



LOWCOUNTRY MUSINGS

February 2018

A JOURNAL THROUGH TIME

By Florence Bothwell Cosby

February



SNOW BALL

I made myself a snow ball as perfect as could be.
I thought I'd keep it as a pet and let it sleep with me.
I made it some pajamas and a pillow for its head.
Then, last night it ran away.
But first -- it wet the bed.

Shel Silverstein



Snow does not usually figure in to a winter in the Lowcountry. The last time that happened was in February 2010 when we were buried in a record accumulation of eight inches here in Summerville. The storm hit on a Friday night, and with temperatures hovering just above freezing by morning, it was all pretty much a memory by the time kids returned to school on Monday.



But that fading memory of "snow" became a reality last month when a fierce winter storm dipped deep into the south to embrace us in its icy wrath. And icy it was, as an accumulation of 7.3 inches of snow

piled up on an already frozen layer of ice that crippled most of the counties along the coast. This time we were not saved by the sun, as below-freezing nighttime temperatures hung on for more than a week—melting during the day then refreezing at night. Roads and bridges were impassable, schools and businesses were closed, stores and malls were shut down, no mail service or trash pickup, and with no relief in sight as there is not a single snow plow around to deal with removing the mess. And those of us who do not confront the annual presence of snow and ice will not find an appropriate shovel lurking in the corner of the garage. So, we were at a complete standstill for more than a week, especially folks like us who live in “Unincorporated Dorchester County” which is at the bottom of the list for any sort of DOT services.



But once we emerged from the snow storm’s chilling grip, what was remembered most was the incomparable beauty of falling snow, the tactile pleasure of packing snow balls in your hands, the new-found game of building snow people in our yards, and the striking contrast of a male cardinal framed by the snow-covered branches of a magnolia tree. A rare and effervescent joy here in the Lowcountry.



Years ago, when we lived in Maine, by February of our first winter there we were already missing the sunny, sandy beaches of southern California. So, one Saturday we decided to track down and explore the nearest beach, which was about 70 miles southeast at Bar Harbor on Mt. Desert Island—a far cry from living half a mile from the sandy shores in Santa Barbara. We discovered that coastal Maine is a different kind of beach—rough and rocky, with wild winter surf, yet beautiful in its own way. But we were bundled up and ready for adventure, so we explored the coast and introduced our young daughter to the miracles of shore life. One memorable find was a small purple starfish, which Cati greeted with much delight.



After our excursion on the beach, we were ready for a hearty lunch to banish the chills of this wintry day. To our surprise, there were not many choices available to us, as it was the off-season for tourist trade in this popular vacation spot. But we did find a small diner open on the snowy main street, with a

welcoming warmth and aroma as we stepped inside. Their specialty was New England clam chowder and freshly baked bread. Oh my, it was absolute perfection. The chowder was packed with succulent clams in a creamy broth, tender chunks of potato, and savory seasonings. The bread was hot from the oven, with a crunchy crust and plenty of sweet butter to slather on each slice. It remains in my mind as one of the best winter meals ever.



To me, one of the most exciting competitions in February is the Westminster Kennel Club dog show held each year at Madison Square Garden in Manhattan. This year the event is scheduled for February 12 – 13. We usually do not see particularly noticeable reporting of the winners in the various breeds and groups, but the Best in Show winner always receives prominent media coverage.

Last year, the Best in Show winner was a German shepherd named Rumor—only the second time that that breed has won since the beginning of the event in 1877. I was so pleased to see this, because I love German shepherds. They are dedicated working dogs for law enforcement and the military, as well as admired heroes during the rescue work after the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Center.



Many years ago, probably in the late 1980s, David and I went to the final night of the dog show, which included the Group Judging across Sporting, Working, and Terrier groups, as well as the Best in Show championship. It is traditionally a grand affair, with much of the audience and all the judges dressed in formal evening attire. We went as guests of a friend of David's and were treated to a limo ride from our home in New Jersey, and a fine dinner at a nearby restaurant prior to the show. It was a glamorous evening for sure.

