Grandpa as one of his life’s pleasures was to have fresh cream poured over a bowl full of fresh from the bush berries.

It was when Grandma told us of how hard they worked to grow the fresh berries and purposefully held off picking them because they so looked forward to this exclusive delight to share with us all, that we felt horrible because we had hurt them. No amount

of apologizing could take away that painful sting. The berries were cleaned and shared equally among all for the evening dessert; however, mine and Jim's servings just did not taste as good as it did earlier.



Sassafras and Slippery Elm

Two plants growing in the wild that the family spoke about collecting were sassafras root and the bark of the slippery elm tree. Grandma and Aunt Eva shared melancholy moments of wandering around woodsy mounds to dig up sassafras roots for brewing hot tea or root beer. That story certainly hit a chord within as I have always been fond of root beer and most certainly voiced that to my grandma where she told me this story. She pressed me about just how much I like it. And after I told her enough times of how much *I love root beer*, she took me outside for a walk while toting a little shovel along. We made our way to a particular area of the nearby woods where she stopped and told me to start digging. "What for?" was my immediate response. She just smirked, "Well, you want some root beer, don't you?" She didn't have to say another word. I commenced to dig!

Frequently recounting his childhood, Dad mentioned, "We could always tell when the neighbors also ran out of their canned and dried fruits and vegetables because the Slippery Elm trees in the woods had notches in the bark where it had been stripped some." Turns out he was out in the woodlands seeking the same bark to bring home because everyone was in need of this homeopathic laxative.

Foraging out and about in the local rolling hills also included gathering ggooseberries, wild strawberries, raspberries, dewberries, blueberries, and black berries. Not only were delectable golden crusted pies with crimped edges made from many of these berries, more so, yummy shiny jams and jellies which adorned many a hot biscuit or pancake.

The surrounding sugar maples trees also provided for the larder through the collection and processing of its highly prized sap into sweet maple syrup and succulent maple cakes which were a treat that brought the surrounding neighbors to the Wright farms to purchase. Read the full account in *Boiling it Down* from [The Wright Maple Syrup Legacy](#) page.



Ellie Mae and Grandpa Eldon

Ellie Mae (whom I mentioned provided the cream for the raspberries and blackberries) was just one of many milking cows owned by my grandparents; however, she had the distinction of being the last bovine that my grandparents owned up until they sold the Ava property and moved to Spickard. She was a Black Angus with a very calm and kind disposition. Grandpa taught us to call her in from the woods to either give her a hello or lead her into the barn at night. Each visit to the farm was the same where she would not come to our whistles or calls for the first day or two. Grandpa always had to give his special holler and whistle to call her; but once she became reacquainted, she would respond to our calls thereafter. We enjoyed romping around in the surrounding woods listening for the clanking of her cow bell. More often than not, we would find her either near or in her cow pond!

In the mornings as soon as an early breakfast was eaten (which usually consisted of toast with jam accompanied with bacon and eggs to order which were cooked in the same skillet as the rendered bacon fat, we headed out the door with Grandpa to milk Ellie Mae. She was always eager (and probably relieved) to see us as her full udder was ready to be emptied. The cats all saw us heading for the barn and raced to beat us in the door. For the moment, we were their best friends.

After Grandpa secured Ellie Mae to her milking post, he set up a stool beside her and first washed her udder and then placed a clean galvanized steel bucket under her. He started the milking process to relieve a lot of the pressure and to reassure Ellie Mae all was well. She swatted her tail back and forth across her hind quarters and turned her head here and there watching what was going on all the while chewing the hay and her cud. Now it was our turn. Grandpa had taught us how to correctly grasp a teat and give it the appropriate squeeze while gently pulling down to release the milk into a bucket. The cats would frantically meow begging for Grandpa or us to give them a squirt of fresh milk. Of course, we were more than delighted to accommodate these feline requests! Jim and I would giggle with childhood glee the whole time and enjoyed every moment of these times together with our grandpa who patiently stood near us and (if he was not talking with us) whistled softly.

