



LOWCOUNTRY MUSINGS

May 2018

A JOURNAL THROUGH TIME

By Florence Bothwell Cosby

May



*Be like the flower,
Turn your face to the sun.*
~ Kahlil Gibran ~



When I was a kid growing up on Staten Island, school girls around New York City gathered in community parks to celebrate Maypole Festival Day on May 1st. The tradition of maypole dancing dates back at least to medieval times, perhaps even earlier, and has been celebrated over the centuries in many parts of the world for various reasons, ranging from the arrival of spring and hopes of a fruitful growing season to the celebration of the virtue of young maidens. Central Park, as well as European immigrant neighborhoods in Manhattan, hosted maypole dancing as far back as 1886. A tall pole representing a tree was topped with flowers and strung with colorful ribbons, one for each girl (or boy) who formed a ring around the pole. An elaborate dance was performed, skipping in two opposing circles while winding the ribbons over and under each dancer, around the pole until an intricate pattern of weaving formed down the pole. The process was then reversed to unwind the ribbon, all of this to lively background music.



1905



1912



Clove Lakes Park

At P.S. 8, girls in grades 6 – 8 practiced the maypole dancing for weeks in advance of the festival. The pole was probably a volleyball pole, and the ribbons were strips of sheets that were used each year to train and rehearse the skipping and weaving. It was a relatively simple task, passing your strip under and over the girl coming in the opposite direction, but we suffered many mishaps, as well as many stern reprimands from our teachers who conducted the practice and strove for perfection. When at last May 1st arrived, busloads of girls from all the schools around the Island descended upon Clove Lakes Park where a vast area of flat grass had been set up with dozens of maypole sites. The music was broadcast over loud speakers while hundreds of dancers wound their respective maypoles.



1956

Most girls were dressed all in white, a throw-back to the significance of virtue, although some were dressed in pastel spring colors. When I was in 8th grade, my mother's friend Alice gave me a length of fine white linen fabric to fashion a skirt for the Maypole Festival Day. There were four yards of the lovely cloth, so I was able to choose a pattern with three tiers of ruffles forming the skirt. Our school math/sewing teacher helped me to use a gathering attachment to create the layers of ruffling. Another friend Deborah gave me several yards of embroidered braiding with a flower design on a red background. I stitched this to the horizontal seams that divided each tier. With this I wore a white blouse, and added a matching bow tied from a piece of the braiding. To me it was a grand outfit to wear for this festive occasion, especially with the twirlability of its bouffant skirt.

Although the Maypole Festival Day was no longer widely practiced by the time I left high school, years later in Santa Barbara I organized a day of dancing at a small neighborhood school where I was teaching. Each grade level chose a dance to present, with a finale featuring the Maypole Dance performed by the 6th grade boys and girls. It marked a special day when family and friends all gathered on the school playground in lovely California sunshine and celebrated the rites of spring with traditional music, dancing, and our best dress-up outfits.



My grandson Cameron stopped by last night to pick up his birthday pie. He had been so busy working on his actual birthday, then celebrating with his girlfriend Brie the following day, that he wasn't ready or able to claim his pie until last night. He is 20-years-old now, in college locally and working for a swimming pool maintenance company for the summer—happy and healthy in his life as a young adult.



We had never made a strawberry pie, so we were a bit apprehensive about it being perfect for the occasion. The first crust shrank when it was baked, so we made another one, which *was* perfect. We filled the baked crust with halved fresh berries in a double layer. The strawberries were bright red, luscious, and juicy. Then we mashed up more berries and cooked them into a sauce with sugar and cornstarch until thickened. This saucy glaze was then carefully poured over, around, and under the berries in the pie, then smoothed on top. We tasted the sauce that was left in the bowl and it was deliciously sweet and flavorful. Next the pie chilled in the refrigerator until Cam was ready for it. He and Brie stopped by later in the evening to take the birthday pie home with them. David packed it in a box for traveling, along with a can of Reddi-wip—Cam’s favorite whipped cream for serving. When all was said and done, we can confidently declare that the birthday strawberry pie was indeed absolute perfection.



For Cinco de Mayo, we usually “celebrate” by preparing a special Mexican-themed meal for dinner. We have Mexican food on a regular basis, but we like to acknowledge this particular day through its culinary connections.