During one of the intermissions, David and I took a stroll through the back-stage holding area to see how the dogs were groomed and primed for their appearance in the competition. Each dog had its own table or alcove where it was tethered in place, so it would remain posed while visitors passed by and chatted with handlers. I don't remember now what breed won Best in Show that year, but it was probably a poodle or a Pekinese, or one of the smaller breeds. My personal favorites are the sporting, herding, and working groups, dogs that are trained to perform noble deeds. And so, I was doubly pleased that a German Shepherd was last year's winner. What a magnificent dog she is, and so sweet when she raised herself up to her handler to be given a special treat for her amazing accomplishment.



National Kite Flying Day is celebrated in February, which is puzzling because this is not exactly a hospitable month for that activity. Nevertheless, I love kites. When we were kids growing up on Robinson Avenue, one of the great pleasures of our childhood was when we all trooped up to Geller's 5 & 10¢ Store in Great Kills to purchase our kites, costing about 10¢ each. They were the traditional diamond shape with two crossed sticks to hold its shape, in either red or blue shiny paper. To that we added a ball of string and some rag strips tied together to form a tail. Our success with flying our kites

was at the mercy of the breezes and light winds, and so our kites would often crash and perhaps even break. But not to worry, we would patch them up and try again. That was the fun of it all—trying to get our kite to fly. Usually that entailed running up and down the street to launch it into the air, where hopefully the current would catch it and carry it to greater heights. More often than not, it was reduced to just that—running up and down the street with our kites a few feet above and behind us. Carefree, happy days.



When Cati was young we spent a good deal of summertime at Cape Cod. There was a large and fancy kite store in Provincetown where we purchased an elaborate—and expensive—kite ensemble. It was a sport kite, also called a stunt kite, which had dual lines, so it could be maneuvered and piloted in the air. It was made of rip-stop nylon with carbon fiber tubing and had sturdy string with plastic looped handles for manipulating it. We flew it on the beach in Provincetown where there were considerable wind currents to make the investment of money, time, and energy well worth the cost. Peaceful, happy days.



My parents were married in February in 1933. My father was 25-years-old, and my mother was 24. They had been together since he was 18 and she was 17. Although they had been engaged for some time, their marriage was a secret—what was called an elopement back then. I am not sure why this was the case; perhaps they were tied to family obligations that stemmed from the financial crisis of the Great Depression. They were married at the Chelsea Presbyterian Church on 23rd Street in Manhattan, witnessed by two persons at the church who were unknown to them. Their “honeymoon” consisted of a stage show and movie at Radio City Music Hall, which had recently opened in December 1932, followed by dinner at a nearby restaurant, although I don’t remember which one. Afterwards, they each went to their own home to carry on as if nothing had happened beyond a date in the City.

For about six months, my mother secretly wore her wedding ring on a ribbon around her neck in the tiny white leather pouch her rings had come in, until finally one day her father confronted her. He acknowledged that he suspected they were already married and encouraged her to have her husband move into the family home with them, so they could live openly as husband and wife.



My parents were married for 26 years until my father's death in 1959 at the young age of 52. For each of those years that they were married, my father remembered their anniversary with a beautiful card, which my mother saved in an album with all the other cards she had received from him over the years. I have that album, here in a box of keepsakes from my parents' life together—happy memories for me as well, knowing how loving and romantic my rough and burly father was to the woman he loved.



I am not sure how I discovered the National Day Calendar website— www.nationaldaycalendar.com — but it is a fun site for tracking the nearly 1500 National Days, Weeks, and Months that are registered by businesses, corporations, and social and civic groups. In addition, they research the history and origin of the National Days and offer entertaining ways to celebrate the occasion. It is intended for fun, and I often check the calendar site to discover ideas and connections for reading and writing.

So, with that in mind, the February calendar of days includes National Crab Stuffed Flounder Day. Yes, there really is a designated day for that, which immediately triggered a far-off memory in the archives of my brain, vividly reminding me of my introduction to the dish. I was probably in college at the time, perhaps my first or second year. I had met my mother where she worked at the Advertising Club of New York at 23 Park Avenue. We were meeting an old friend of hers who had been her supervisor and mentor when she first worked at the Club long before I was born, probably in the late 1920s or early 1930s. Her friend's name was Essie Gabriel—an anglicizing of Gavrelewich—called Gaby by her friends and co-workers. She was a single career woman, long retired, but who had always kept in touch with my mother. Gaby was treating us to dinner out. We all met at the Club, then walked up Park Avenue to a Stouffer's restaurant located on E. 42nd Street near Grand Central Terminal. Although not a grand establishment by Manhattan standards, I remember sitting in a comfortable red leatherette booth in a nicely decorated dining room—a pleasant ambiance suited to local business and shopper patronage.



