



## LOWCOUNTRY MUSINGS

July 2018

### A JOURNAL THROUGH TIME

By Florence Bothwell Cosby

July



Edwin Budding's Grass-shearing Machine  
1832

A perfect summer day  
is when the sun is shining,  
the breeze is blowing,  
the birds are singing,  
and the lawn mower is broken.

~James Dent



The month of July kicks off with *National Eat Your Beans Day* on the 3<sup>rd</sup>, celebrating beans as a healthy source of nutrition—high in protein, fiber, and iron. Beans (legumes) are one of the longest-cultivated food products, dating back to pre-Christian times. I did not know that, but now I do, thanks to the history accompanying the National Food Day calendar information. It seems like a timely day to promote beans, with the holiday tomorrow that to me was custom-made for baked beans casserole.



As for beans, I have enjoyed baked beans for as long as I can remember. It was one of the dishes that my mother was good at preparing—mostly for picnics, such as on Fourth of July. She used a large can of Campbell's Pork & Beans, whose slogan back in the 1950s was "Folks who know their beans ask for Campbell's." She mixed them in a round Pyrex casserole dish with diced bacon, brown sugar, ketchup, mustard, Worcestershire sauce, and chopped onion. She did not measure these ingredients, but rather added them with a practiced hand well-versed in the quantities and proportions necessary to make this dish a perfect hit. She then baked the bean preparation for about an hour and a half until thick, rich, and bubbly. I remember the aroma filling our kitchen, and my mouth waters now just thinking about my mother's savory baked beans in anticipation of the holiday ahead.



When I was growing up in the house on Robinson Avenue, Fourth of July began with my father raising a flag—48 stars back then—on the flag pole in our front yard. The day started early for us, because there was so much to do in preparation for the activities of the day. My mother, the quintessential event planner, made sure that the entire neighborhood was up and ready, having been notified in advance what was expected of them.



My best friend Linda's father was key to the successful logistics of the day's activities. Mr. Link was an electrician and expertly strung lights among the trees in the grove next to their house, which would serve as the central cook-out location for later in the day. He raked it and cleared it of debris, creating an inviting verdant enclave. For added ambiance, he also hooked up outdoor speakers for musical background. Several dads would cart their charcoal grills to the area, but my Uncle Bob's grill was state-of-the-art, with a built-in bellows that was controlled by a wind-up handle. He would wheel it down the sidewalk with a distinctive clattering noise that alerted us all that the festivities were well underway. Several other neighbors sent over folding tables to hold the many dishes that would gather there, and everyone brought their folding beach and garden chairs to circle the area. All was in place and ready.



Moms were in their kitchens preparing the side dishes to accompany the hot dogs and hamburgers that formed the staples for the vast cook-out menu. My mother's specialty was her baked beans, my Aunt

Madeline made coleslaw and a cake, others contributed potato salad, deviled eggs, as well as snacks, watermelon, and Mrs. Davine's chocolate chip cookies. I had never seen such quantities of food appear on the serving tables for the consumption and enjoyment of all.

We kids in the meantime were busy with our fireworks. We all had some firecrackers, perhaps a cherry bomb or two, as well as a few others that we were permitted to light on our own. We also decorated our bicycles with red, white, and blue striped streamers, and clothes-pinned playing cards to the spokes of the wheels to add to the clatter and clamor of the day. We created our own parade up and down the nearby residential streets.



Fireworks were not readily available for purchase in New York at that time, so it was the task of one of the families—usually the Links or the Drings—who had vacationed in Florida the previous winter to purchase a quantity of fireworks to store hidden in their basement until the Fourth had arrived. When the marathon eating drew to a close and the cook-out remainders were cleared away, we all eagerly awaited the evening's fireworks display. By then we were all stuffed with food and running wild and barefoot around the safety of our small rural neighborhood. As darkness fell, our parents moved their chairs to the edge of Oakdale Street across from the empty field where the fireworks had been set up and displayed. My uncle was good at this, with the able assistance of other dads. Over the years, we discovered that folks from other streets, some families we knew only by sight, had joined our crowd with their own folding chairs on the sidewalk viewing area. At one point, a town police car arrived and made sure we were at a safe distance, and even blocked off the street to secure and confine our private show. It was a grand finale to an amazing holiday, filled with food, family, friends, and fireworks.



The other day David bought a container of Neapolitan ice cream for me, as a surprise treat. He did not make a big deal out of it, but I could tell by his expression that he had given the selection special thought and that he wanted me to be pleased. And I was. I love Neapolitan ice cream; it is perhaps my favorite combination because it contains three delicious flavors—not having to choose just one. Most of the time I like my scoop to contain the trio of tastes, but sometimes I like a solo flavor, or even a duo. So many variations on that one theme: ice cream!