We have never cooked chicken fajitas at home but made our first attempt tonight. We have, however, had beef fajitas in restaurants. We like how the hot pan is brought sizzling to the table with the accompanying toppings in bowls and plates around the main dish. The aroma is tantalizing and invites the diners to dig in. David prepared the chicken strips several hours in advance, so they could marinate in the mixture of spices and seasonings that make it a signature Mexican dish. Then later he fried the chicken with the red and green bell peppers, onions, and fresh cilantro. The fajitas are traditionally served on grilled flour tortillas, with bowls of grated cheese, salsa, and sour cream, as well as a side of refried beans. My mouth waters at the prospect of the delicious aromas that preface our meal, and the pleasure—*mucho gusto*—of consuming the bounty of this cooking endeavor. With a cold glass of Modelo Negra, our meal will be *mucho delicioso*!



When we lived in Santa Barbara, I worked at a predominantly Spanish-speaking school in a Mexican-heritage community. I learned that Cinco de Mayo was celebrated more so in the United States than in

Mexico. I also learned that Ruby Hernandez had the gift of making the best margaritas imaginable. She lived across the street from our small neighborhood school and, as was typical in this community, she warmly invited faculty and staff into her home to join her family for celebratory occasions. My most vivid memory of Cinco de Mayo was of Ruby stationed in her spacious kitchen, with numerous borrowed blenders humming away on the counter, the sink full of discarded lime halves squeezed of their juices, and her enormous smile lighting the room with her generosity of spirit. ¡Viva la Fiesta!



We regularly have Mexican food for dinner, especially tacos. It is a favorite family meal, with Cameron and Cati preferring the soft flour tortilla taco, and David and I preferring the crunchy corn ones.



Mexican food was not always as ubiquitous a family meal as it is today. When David and I first met over 50 years ago, our friends in Louisville had never heard of them. I had been introduced to the ethnic staple by friends from California, and David had enjoyed them with friends of his in Massachusetts. Somehow the subject of tacos came up in conversation the night David and I met, and we encouraged our mutual friend Judy to collect the ingredients for dinner the next night. Easier said than done, as taco ingredients were not readily available in Kentucky. Corn tortillas were sold only in a can—no such thing as fresh. But Judy did her best, seasoning the beef filling with some chili powder, cubing chunks of Velveeta cheese, and offering Tabasco as the spicy sauce. A bit of a stretch towards authentic Mexican fare, but still delicious to us, and memorable as our first dinner together.

Soon after, David and I were married and moved to California, where the offerings of Mexican cuisine were widely sold for at-home cooking, in specialty markets as well as in local grocery stores. These days the product availability has exploded into a mainstay of grocery-chain stock. We have over time introduced our family and friends to the culinary pleasure of taco consumption, with the basic ingredients on hand in our fridge and pantry. Tacos became one of Cameron's favorite meals as a little guy, and he was happy to share his fondness for them with his classmates at school. When he was in first grade, a class project was to compile a cookbook of students' favorite recipes, written and illustrated by the students. Cameron's recipe for "Tagos" still puts a smile on our faces, especially the step in the directions when he says to "cook the meat for a full minute." Cati has that original recipe, framed and hung on the wall of her at-home kitchen—a special treasure for a professional chef from her food-loving son. ¡Bueno provecho!



I am not much of a TV show watcher, but I do love movies. Our local library has an extensive collection of DVDs available, plus options for retrieving additional titles from all the libraries in the *SC Lends* system. Their online site has a catalog of the state-wide inventory, which enables library members to place a hold on a title and have it delivered and ready for pick-up at their local facility. We have borrowed several hundred of their DVDs, all the way from *A Tale of Two Cities* (1936) to *The Shape of Water* (2018). Recently, I was perusing their selection of Oscar-winning musicals and came across *GiGi* (1958) starring Leslie Caron and Maurice Chevalier. But it was the supporting actress who drew my

attention and triggered a long-lost memory from the past—Hermione Gingold. I am not sure how all these random ramblings connected, but my mind jumped from one to the other, like the game hopscotch, and I wound up focusing on what I remembered about Virginia Graham.



Virginia Graham was a radio personality from the days before television, and then a TV hostess as that medium grew in popularity and presence in American homes. She had a talk show called *Girl Talk* in the 1960s. It was broadcast live, as most programs were at that time, rather than taped or pre-recorded. The theater was off-Broadway on W. 58th Street and attracted a live audience.