When we were all done, we turned Ellie Mae out into the pasture to enjoy her day and Grandpa carried the heavy bucket of milk to the cream separator on the back porch. We asked him every question there was about the process. From the pouring of warm fresh milk into the top bowl of the separator until it dripped out into a clean bucket below: *How does it work? I don't understand. Why does it do that? Why is it taking sooooo long? What's the yellow in there? Why does the cream rise to the top? What makes the cream rise to the top? I still don't understand.* Finally, he was ready to move on to the next task and explained that we would have to wait patiently "for a spell" to let it do its job. Waiting and waiting for it to separate seemed to take *forever* similar to a watched pot that never boils.

So off we went to new adventures for the day. At some point later, Grandma would give a call, "Eldon, the cream is ready!" We shot off for the cream separator; "Oh, boy! Oh, boy! Where is it Grandpa? Can we see it?" He would then show us the golden flaked buttermilk and the whole, unpasteurized milk. Lastly, there in the one chamber was the long awaited fresh from the cow cream! It was really a rich learning experience to see what our little hands had helped draw from Ellie Mae and turn into cream. But, one of the best bi-products was yet to come... the churning of the cream into butter.



Example of a Cream Separator



After Grandpa retrieved the cream, Grandma poured scalding hot water into the top of the cream separator to clean and sterilize it. Next, Jim and I would argue over whose turn it was to have the honor of using the old butter churn that they had for some 50 years which was since they were married in 1919. As a youngster, cranking that handle around and around seemed to be endless! Left handed churning; right handed churning; back and forth as one hand grew fatigued and the other took over. Almost regretting what we had started, we would cry out, "Grandma, how much longer? My hands are getting tired!" She would simply tell us to keep going as it was about *to come together now and you don't want to stop.* I think she just wanted us to complete the task! Sure enough, she was right as a few minutes later the white sloshing liquid had fully converted to a solid state and the paddles would not turn anymore. Now it was time to rinse the butter to wash away remnants of buttermilk so it wouldn't sour; then, grab the butter mold and paddle. Every time that we worked on packing the butter into this old wooden mold, Grandma retold the many times she used that butter paddle as a rod of

correction on my dad's backside. This may have been a fond remembrance for her, but he was none too happy to be reminded of his boyhood punishments!



Esta's Dazey Churn



Examples of butter paddles and butter molds.



After pressing the creamy butter into the mold, Grandma placed it on a dish in her refrigerator so it would drain and set up with a cute floral imprint on top. Similar to waiting for the cream to separate, we were asking her every few moments, "How much longer, Grandma?" The anticipation of having the opportunity to turn the mold upside down and push the disc out to release it and then savor that fresh churned butter was almost more than we could take! Oh, the agony. Our taste buds were screaming for fresh butter melted into steaming hot, fresh from the oven bread or biscuits adorned with her homemade apple butter or berry preserves. Mmm mm!

When it came time to pack up and head back home, Grandma always made sure we had several pounds of the butter we churned to take to our larder. Then all too soon, those happenings ceased as they found caring for the animals was becoming too difficult for them. They sold Ellie Mae; subsequently, the churn and butter mold went home with me the following visit. To this day, I still have the churn. However, time and decomposition had its effect on the wooden mold. Alas, I had taken the mold to school for show and tell; and, as I clutched my precious memento to my chest running to catch the end of day school bus, it literally disintegrated into pieces. Both the mold and my heart were sadly crushed. We had the paddle for many years after. In time, it too succumbed to the aging process.



Not only did Dad's birthplace in Mill Grove have the Grand (Weldon) River cutting through it, so did several other Wright and Hamilton farms. This afforded all of them ample opportunities for bountiful fishing.

For Dad, anytime he was at the river bottom, he had an opportunity to catch freshwater fish for dinner which included little pan fish such as the Sun Fish. Moreover favorites included Small Mouth Bass and Rainbow Trout. Even though Gar, Catfish, and Carp were available, they were mostly used for fertilizer than the table.

Once, I asked him what kind of pole and bait he used. This was another father and daughter interaction that brought him humor as he teasingly replied, "Why would I need a pole and bait?" True to form, I was drawn in and was perplexed because we had been brought up using a variety of cane poles or rods and reels along with different bait from digging our own earthworms to shiners and plugs. To wit he laughingly retorted, "Why, I only needed my hands." Obviously I didn't believe him, "Not, uh! No way can you catch a fish with your hands!" The banter continued briefly.