When I was a kid growing up on Staten Island, my family used to travel to the other side of the Island on Fourth of July to watch the parade on Victory Blvd. The parade was enormously exciting and entertaining but could not match the anticipation of what always followed the end of the parade—a stop at the news stand on the opposite corner. It was there that I had my first taste of Neapolitan ice cream, but not just an ordinary serving. The small store was not a designated ice cream shop and served only one variation on this specific treat. First there was the unusual shape of the cone. It had the usual pointed bottom, from which the name cone got its name, but the top was a rectangle, not the expected circle to hold the scoop of ice cream. As well, it was not filled with a spherical scoop, but with a cylinder of ice cream that was pre-wrapped in a paper covering. I vividly remember how the shop owner would slide open the glass top of the freezer chest, reach inside for the ice cream cylinder, hold it by a small paper flap, tear the perforated seam, then deftly unwrap the cylinder of ice cream while rolling it into the awaiting rectangular cone top. It seemed like magic to my little-girl eyes. There was only one choice of ice cream flavor and that was Neapolitan. I have never seen this form of ice cream or cone anywhere else since, although a Google search uncovered its patent from 1941. It was, and still is, truly unique.

My family did not buy ice cream as part of the weekly groceries. Ice cream was a treat, usually enjoyed in the summertime and purchased from an ice cream parlor, as they were called. The available size boxes were a pint and a quart. We often got a pre-packed pint of Neapolitan, chosen because it had to please a family of seven, and so three flavors were more likely to satisfy everyone's preferences. (My mother, for example, never ate vanilla. Ever.) My mother or my aunt would unwrap the entire box, then cut the block of ice cream into thin slices, rather than the usual scoop. This delighted me because the trio of colors appeared as distinct stripes that I could enjoy in whatever order of flavors suited my fancy at that time. And now, decades later, a bowl of Neapolitan ice cream still fills me with tasty delight.



Cati and the Kandinsky cheesecakes.

My daughter Cati works as an Executive Chef at an up-scale restaurant in Columbia, SC. One of her dessert specialties is cheesecake, made with luscious ingredients planned to tease the palate, and plated with a flair for artistic design to delight the eye. Cati's signature approach to food has always been that you eat first with your eyes. With that in mind, she creates dishes that are worthy of a place on the walls of renowned art museums.



When we lived as a family in New Jersey and David was working in Manhattan, we often spent our weekends visiting the City's museums. The Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Museum of Modern Art were two of our favorites. It was there that Cati first discovered the intrigue of modern art, and especially the abstract vibrancy of Wassily Kandinsky, the world-famous Expressionist. She told me this morning that she loved seeing the original paintings in person, as the paint seemed shinier and more vivid than they do in the art books she enjoyed perusing. She liked how the paintings seemed to pop off the wall. And that is the spirit she has brought to her signature dessert presentation.

Here in Charleston, Cati studied studio art and art history in college, with the thought of a career in that direction. While she was taking classes, she worked part-time in various restaurants in Charleston, and it was there that she discovered her passion for cooking and decided to redirect her career path. But the artist in her was always on the back burner, so to speak, so that years later, as she advanced in her career and became Kitchen Manager then Executive Chef, she was finally able to freely unveil her artistic flare in her cooking and baking. And so, we have—drum roll please—Cati’s Kandinsky Cheesecakes—*A delicious and beautiful finale to your dining experience.*



I have been so preoccupied with recollections of summer adventures that I missed National French Fry Day, which was yesterday. I don’t check the National Day list every day, but when I see something of interest about the day mentioned elsewhere, well I look back at the list for fuller details. The origin of the product known as “French fried potatoes” is either from France or Belgium, but since the French language is also spoken in Belgium, the exact origin is a bit murky. Either way, they are a potato that is cut into elongated pieces and fried in hot fat or oil or various combinations. Likewise, the cut shapes vary as slices, crinkles, waffles, or swirls. But the basic ingredient to this classic dish remains the same—cut potatoes. And once again, here is a food that I love, and which is available in its many iterations at grocery stores, restaurants, and fast-food establishments pretty much everywhere.