Well, one particular day, probably around 1963 or so, my friend Ellen Johansen (THS '60) and I were on a day trip into the City, and were aimlessly strolling around midtown, enjoying the energy and sights. There were a number of people standing along the sidewalk handing out flyers advertising shops or merchandise or attractions to invite the passers-by to buy or visit. They were extended to walkers at about hand level, making it easier for the receiver to grasp it and move on, rather than having it waved in your face. So, Ellen and I each dutifully took a flyer, but instead of throwing it away, we glanced at it and discovered it was a complimentary ticket to sit in the audience of a TV show that was about to begin and was conveniently located around the corner. At this point our feet were hurting us, having worn pumps instead of more comfortable flats. Needless to say, we decided to accept the invitation and joined the audience of *Girl Talk*.

The theater was small, and we chose a balcony seat which still had a good view of the stage. From there we got to experience the excitement of program production, the stage, the curtain, the lights. There were two comfortable chairs and a table set up on stage, for Virginia and her guest to sit and, well, talk. There were smiles and chat in a comfortable ambience, as well as asides to the audience during commercial breaks. The only guest I remember all these decades later was Hermione Gingold, “an English actress known for her sharp-tongued, eccentric persona” and a “signature drawling, deep voice.” I thought she was delightful, effervescent, and totally engaging. I recall that she was a bit late for the broadcast and Martha was stalling the program with random filler until her guest arrived, which eventually Hermione did with theatrical flair—breathless and bubbling as she swooped onto center stage. She wore black pants and turtle-neck sweater, and a sumptuous leopard fur coat, which she grandly flung off and draped across the back of her chair.

At that point, regardless of Hermione’s untimely arrival, they had to go to a commercial break. During the commercial, Hermione began to relate the unexpected adventure that had caused her lateness, but Martha interrupted and asked her to wait until they were back on the air so that the home audience would not miss the spontaneity of Hermione’s dramatic tale. It was fun, a memorable experience, which I often think of as I watch TV talk shows that are pre-recorded, dubbed, edited, and whatever else is done to achieve smooth perfection. But I must confess that I prefer the immediacy of the simple live broadcast that Ellen and I were part of that day in the Manhattan of our youth.

Somehow these lyrics seem more poignant to me now at age 75 than they did when I first saw this film 60 years ago.



I Remember It Well ~ Hermione Gingold and Maurice Chevalier

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GQxM5rJ-UiY>



Cati recently sent me a photo of a pot of petunias she had placed outside her apartment door, a colorful touch to greet her as she comes and goes. She also added a new doormat decorated with pineapples—a sign of hospitality in the south. It is a perfect addition to Cati's cheery door-side décor.



Cati places her seasonal plants on top of a stool that she took with her when she moved out of our James Island house more than 15 years ago. She kept it indoors in some of her homes, displaying various decorative pieces as part of her changing décor. But in this apartment the stool holds pride of place outside her door, in a safe location far from pilfering eyes. The stool is a particular treasure because it had once belonged to my mother, Cati's Grandma, and remains as one of the few keepsakes that has survived the many years of moving from house to house and one generation to another.

The stool goes back in time to when my mother was a child and her father owned a barber shop on Bay Street on Staten Island. The building was actually a duplex, and on the other half was a confectionery where my mother's family sold ice cream and candy. The stool was originally used as an ice cream stool that sat at the counter of that shop from long ago. I do not know its original color, perhaps the bare metal it is made of, because my mother spray painted it over the years—bronze, black, or whatever suited her fancy at the time. She would also on occasion cut a circle of Contact Paper to affix to the top of the once-wooden seat. Although I remember the stool in the houses where I grew up, my most recent and vivid recollection of it is on the terrace of my mother's retirement apartment in Upper Montclair where it always showcased a potted plant—usually one my mother had cultivated herself. And now the stool stands sentry at Cati's lovely apartment, reaching back over probably a hundred years to connect great-grandfather Paul's sweet shop to Cati's front door.



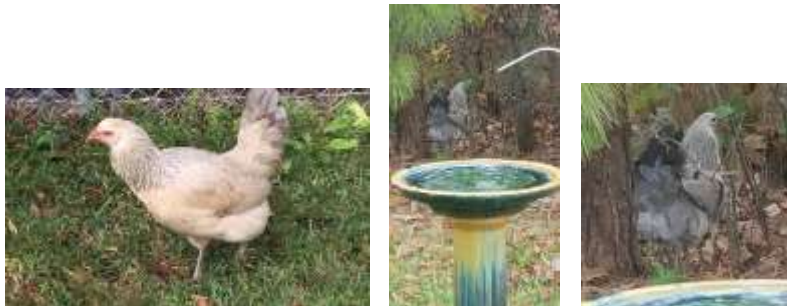
When we first moved into this house in November 2006, we began a record of all the birds that came to our feeders or were visible from our backyard. The two criteria for inclusion on our list were that the bird species had been seen by one of us in the family and from any vantage point within our property.

