

Pancakes and Peaches

(from "Patches and Pins..." ©1987)

The reporter asked me "What are some of your Thanksgiving traditions? Is it just going to Grandma's home and everyone eating the traditional foods...or is it something else?"

When I was attending the Signal Officer Basic Course at Fort Gordon, Georgia, there were no quarters for "officers' families" attending the course. The course is offered in what is called "TDY" or "temporary duty" and those on TDY status do not get access to housing on the base. In exchange for this, the Army provides a meager TDY payment.

My new wife Mildred – Millie – and I had already spent November's TDY payment -- \$3 a day or \$330 a month -- on car repairs. This also forced us to stay in a run-down "strip apartment" building four miles away from the post and not in the nice Guest House a mere walk away from where my classrooms were on the base.

Thanksgiving came, and Millie and I thought about what we would eat. We didn't have enough money to go eat a good "Thanksgiving meal" and because military payday would come the following week, we did not have enough money to go get a lot of groceries.

So, we looked in the cabinets that Thanksgiving morning and found what would become our annual meal:

A large can of cling peaches with heavy syrup.

A box of Aunt Jemima's (tm) complete pancake mix.

Two cans of Pet (tm) evaporated milk.

One can of generic coffee.

In the refrigerator was a stick of butter, a half-gallon of milk and two cans of biscuits.

"That's all we have, Mike. Some Thanksgiving meal!" Mildred slouched in the living room chair, the television set showing the annual Macy parade. She sat there looking at the parade, tears rolling down her face until she smelled the pancakes being half burnt by me in the kitchen.

"What are you doing??" she yelled at me. She came over and I saw her tear-stained face.

"I'm making Thanksgiving breakfast for us. Sit back in there and let me finish this!!" I answered.

Millie walked over to the kitchen, took the frying pan from my hands and said "If I'm going to eat this, I'm going to fix them..."

As she prepared the next batch of pancakes, she remembered something important.

"We don't have anything to put on these...we don't have any syrup..."

I pointed to the cling peaches. "Yes, we do!"

"Yuck!!" she exclaimed.

"Hey...don't knock it until you've tried it, Henna-Red!" I called her "henna red" after the reddish tint her hair had. A nice reminder of her Irish heritage coming through her.

We sat down at the rickety table, with a bowl of peaches, a stack of pancakes swimming in butter and heavy peach syrup, milk and coffee. We gave Thanks for the meal, and while the Parade was still going on, we sat and ate pancakes and peaches and drank coffee laced with evaporated milk. We smiled and talked about the parade, making fun of the various artists who would come down the street, lip-synching their latest song, or a Christmas carol. We felt good.

"How appropriate is this, Millie?" I looked at her.

"What are you talking about now?" she said, between bites of pancake.

"Think about this. Milk and coffee. You and me. Peaches...from Georgia, this state. Pancakes, brought to us by people like Daniel Boone, and probably one of the oldest and simplest meals Aunt Jemima probably made these for the "masser" in the "big house!"

"Butter..." I explained to her, pointing at the various items. "I can't think of anything for the butter. All I know is that we've just created something new for our family. Ten years -- twenty years -- from now, we'll be talking about this morning and what we had to eat because that's all we could afford to eat." I reached over and held her small freckled hand. She grasped my brown hand and smiled at me through her glasses. A tradition was born then.

Years after we have divorced, and after both of us started with new mates, every Thanksgiving morning has started the same way: breakfast, with pancakes, cling peaches, milk, coffee -- and other items now, added by Jessica to add onto the tradition.

We invite our friends to remember that on Thanksgiving, there are some families who will have one meal that day. Not of turkey and all of the dressings; ham and potatoes and cranberry sauce all arranged in a beautiful setting.

Many families will only have what is in their cupboards or pantries or on a shelf -- if they even have that. Most of what they have is not even fit to prepare, let alone eat.

My insistence of serving pancakes and peaches on Thanksgiving morning reminds me of those people -- people just like me, one paycheck away from poverty. It became and continues to be an annual lesson that while Thanksgiving is a time of parades and football games, it is also a time for family, friends and neighbors.