From this, I learned about how he would either be out meandering around the woods looking for small game or purposefully go to the river to see fish gathered in the shallows. Other times he waded out a little not more than knee deep. He said he had to be very still and the fish would swim around his feet. From there he would slowly bend over and "tickle" and "pet the fish." As the fish relaxed, it was like putty in his hands that slowly and gently clasped around the fish's midsection. Once secured in his grasp, he lifted the fish out of the water and gave it a toss to the river bank. He repeated this until he had what he thought was enough for the day.

Naturally the very next time we went to visit my grandparents, I had to ask them to verify what I thought was a surely concocted adventure! Grandma was more than happy to proudly affirm his accounting of extremely dexterous hand fishing proficiency in providing sustenance for the family.



Southern Gray Squirrel ---Photo by Kathy Wright-Wainer

Besides the hand fishing, throughout his lifetime, Dad possessed outstanding hand and eye coordination coupled with impeccable timing necessary in successful marksmanship. Both Grandpa and Grandma bragged about Dad's ability to shoot any of the three indigenous squirrel species (the Eastern gray, red fox and flying squirrels) with a single clean shot to the head and never missed. Dad had told us this many times throughout our childhood especially after we had been out hunting ourselves. Squirrels frequently run in a corkscrew fashion up or down a tree to evade predators which makes it tremendously difficult to hit with a clean kill shot if at all. The flying squirrel not only had this same adeptness but would spring from a tree to float through the air either into another tree or sometimes land on the ground. This is where the ability to project timing especially came into play as the gun actually needed to continue forward in play while the trigger was steadily pulled. Similar to a hand's follow through in the successful sinking of a basketball.

This time, my brother Jim did not totally believe that Dad never missed and the shot was always to the head. It took Grandma acknowledging the account to make a believer of Jim. She thoroughly enjoyed telling us how many meals he provided for them with this skill. I can still see her beaming smile and hear the pleasure in her voice as if it were a conversation that just took place, "Your pa would bring in a mess of squirrels for us. All shot clean through the head. Isn't that so, Eldon?" Grandpa would have a big grin on his face and with that familiar twinkle of remembrance in his eyes, simply give a big affirmative nod all the while enjoying his family around his table.

Thus far, all the little scenarios contained herein sound like every hunting excursion was successful. However, one was abruptly halted. On a particular day in my dad's adolescence, he along with cousins Charley Power and Virginia Power piled into a car headed out to a favored hunting area. Chatting as they drove along, the car made its way up and down the hills . . . going faster downhill than uphill.

Some point during all the "*conversating*" and rolling along, a rifle misfired and "scared the shit out of everyone in the car." The car was abruptly stopped; the cousins took stock and saw Paul had been shot. The guns were had been placed on the dash of the car. Even as an adult, Dad never knew what caused the gun to fire as they were not playing around with each other nor were any hands touching the trigger. Furthermore, the car had not hit a rut or bump in the road.

The single shot ricocheted around the interior of the car. Finally, traveling with a right to left outward path, the bullet grazed the bridge of his nose and went clean through the outer left brow taking flesh and hair with as it exited out of the car. Cousin Charley recounted that *Paul was all shot up and a bloody mess. We took him to a Trenton hospital for care. They cleaned him up and sent him home.* He carried the scar of this event with him throughout his lifetime as the hair of his eye brow never grew back (pictured below). Apparently he had insult added to injury because Grandpa (never minding the facial injuries) bemoaned a hole in the roof of his car and the bcousins were still being accused of “horsing around” which made the gun misfire.

You may be wondering the fate of that rifle and if Dad ever touched it or another again. He kept the shooter which never misfired again; however, he made sure of where the barrel was pointed each and every time thereafter whether it was that particular rifle or any other firearm. Furthermore, from then out, all firearms were conveyed in the trunk of any vehicle...unloaded.



Harold Paul Wright; age 16 – Courtesy of Kathy Wright-Wainer