The first food that I learned how to cook on my own was French fries. My father was a great fan and passed his skill and enjoyment on to me. My mother never made them, so they were not part of her daily meal menus. Rather, it was a snack that we enjoyed on leisurely weekend nights. In fact, it is the only food that I remember being permitted to prepare on my own. French fries were a special treat on summer evenings when we—the neighborhood kids and I—played hard all day and stayed up late. Our house had a screened-in front porch—the only one on the block—and where we were always welcome to end our day, playing cards and board games on a round metal table-and-chair set that was intended for outdoor use. Homemade French fries were the perfect accompaniment to our relaxed evening play.

I remember climbing in the window from the porch to my parents’ bedroom—a shortcut we liked to use—and gathering the ingredients for our snack. Sometimes a friend or two would assist me, or perhaps my father if he was nearby. First, we peeled and cut the potatoes into long strips, while the oil—probably Crisco solid shortening—heated in a cast iron skillet, then we fried the potatoes to a golden brown. Finally, we sprinkled them generously with salt, and served Heinz ketchup on the side, still my favorite dipping sauce. My mom even had some of those tacky red plastic baskets for us to carry our bounty back out to the porch. Just one of the many pleasures of our lazy summer evenings.



There was an article in the online local paper about the police receiving a complaint that kids were playing basketball at a hoop *in the street!* The neighbor who called did not like the noise and had concerns about safety as well, although it was a quiet neighborhood street with little vehicular traffic. The police assured the complainant that the kids were fine, and that it was far healthier for them to be

playing actively outdoors, than cooped up inside in front of a TV or video game. The officers then took a few moments to join the kids in their basketball game, much to the delight of the youngsters.



In a similar incident later that week, police responded to a complaint about a giant *slip 'n slide* set up along a down-sloping neighborhood street. Traffic was light and not obstructed, no safety issues, so the officers joined in and took a ride down the water-soaked slope, again to the delight of the local kids.



Robinson Avenue, where I grew up, was one-block long, ending in a narrow dirt road. There were about 14 houses, with perhaps 15-20 kids of all ages from toddler to teen. During the day, we were permitted to play in the surrounding woods within the boundaries set up by our parents, but we often spent much of those lazy summer days—as well as evenings after dinner when it was still light out— playing on the street. Here we had a wide range of games and activities that kept us active and occupied. Most of us had bicycles and roller skates, which we shared with those who did not, and created obstacle courses and races for competitive fun. We jumped rope to rhymes and chants using my mother’s basement clothes lines. We chalked hop scotch grids on the pavement, played kickball, and engaged in Red Rover or Mother May I. On a few occasions, my mother would surprise us by joining in a game of tag and chasing us all up and down the street amid squeals of glee from kids and parents alike. Hide & Seek was another favorite street game, with a power pole as home base, and front yards as hiding places. We put in a long, hard day’s effort of outdoor play on the street of our neighborhood, which ended when the street lights came on—the universal signal that another summer’s day had ended.



Time out for National Junk Food Day! Now, I am not a rabid junk food consumer, but I do have my preferences for treats that are high in calories but of little nutritional value. When I was a kid, we did not even know what *junk food* meant, as the term did not come into the vernacular until the early 1970s. We called those foods *snacks*, and they had a legitimate place in our food consumption, but only at special times or occasions. My mother’s generation served snacks on a Saturday night when they invited friends over for a drink, accompanied by potato chips, Cheetos, and pretzels, which comprised the more limited offerings of that era. Likewise, snacks were included in the menu for summer picnics, especially those celebrating a national holiday.



Snacks for kids were available in vending machines at the Strand movie theater in Great Kills, for 5-10¢ each. My favorite was the Potato Stix, which were packaged in a small cellophane bag. I remember one time the machine malfunctioned so that when I deposited my coin, the entire slot of Potato Stix bags emptied into the collection tray at the bottom. I was so astonished, but swiftly checked to see that the theater Matron wasn't looking so I could scoop up all of them into my bulging pockets. I felt a small, very small, twinge of remorse, but that quickly passed as I surreptitiously gorged on my treasure trove of snacks in the darkened cover of the movie theater.



Candy, also now considered a junk food, was a somewhat common treat for us when we were kids. There was a small convenience store—which we called the Little Store—across the street from our school, P. S. 8, where we were permitted to visit during our lunch hour at school. The store sported a glass case filled with penny candies on its many shelves. We would all crowd the case, eagerly awaiting a turn to give our order. The items chosen were then placed in a small brown paper bag for leisurely consumption on our way back to the playground. Just one penny enabled us to indulge our sweet tooth, and several pennies was a fortune in sugared treats. I did not have one particular favorite, as there was so much to choose from, but I do remember one called candy buttons which were small dots of hardened colored sugar on a strip of white paper. You could nibble them off one at a time, thus prolonging its tasty pleasure. Many of those classic candies from the 1950s are available now in malls and vacation tourist stops as retro candy in fancy shops devoted entirely to sweet treats, but at a much more expensive cost than a penny a piece. But the nostalgia of their unique variety of choices makes them still a junk food favorite.