Eating in a “fancy” restaurant was an enormous treat for me, and to be included in a small group of adult women was even more so. Gaby was so gracious and invited me to choose whatever I wanted from the menu. She and my mother had a cocktail before dinner, while I enjoyed perusing the many tasty selections to be had. My mother had eaten her dinner at noontime at the Club, so she ordered coffee and a sandwich, her usual evening meal. For me, Gaby recommended the dinner special for that night—crab stuffed flounder with stewed tomatoes. Well, I had always been an adventurous eater, not at all shy about trying new dishes, so that was what I ordered, or rather, Gaby ordered for me. She was used to being in charge. I remember to this day how delicious the meal was. The crab filling was rolled inside a filet of flounder, delicately browned and crispy on the outside, and lavished with a tasty stewed tomato garnish, with a side of steamed spinach, and dinner rolls with butter. I ate every bit, slowly savoring the combination of flavors and textures that delighted my taste buds. Absolutely perfect and worthy of a celebratory day in its honor.



Our grandson Cameron stopped by the other day to visit for a bit, wearing jeans, a red plaid shirt with the sleeves rolled up and the tails pulled out, and his new L. L. Bean classic hunting boots. We were startled by his outfit, because he looked just like David—years ago when we lived in Maine.



It had been a staple outfit for David, especially when he was chopping wood to fuel our wood stove during the winter. That particular year he chopped, split, and stacked about seven cords of wood, all of which we wound up needing to keep warm during an especially frigid February. We had electricity, but at that time the cost of energy was so high that a supplemental heat source was financially necessary. David loved the chore of wood chopping, for the physical activity as well as for the satisfaction of seeing the pile stack up as he worked his way through the awaiting logs. Those L. L. Bean boots served him well for the years we lived in Maine and long after. In fact, he wore the soles through and had them replaced three times—no charge from L. L. Bean, as they guarantee their products forever.



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At L.L. Bean, your satisfaction doesn't have a time limit.

Our daughter Cati has a little dog named Roxi who now also has her own pair of Bean boots. They came as part of a monthly toy package Cati subscribes to called BarkBox. Bark & Co. is a New York-based company that provides pet-themed products for the canine members of our families. The contents are clever, amusing, and guaranteed to please your furry best friend. Roxi knows the box when it arrives, and duly expresses her excitement and delight as she unwraps the new toys of the month—like she really needs yet another toy. February's offering included her very own pair of L. L. Bean boots—two stuffed plush look-alike boots connected by a sturdy chew rope. So, the family classic Bean boot tradition continues from one generation to another—grandfather to grandson to granddog.

If you are interested in treating your dog, visit www.bark.com for further information:

Bark & Co.'s flagship product, BarkBox, is a monthly subscription service which caters to dogs and dog parents. Each box typically contains 4 – 6 items, including bones, toys, treats, and accessories, and designed-for-pets dental and health products which have been tested by the company's on-staff vet. Subscribers can sign up for 1, 3, 6, or 12-month subscriptions. 10% of BarkBox proceeds go to local shelters, rescue, and animal welfare organizations.



Mrs. Esther McWilliams was a 4th grade teacher at P. S. 8 in Great Kills. She was well-liked because she worked us hard, was fair-minded, and involved students in a variety of interesting endeavors. There was an annual puppet show, as well as creative crafts, such as sewing projects and knitting. It is this latter activity that I remember well, and which remains to this day as a favorite hobby of mine.

Every student in Mrs. McWilliams's class was required to knit, by his/her own hands, three six-inch squares. We were directed to purchase a pair of No. 6 knitting needles and a skein of colorful knitting worsted yarn. These items were available at a local shop in Great Kills, which was prepared with abundant stock for our class's knitting needs. Mrs. McWilliams taught us how to cast on our stitches, then how to knit each row, turn, and knit the next row, repeating as needed until the desired size was achieved. She would do the final casting off that would finish the square.