We now have 103 additions to the Our House Bird List, with many species as regular residents, others as annually-returning migrants, and still others as rarely sighted—perhaps briefly stopping by for some water and food while on their way to somewhere else along their migratory path.

During the first year of our list, we recorded our greatest number of bird species—61—as we were new at the activity. I remember one occasion when Cameron was around ten-or-eleven-years-old. He and David had been walking through the woods diagonally behind our house when they suddenly began running at top speed to return home. I heard their thumping footsteps approaching and wondered what had spooked them from their peaceful stroll. Well, it seems they had spotted a Swallow-tailed Kite flying overhead and wanted to legitimately record it on our list. They ran as quickly as possible onto our property before the bird flew out of site, just in time to earn its entry as #73 on the list.



When we first moved here, there were a huge grassy field and a small pond nearby our back property, next to an expansive pine forest. We often spotted Wild Turkeys walking by at a leisurely pace, undaunted by the nearness of human activity. As well, flocks of Canada Geese congregated there—some staying the winter and others resting before moving on to other locations. And every spring we are blessed with the return of the brilliantly-colored Painted Buntings who nest in the trees that border our yard, raising their young before moving on at the end of the summer. (Two arrived last week for their annual visit.)



#100. Domestic Chicken

Over the years we have enjoyed adding new species to our list, and excitedly anticipated the arrival of species #100. We speculated what it would be, what we hoped it would be—perhaps something exotic, or rare, or never before seen by either of us anywhere. So, imagine our surprise when we woke up one morning to discover that that celebratory bird was a common domestic chicken! Yes, it was quite handsome, and yes, it was the 100th bird species to appear in our yard, but we were hoping for something, well, more noteworthy. We debated not counting her as she was not a wild bird, but we willingly relented when we discovered that she had every intention of remaining with us and enjoying the bounty of our bird-feeding area alongside the other feathered residents and visitors. Henny Penny, as we called her, stayed with us for nearly three months. We have no idea where she came from, or how she met her demise, but we enjoyed her quirky rituals of behavior and daily presence in our yard.

When we were kids growing up on Staten Island, Decoration Day was celebrated on May 30. Dating back to the Civil War, it was a solemn day for remembering those who died while serving in the armed forces, and for placing wreaths and flags on their graves. In 1967 the holiday became officially known as Memorial Day and was moved to the fourth Monday in May as part of the Uniform Holiday Act in 1968.



We had the day off from school in order to march in our small home-town parade, and to travel to the other side of the Island to view a larger, more elaborate one on Victory Blvd. The parades included marching bands, color guards, military persons, and floats to honor the war dead. My most vivid memory is of a flat-bed truck that held a field-of-battle tableau with a soldier lying face down on a sandy ground, his helmet and weapon to his side, and an American flag waving nearby. It was a moving tribute to those who fought and died for their country, and at the end of the parades, important persons spoke, and wreaths were placed by plaques and monuments honoring them. Even as a young child it was a serious and moving occasion.

Our house on Robinson Avenue had a flag pole in the front yard, on which, for Decoration Day, my father would first raise the flag to full staff—as is the appropriate protocol— then lower it to half-staff in reverence to the dead for which the day was originally intended, until noon when the flag was once again raised to the top of the pole, as per the military tradition. My father had survived his service to the country as a Navy Seabee, but he had lost a number of pals and fellow sailors during World War II, whom he never forgot on this solemn day of remembrance.



For some, Memorial Day marks the unofficial beginning of summer, but in New York City we still had another month of school, so the day was celebrated at a lower level of festivity than on other summer holidays. However, my mother, ever the dedicated event planner, arranged an annual picnic to cap off the day's activities. We gathered in our backyard for a cookout, which over the years gradually grew from our family to include the neighborhood families as well, and eventually moved to a larger location in the grove next to the Links' house next door. But the picnic ended at nightfall, because we kids had to return to school the next day, if the 30th fell on a weekday. The much-anticipated lazy days of summer were still yet to come.

*Now May has ended,
With baby birds flocking
To gather at the birdbath.

Verdant trees flourish,
The lush blooms unfolding
With gentle rain and sunshine.

Daylight grows longer,
The darkness receding,
Awakening the promise
That summer draws nigh.*

~ FMC 05/2018

fmcosby43@gmail.com

☞ Please check back next month for the **June** entry to this *Journal through Time*.