My friend Ellen Petersen—THS '60—sent me a photo of her lovely granddaughters Sarah and Emily at Long Beach Island off the Jersey shore. They are dressed in stylish swimwear and have a colorful beach canopy for comfortably accommodating their sand chairs and cooler. The domed tent is made of nylon fabric which is water resistant and blocks UV rays. The frame is made from slim, hollow fiberglass rods that are easily collapsed to transport and store. The folding chairs are aluminum tubes with a synthetic webbing for the seat and chairback. The cooler is insulated nylon. This collection of beach equipment is designed to be light-weight and portable, for easy use, cleaning, and comfort. A day at the beach is a breeze to enjoy, with focus on breezy enjoyment.



I was amazed at this evolution of beach gear over the generations since we were kids on a summer outing to the beaches near where we lived on Staten Island. We frequented South Beach, Crescent

Beach, and Great Kills Beach, all along the South Shore facing east over Lower New York Bay and the Atlantic Ocean beyond.



My mother had all sorts of paraphernalia for ensuring oceanside comfort, shade, and refreshments. There was a multi-colored striped umbrella made of heavy cotton canvas with a solid wood pole to stick into the sand, then tilted at an angle to block the direction of the sun. Beneath the umbrella she would spread my father's old Navy blanket, which was thick wool, made coarse and scratchy from frequent washings. Next to this she placed her sand chair, also made from canvas and wood, with a canopy top and adjustable back. Although it could be folded, it had so many slats that it was like a complicated puzzle to open or close. Sandwiches and fruit were carried in a woven willow picnic basket with a wooden lid, and containers of Kool-Aid or lemonade were transported in a large insulated metal Thermos cooler. All of these items were heavy, cumbersome, and awkward to carry. But on beach days, my mother dutifully collected all the apparatus, stowed it in the trunk of the car, and then lugged it from the parking lot to set up at the water's edge—which usually took several trips. I don't know how she managed that seemingly Herculean task, but like mothers from generations ago, she was strong, determined, and undeterred by pesky burdens. After all, the ultimate goal, both then and now, was to enjoy a blissful day at the beach with family and friends.



On Fridays, I do my bookkeeping and bill paying. This is a fairly easy chore, as I do all banking these days online. We do, however, still keep some cash stashed in the closet safe for emergencies or easy access. As well, I have a designated sugar bowl for collecting spare change, and when it becomes a sizeable amount I give it to Cameron to transfer into paper currency. There is a machine at the grocery store where you can dump in all your change to be automatically sorted and counted, then converted into paper bills at the Courtesy Counter. We do occasionally go to the real bank building, but not very often, since the majority of our banking transactions are conducted online.



The first bank I remember was when I was about three-years-old. It was located on Canal Street in Stapleton on Staten Island and had entrances on two sides of its main lobby. Banks back then were grand structures, with towering ceilings and opulent décor and furnishings. Their appearance seemed to project their importance in the economic foundation of society—it was the place to safely store one's wealth, whether small or extensive. My first savings account was one of the Dime Saver books that were developed to encourage young children to start a savings plan, a dime at a time. The day I recall was summertime, as I was wearing a sundress and sandals. My father had taken me to this bank to

deposit my treasured savings of collected dimes. I wasn't sure how I felt about relinquishing my cash for a notation in a little book, when in reality I would have liked to have taken my bounty to the 5¢ & 10¢ store to buy a toy or a bit of candy.



Years later in 1954 when I was in grammar school in 5<sup>th</sup> or 6<sup>th</sup> grade, the United States Savings Stamps program was initiated through schools to encourage savings and thrift among school children. We were given the opportunity to buy US Post Office Savings Stamps at school and save them in a designated stamp album. When the album contained \$18.75 in savings stamps, it could be exchanged for a US Savings Bond with a face value of \$25.00. Well, my album amount never reached that total, and wound up forgotten in a drawer for the years I was in high school. When I did rediscover it, I cashed in the stamps at the post office, and did in fact go shopping, this time for a pair of white Bermuda shorts—that newly popular summer fashion item in the late 1950s—at a ladies' clothing store in Tottenville. I was thrilled beyond description at my windfall money—far more satisfying than turning over my precious little dimes to the teller in that stately bank from long ago.