My brother Jack had a terrible time exacting his squares to the required six inches. Somehow his knitting was so tight that the resulting square always fell a bit short, so that our mother would have to pin it to her ironing board and apply abundant steam to stretch it that last quarter inch or so. Once he fulfilled his square allotment, he abandoned the project and never knit again. Another student in our class, Linda Mattson, was launched into a knitting frenzy. She would take out her square and knit with lightning speed whenever she had a spare moment in our busy school day. Needless to say, she contributed more squares than any other student. I eventually lost track of Linda, since she did not attend THS, but years later I spotted her on the SI Ferry commuting to work, with a bundle of knitting in her hands and her fingers deftly producing row after row of perfect stitches. I wonder if Mrs. McWilliams ever knew what a lifetime of crafting enjoyment had been instilled in one of her students.



When all of our squares were complete, they were joined together with crocheted stitches into a patchwork patterned afghan about the size of a modern-day throw blanket. The grandmother of our classmate Joan Bendiksen (THS '60) volunteered her own needlework skills by crocheting a small daisy-chain flower on alternate squares in the afghan. The beautifully finished product was then donated, I think to a SI Veterans Hospital, or some other appreciative recipient. Mrs. McWilliams made this annual project a stirring example of dedicated group-effort volunteerism.

My interest in knitting which began in Mrs. McWilliams's class has stayed with me throughout my life. In fact, I still have those very same needles that I used for the squares I crafted in her class, as part of my collection of knitting and crocheting tools. As well as becoming a life-long knitter, I also taught my own 4th grade students how to knit, while teaching at an elementary school where we lived in New Jersey. I started the project as a way to productively fill recess time when cold or snowy days forced us to remain indoors. I designed a simple pattern for a unisex stocking cap, using large-size No. 13 needles and a double strand of yarn. Students chose their yarns based on their favorite colors, favorite sports team colors, or variegated combinations. The completed product became a winter hat that they could wear themselves or give as a gift. Years later, when these kids were in high school and when I had moved on to middle school, my daughter noticed one of those stocking caps sitting on a table in the local public library, tattered and worn but obviously still in use since first knit in one of my former 4th grade classes.



February is American Heart Month, initially proclaimed by then-President Lyndon B. Johnson in December 1963, with a start-up scheduled for February 1964. The designation is intended to remind Americans to focus on their hearts by making heart-healthy choices in their diet and lifestyle.

A sub-group of volunteers joins the American Heart Association, in connection with The Children's Heart Foundation, to celebrate American Heart Month by knitting and crocheting little red hats for babies born in February at participating hospitals nationwide. *Little Hats, Big Hearts* collects contributions of hand-knit and hand-crocheted hats throughout the year for distribution in February.

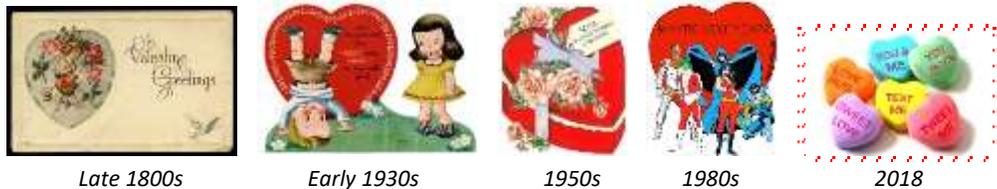


These little hats do not take long to complete, as the pattern is simple and unadorned. I keep one in progress year-round in a basket on the table next to my favorite chair. I knit a bit whenever I can, and when several are completed, I send them off to the volunteer representative for South Carolina. She is a survivor of a childhood congenital heart defect, and so the campaign is truly dear to her heart. If you or someone you know is interested in joining the *Little Hats, Big Hearts* project, check out this site to locate the campaign manager in your area.

http://www.heart.org/HEARTORG/Affiliate/Little-Hats-Big-Hearts_UCM_487734_SubHomePage.jsp#mainContent



I wish you all a heart-happy February, filled with love and good health.



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🐾 Please check back next month for the *March* entry to this *Journal through Time*. 🐾