The Secrets of Blackberry Pie

An Arlington County Memory

By Brian Price

When I think of my mother I always think of pie. This may not sound all that mature or well rounded, but it's how one boy thought. It's how my mother and I best communicated, I suppose. She baked and I ate whatever she baked with such relish and such joy that it made her smile.

My mother was the baker in her family. All the women cooked, of course. Everybody had to eat, so somebody was cooking something almost all the time, but in my mother's family they all believed they had their specialties. My mother's sister made tea and crocheted. Us kids had to wear the weird hats. My grandmother stirred up hot dishes that fed 300,000 church people in one sitting. These dishes always had little pieces of green pepper in them. It was left to us kids to pick them out.

And my mother baked, and seemingly only baked pies for me. I don't know what was wrong with the rest of my family. I don't know why my dad and my sister and my goofy little brother didn't love sweets the way I loved sweets. Sure, they ate cookies. They went to Dairy Queen. They acted like Americans. My dad even had a certain thing for Mars bars, but my family didn't understand pies. They didn't adore pie the way I did; the way pie was meant to be, must be, has to be worshipped.

Sometimes the pies, my pies, were given to and sampled by other people. Mrs. Butler, our next-door neighbor, got the occasional pie. The Stonewall

Jackson Elementary School bake sale always got a few and I had to watch my pies be sold to the highest bidders.

It's not just my opinion that my mother's pies were wonderful. It was generally agreed that there was something special about my mother's pies.

"What's in those pies? They're so awfully good," the various usual people would ask.

"Nothing special," my mother would say.

"There's got to be a secret ingredient," they'd continue.

"I don't think so." My mother would smile and shake her head, although, in retrospect, one did always have to wonder about the soup can of bacon grease that my mother kept under the sink at room temperature.

But, of course, there were secret ingredients.

Something in her half-Dutch heritage or maybe in her natural depression-era-austerity made my mother feel that her pies (well any food actually) tasted better if the main ingredients were found for free. Why buy it, if you can pick it up off the ground?

My mother foraged in our neighborhood, which was actually easier than it sounds in the Washington, DC suburbs of the 1960s. You just had to know where to look. The apples for the apple pies came from an abandoned orchard up off 8th Street, which I think that was the old Judge Thomas estate. The property is now a ring of dull row houses or, excuse me, executive townhomes.

The pears for the pear pies came from a branch of the McKann's pear tree that bent over our back fence. My mother claimed that any pear that dropped on

her side of the line was hers by right and she could do with the pears what she would. God, those pies were incredible.

The berries for the blackberry pies came from along the railroad tracks. These blackberries, mother always called them blackcaps (there being a difference in size and sweetness), grew along the seldom used Washington and Old Dominion Railroad right-of-way in Arlington County, Virginia before the highways came through. There was a patch off the Harrison Street crossing and an even bigger and better patch below Wilson Boulevard on the other side of Four Mile Run.

The right kind of black caps apparently only grew along railroad tracks. They didn't grow along highways or sidewalks and especially didn't grew anywhere near Bonair Park's prize-winning rose gardens. My mother would walk us down to see the American Beauties in bloom and we'd run around the rows like we were in a maze, but you could tell she'd just as soon be hunting for berries.

My mother tried a number of times, pretty much once or twice a season, to conscript us kids as berry pickers. You'd think with our pedigree and berry-eating bloodlines we would've been really, really good berry pickers, but we were really, really, really bad berry pickers. Mom would send us off into the dense June heat with one or two of her berry stained berry baskets and we'd be back in 15 minutes exhausted having either picked the berries green or eaten what was left.

So my mother would huff, put on her giant yellow straw sun hat and go out and pick the berries herself and pick them correctly. She liked being down by the

tracks anyway. They reminded her of being a kid, of following the tracks and waiting for her father at the station. But mostly, I think she just liked the smell of the ties, the dragonflies and the breathless warmth of being alone along the rusted and ill-maintained tracks on a summer's day. She'd have denied it, but I saw her walking along balancing on one of the rails once.

