

The Birth of a Loaf of Bread

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The wood-stove fire was banked for the night. I walked into the kitchen in my flannel nightgown to tell Aunt Carrie good-night. She stood in the center of the floor ready to turn off the light that hung from the... ceiling. She looked at me and said, "Need a drink of water, Mary?" I answered, "No, a good-night kiss."

I stretched tippy-toe to receive her hug, and pat on the bottom, to tell me I had been a good girl that day. "But," she said, "You are always a good girl except when you are mischievous, which is a lot of the time." She laughed, as only Aunt Carrie could laugh. A slightly stilted, lady-like laugh but nevertheless a happy chuckle. She was my Momma's maiden aunt, and almost a second mother to me. She lived with us, and we loved each other a lot.

My Nanny, as I called Aunt Carrie, reached for the light switch looking lovely in her long lavender gown, ruffled at the throat and wrists and said, "Oh, I forgot the bread!" "May I stay and watch?" I asked. "O.K.," she said, "It won't take long; but don't get yourself chilled."

I watched as she broke the yeast into the big earthenware bowl she always used for this ceremony of her's that I loved so much. The bowl was so pretty and so fitting to something that would smell so good later. It was white with a blue band near the top. Nanny added the warm water to the yeast and the scalded milk - not too hot - not too cold. "Shouldn't chill or kill the yeast," she explained. Then the salt, sugar, and butter was added. She was an expert so she didn't measure. Sometimes she added molasses or an egg. She knew lots of ways to make a good loaf of bread. Then from out of the big tin of flour in the pantry, she pulled the flour sifter with a wooden knob. I always loved to make that knob go round and the flour come down like snow. I'd say, "Nanny, am I making it snow too fast!" And she'd say, "No, but there must be a breeze because it sure is drifting."

We'd look at each other and smile our secret smile. By that time, the kitchen was starting to cool down, so we closed the door to the dining room to keep the warmth in. We had heat in the bedrooms of course, but not central heat throughout. On cold winter nights the house cooled down in a hurry. By this time. Mother and Daddy and my sisters were about asleep, so we tried to be a little more quiet. It was difficult because we enjoyed each other's company so much. In a little while the flour was sifted, and Aunt Carrie worked quickly with fingers sticky with the flour mixture. She manipulated that dough until it was kneaded into a smooth and satiny white mound. We washed our hands and the pretty bowl.

She greased it with a little butter and plopped the mound down inside. We dimpled the soon to be born bread with our fingers. I got a blue and white tea towel out of one of the drawers of the big old kitchen safe and covered the dough gently. She moved my little red stool I had been standing on and put it behind the stove. She gently set the bowl on it and tucked the towel around it. We wanted to keep it warm and away from drafts. Aunt Carrie turned off the light, and we crept quietly up the stairs. I got one last squeeze and she went across the hall to her bedroom on the right, and I joined my sisters in the bedroom on the left. I sometimes sneaked my cold feet on my sister's back. I could get away with it if she was sleeping soundly. In the morning, I heard a stirring downstairs, and wondered if Aunt Carrie was in the kitchen. Soon I crawled out of bed, and peeped around the corner of the downstairs hall into the big kitchen. There was my Nanny, poking at a now rising flame. The smell of coffee was in the air. I said, "Ready for a little help?" She said, "In a little while." I probably wasn't nearly the help I presumed myself to be. I looked back of the stove, and the dough was bubbling over the top of the bowl about ready to escape. What a yeasty smell it was. Something great was happening. A form of life was growing right before my eyes! About that time I got a little impatient, so I sat on a ladder back chair in the kitchen swinging my feet; waiting for breakfast. Nanny and I were involved in some deep

conversation. Perhaps whether I had outgrown playing with my Teddy bear or not. Then we sat down to breakfast. I enjoyed the breakfast of eggs and pancakes. I always enjoyed the pancakes 'cause I got to pour my own syrup out of a tin container shaped like a log cabin. Maple syrup poured out of a chimney!

After we cleared the table, we got back to the bread. We removed the towel from the bowl, and as we did the mound deflated a little. Aunt Carrie let me punch down the dough the way she did. She soon started

kneading again and sifting flour through her fingers onto the hard-wood board we used for this special occasion. She moved back and forth | rhythmically, sometimes singing "The Old Rugged Cross" or "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot" as she worked. It was a treasure to watch her, and a treasure now to remember. We got busy, and washed the breakfast dishes, and tidied up the kitchen. Sometimes I helped. I did the dusting very carefully. And sometimes I folded handkerchiefs while Aunt Carrie ironed. Back in the kitchen when the dough had grown again, Nanny would give me a small part of dough to work with, and I would knead my portion until it was ready to go in my own little metal loaf pan. The rest of the dough went into large loaf pans - sometimes several. We covered the dough in much the same fashion as before, but we left it on the kitchen table this time, as the kitchen was now toasty warm. We let it rise until it doubled its size. Then we brushed it with melted butter that was setting on the back of the stove waiting for us. We used our fingers; no clumsy brushes for us. Into the oven it would go. Didn't worry about the temperature of the oven. We knew when it was hot enough. Soon the smell of baking bread would drift through the house. It smelled so good you, almost thought you'd died and gone to heaven. In a little while we called Momma into the kitchen. She had been sewing, or taking care of my little sister. I missed having my two other sisters around, but they were big girls now and going to school. We sat down to a big assortment of hot bread, butter, sorghum, homemade apple butter and peach preserves. It was difficult to decide what I wanted. I watched as Momma sliced the bread. It would sort of mash down as the knife struck it and then spring backup. Nanny poured the coffee and got the milk out of the old wooden icebox. Sometimes, since I was such a good helper and so grown up, I could have a little coffee in my milk. After all, I was big enough to bake bread. We had such a nice feast, and happy talk with laughs all

around. Maybe the living wasn't real easy back then, but it sure felt good, and the bread tasted even better. And dinner was only an hour and a half away!

(Aunt Carrie was the late Caroline Eberle, sister of the late Catherine Eberle Strobel. Her brother John Eberle still lives in Tell City.)