

Remembering

I remember a summer camping trip with the old tent trailer. On that trip it was just Mom, Dad and "the three little ones," Mary Ellen, Kevin and me. When we arrived at the campground, all the regular campsites were full and we had to set up in the over-flow area. After a day or two one of the good campsites opened up and rather than carefully re-pack the trailer to move just a short distance, we decided to loosely stow the gear, crank the roof down to half-mast to avoid the overhanging trees along the road, and pile the rest of the gear onto the car's passenger seats. Dad would drive the camper to the new campsite and Mom and we kids would walk.

As Dad disappeared down the dirt road in a cloud of dust with a trailer looking in disarray and canvas flapping in the wind, Mary Ellen, Kevin and I took it into our heads to race behind shouting "Dad! Stop! Come back! We'll be good, Dad! Don't go!" I believe Mom was mortified by the stares of the other campers though I'm not sure Dad even knew why we were laughing when we met up with him.

A lot can be said about my Dad: born 1917, raised on a farm, attended a one room school house through the eighth grade, was twelve years old when the Great Depression hit, picked celery for a dollar a day with a ten hour day, managed one year at Kent State before his money ran out and later another quarter at Ohio State before his money ran out again. He was drafted in February of 1941 ten months before Pearl Harbor and not mustered out until October 1945. He was enlisted in marriage in 1946 with Mom and still not mustered out after 60 years.

But those are his memories, not mine.

What I remember is dinner. I really don't know how early Dad had to get up each morning to wait for the bus to go downtown to work a full day and catch another bus home; but, in all the years of my childhood, I can only remember one or two times when Dad wasn't home for us to eat dinner as a family. It was always Dad at the head, Mom to his right by the kitchen door, and then all the rest of us arrayed around the table.

I also remember the pot roasts. With seven kids, often one grandmother, Mom, Dad and one income, I remember a lot of pot roasts. I learned later that at the end of some years, Dad's bank account held less than fifty dollars but just as I can not remember a single Christmas without a live tree and a mountain of presents, nor a Sunday collection basket that my father failed to put in an envelope, I can not remember a single night that I went to bed hungry.

When the pot roast made it to the table, it was placed directly in front of Dad. He would say Grace, carve the meat into strips and, without taking a piece, silently pass the platter to the child to his left. As I recall it, there were never assigned seats around that table but some how or other the older kids always managed to be upstream as that platter made the rounds. When that plate reached me, I would spear the best looking piece I could. I suspect the others did the same.

Somehow there were always enough pieces by the time it reached Mom and finally Dad although I can't say much for what those last two pieces looked like. That was the routine: first Grace, then the kids, then Mom, and finally Dad. In all those years, with a thousand pot roasts: first Grace, then the kids, then Mom, then Dad.

Those dinners were a long time ago and in the intervening years I have only managed to learn a handful of things that are truly worth knowing. One of those is that sometimes somebody downstream deserves the better piece of pot roast. Another is that no matter how much I still want to run after that car shouting "Stop! Come back! Don't go!," I know that my Dad will be waiting up ahead at the next campsite.

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