

RANDOM REFLECTIONS: Missing Family Picnics ...

By Kathryn Wishlow

Lately this nice summer weather, and nearing the end of the school year, reminds me of what I used to look forward to attending in August every summer. When I was a young girl, the waiting for the date to be set for our annual “family picnic” was a happy anticipation. Based on the previous years, it was always fun to see how the cousins had grown and changed, and see what games had been planned for us to play before the dinner.

My Aunt and Uncle had a farm in what is now called Mississauga, but then it was considered on the outskirts of Toronto. They had a central location, large acreage, apple trees, and lots of space to park everyone's vehicles, making it the perfect location for a family gathering. My father had three sisters and a brother, and they all had children. There were a total of seventeen cousins, and of course my grandmother and her three sisters always came.

There were always enough people to get two teams together for a rousing softball tournament, where even the little ones were welcomed to participate. Usually an adult or older cousin, would help them swing the bat, whack the ball, and then lead them around the bases. Some people would be playing horseshoes back by the barn. Games of tag and “Red Rover” kept the children of different ages entertained, and helped us all work up a very good appetite.

This reunion is where I learned the true meaning of a “potluck supper”. I was seven. Being rather tall and athletic, and starving all of the time, the huge variety of dishes that arrived were a delight for me. My Great-Aunt Jeannie always brought her famous fruit salad with the multi-coloured tiny marshmallows covered in whipping cream ... a huge hit with all of the kids, and sadly never any left for second helpings. Variations of that “ambrosia” salad are all delicious.

Some years, there would be a huge carved ham. Other times, hotdogs, and hamburgers. I could never make up my mind and would end up having one of each. The mounds of different potato salads, coleslaw, and garden salads went so well with the fresh-picked, boiled corn on the cob, just dripping in butter. The platters of devilled eggs always disappeared even faster than the marshmallow/fruit salad. Someone always brought a huge tray of pickled cauliflower, celery stalk bites filled with cream cheese, black and green olives, carrot sticks and pickles.

It did not take long for me to learn moderation for the first course, no matter how starving I was. Otherwise, I would not have enough room for the deserts when they were presented. My grandmother made a pan cheesecake with cherries on top and a graham cracker crust that was always everyone's favourite on a hot summer day. Out came a

collection of homemade pies, and of course, several big watermelons appeared. One was cut in carefully zig-zagged halves, scooped out and then re-filled with a variety of other cut fruits. Refreshing and hydrating, it looked like something out of a Better Homes and Gardens magazine. Another watermelon was just cut up into slices, and it was not long before a seed-spitting competition was begun. It might sound rather disgusting, but it was tons of fun!

The adults took care of setting the tables up, then tidying up afterwards, with the older children on dish duty. Yes, in later years we used more paper plates as they got sturdier, but the original ones got too darn soggy, bent in half and you could never cut anything without going right through them. As darkness descended, children were called in to say their final goodbyes and give hugs to everyone. With plenty of “Awwww do we have to go now?” and “We were just going to play hide-and-go-seek in the dark!” protests, we eventually all went home. Oh how I miss those wonderful family picnics! I wonder if younger families still do them? *(Kathryn Wishlow belongs to White Pine Writers Inc., a local group of like-minded authors who encourage and support all facets of writing and publishing literary efforts. Follow them on FaceBook or www.whitepinewriters.ca)*