I subscribe to the online Dictionary.com “Word of the Day.” I like words and enjoy learning new ones as well as reaffirming ones already in my working and archival vocabulary. Today's word is “variegated” and I instantly recognized this word from when I was a young kid, perhaps seven-or-eight-years-old. To me back then, it meant varied in appearance, with spans of diverse colors.



The context of my awareness of variegated was the small skein of yarn I used to buy with my accumulated allowance, in a color variation known as Multi Color. The brand was Red Heart and was available in Great Kills at Geller's 5¢ & 10¢ Store in variegated red, yellow, blue, and green for about 10¢ for a small skein. It was by far my top choice for yarn-color combination, because it contained all four of my favorite Crayola crayon colors.

I used this classic yarn for a homemade yarn project woven on what was known as a spool knitter. It was based on an empty wooden spool of thread, the larger size that usually contained a basic thread color like black or white. I couldn't wait for my mother or my aunt to use one up, so it could be passed on to me. Four finishing nails were then hammered into the top of the spool to create a square. And that's it—spool knitter ready to go. The end of the yarn was then fed through the center hole of the spool, allowing a few inches to dangle out the bottom. The top end of the yarn was looped around each nail, then as the second strand of yarn covered the first, you used a longer headless nail—or in my case, a small crochet hook—to pull it over the first loop. Round and round you'd go, pulling the yarn tail at

the bottom to feed the chained loops down through the center, where it created a knitted tube of variegated yarn. The tube extended for as long as the knitter had the patience to continue. When the determined end had been reached, the loops were cast off and tied together to secure them. The finished product was used to make bracelets, coiled into mats, or worn as a headband. It was a simple, stress-free, engaging pastime. It was easily stored and transported—on a car ride, or to a friend’s house. All the girls on the block had a spool knitter, which kept us busy for hours—usually sprawled on someone’s back porch or under a tree—on a lazy summer’s day.



We have several mockingbirds that live around our property, mostly in the front-yard shrubs, as well as in the back. They are active and vocal permanent residents. They are constantly guarding their territories, and make their presence known when they zoom into the feeding area in the backyard, heading for the suet and the peanuts, and the bird bath for a drink or a bath. They now are raising their young, so we see the families frequently throughout the day. Their song is easily recognizable, even when they are attempting to “mock” another bird’s call. This morning we heard one chirping like a wren, but with the obvious dialect of a mockingbird, as he segued into his native jabber.



We found a mockingbird nest in our backyard with a single egg in it, apparently having been blown loose during a recent thunderstorm from one of the nearby trees that the mockingbirds like for building their nests. It is woven with twigs, bits of twine, and what appears to be shreds of blue plastic. We saved the nest and keep it on a shelf in our curio cabinet, along with other objects from nature. It is a visual reminder of the artistic abilities of our feathered residents.

My first encounter with the nocturnal presence of a mockingbird was during our first trip to Charleston, probably 45 years ago. David’s parents’ house was on the edge of a not-as-yet developed site with many oak trees dripping with Spanish moss. It was springtime, so the mockingbirds were busy setting up their territories for subsequent nesting. They sang their hearts out well into the night, and I remember lying in our bed in the dark wondering if they ever took a break. When we returned to Santa Barbara, we came upon a print by the artist Richard Sloan of a pair of mockingbirds in a tree similar to the ones we saw in Charleston, bordered with the brilliant pink azaleas ubiquitous in the south. We bought the print as a memory of that enjoyable encounter with the mockingbirds in Charleston.

The first birds I see when I open my bedroom blinds in the morning are our front-yard mockingbirds. They flutter through the tall shrub that abuts the driveway, perch on the picket fence to view their environs, and stop for a bit on the mail-box post before heading back to their nest. Later in the morning when I sit at the table for breakfast, I see them swooping through the side yard on their way to and from the backyard feeders and birdbath. And then there is their signature song—always present, always pleasant.

When I was a kid growing up on Robinson Avenue, I do not recall any mockingbirds visiting my mother's backyard birdbath, but I do remember a song from 1951, from a recording by Burl Ives with a catchy tune we kids sang in unison. It pops into my head every now and then as I enjoy our own mockingbirds, especially the refrain:

Tra la la, tweedle dee dee dee  
It gives me a thrill  
To wake up in the morning  
To the mockingbird's trill

[http://www.aldielyrics.com/lyrics/burl\\_ives/mockingbird\\_hill.html](http://www.aldielyrics.com/lyrics/burl_ives/mockingbird_hill.html) Scroll down to click on the picture of the album cover in the bottom right corner.



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