But you're probably asking—what was the secret to the secret ingredient? What made the berries so much sweeter than regular berries?

It's hard to convey how incongruous Arlington County was to grow up in the 1960s. On the one hand, it literally overlooked the Nation's Capital. If you climbed a tall tree in my neighborhood you could see the Washington Monument. Yet, on the other hand, I remember horses and cows, vacant lots, woods, grass, and, of course, abandoned railroad beds: A complete lack of urban planning for what was to come.

Arlington was one of those nice little southern places, a land that time forgot. But not for long. People were going to want to get to the big city and our town was in the way. Change was coming. Progress was bearing down.

My mother's reaction to change was to fight back, and there were two things she constantly fought when I was a kid: The highway coming through and her own mortality.

The first one was easy. While other people went to public zoning meetings or put anti-Interstate 66 signs in their yards, Mom waged a one-woman guerrilla campaign against the Virginia Highway Department. By that time, they'd torn up the some of the tracks and left gashes in the woods, but there were still berries

there and would be for a number of summers. Passing by the bulldozers and road graders on her way to pick what was left, my mother would calmly walk along on the dead red clay and calmly yank out a few surveyors' stakes. Sometimes she'd throw them into what was left of the woods. Sometimes she brought the stakes home and chucked them behind the garage.

As for death, she ignored it. She had lupus—basically she was allergic to her kidneys, her skin, to herself. So, she wore the sun hat, took those hideously large pills and never mentioned it to anyone.

Of course, I'm holding back on discussing the secret of the secret ingredient. What made those berries so perfect for pies? Was it the soil? The sun? Their natural hybrid vigor? There was something.

Usually, when asked what made her pies so special my mother would always say, "Oh, a little of this, a little of that." But once the President of the Clarendon African Violet Society pressed her and I heard the truth.

"Now, darling, do tell. You must tell. How come them berries are so sweet?"

"It's the creosote," my mother said.

"I beg your pardon?"

"It's the creosote. I believe it's probably a combination of dust, the angle of the sun, and the creosote on the ties that makes the berries taste like they do. They don't taste right otherwise."

The lady opted for just a small piece of pie. Good, more for me. She shouldn't have been eating my pie anyway.

It took seventeen years of legal injunctions, political battles, and federal and state territorial infighting before the highway actually plowed through the old neighborhood, making a two-block walk to the grocery store into a one and a half mile six-traffic light slog; seventeen years from the time the Eisenhower administration decided to expand a one-track railroad into an eight-lane highway. 1959 to 1976.

One of the final images in my mind of my mother is her walking across the highway right-of-way with her sun hat and basket. She was thinner than ever and was wearing a goofy orthopedic device to protect the dialysis shunt on her ankle. She'd scoped out where the last berries were and was going to get them before the bulldozers did.

It's not often that a mother takes her son's advice. There's no reason for it. But one time I said, "Mom, you know, if you just keep pulling up the surveyor stakes and throwing them away the highway guys will just come along and put them back, but if you maybe just moved a couple of the stakes a few feet one way or another—maybe nobody would notice."

We ate the last of the blackberry pies in silence.

My mother's been dead a long time. She died well before the highway was completed.

But today, if you happen to be driving in the far right-hand, northbound lane of Interstate Route 66 towards D.C. somewhere between what used to be called Westover Field and the Harrison Street overpass you might notice a slight little jiggy-joggy in the road where it feels like maybe the surveyors took one

quick step to the left and then one quicker step back to the right, and all the traffic swerves and wobbles just a little bit going by at 65 miles per hour.

That's where the berries used to be.

I still like pie. I try to buy a slice of pie whenever and wherever I can: Roadside diners, fancy restaurants, national franchises. All the pie seems to taste just about the same cardboardy same. There just seems to be something always missing in those recipes. Must be the creosote.

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