

A Holiday Story

Essay by Carol Bodensteiner

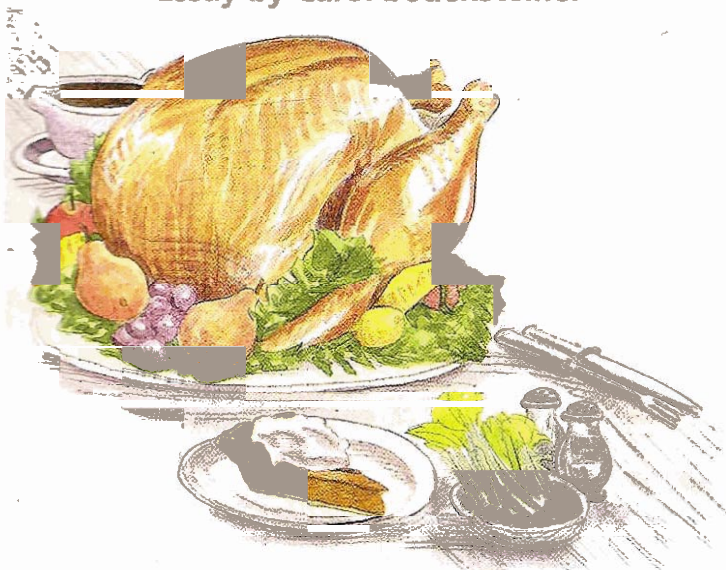


ILLUSTRATION BY GENE HAMILTON

I have always believed that Thanksgiving dinner is simultaneously the easiest and most difficult meal to make. Easiest because there is no wondering what will be on the menu.

At least at our house, the meal is always exactly the same, from homemade pumpkin and mincemeat pies to cranberry sauce cooked up and cooled in an aluminum mold used only for that purpose to the dinner rolls my aunt bakes on Thanksgiving morning. A turkey with sage dressing is the centerpiece.

At the same time, the meal is difficult because of the high level of expectation attached to all holiday family gatherings.

For me, sage dressing is the food I desire most. I can pass on potatoes and gravy, forgo cranberries, even skip the turkey. Fill my plate with the sage dressing that I wait all year to taste.

So it was with more than casual interest that I listened to the phone conversation my mom was having with her granddaughter in Pennsylvania about Thanksgiving dressing.

"Say, Clorinda," Mom said. "Your mom says you do a great job making dressing. If you want to make it when you're here for Thanksgiving, I'll get everything around so it's ready when you are."

Mom cradled the telephone between her shoulder and ear as she reached for a pencil and paper.

"Okay, I'm ready," she said, pencil poised to write. I knew she anticipated a list beginning with dried bread and progressing through sage seasoning.

Watching from across the table, I could see the list as Mom wrote down the ingredients Clorinda detailed: Stove . . . Top . . . Stuffing. Mom hesitated as she took in the words and glanced up at me. I couldn't stifle a laugh.

For nearly 60 years, my mother had put three square meals a day on the table, all made from scratch, mostly using produce grown in her own garden. The very idea of making a Thanksgiving dish so basic and so traditional as dressing out of a box nearly made her go into shock. But she's quick on her feet, my mother.

"How many boxes do you think we need?" she asked Clorinda.

Though Mom takes justifiable pride in the meals she prepares, she has her priorities in order. If her granddaughter wants to help make the meal, and that help comes out of a box, she won't bat an eye. But don't underestimate what a mental shift that took.

From the time my sisters and I were 10 years old, Mom taught us not only to grow the food we'd eat but also to cook it. She guided us through the basics of growing and canning peas and beans, tomatoes and corn. From there we explored the complexities of meal planning and cooking.

Mom made cooking easy, measuring out ingredients before we knew what we needed, cleaning up every drip and spill as we made it. We knew no failures in her kitchen.

When 15-year-old Clorinda arrived in Iowa that November, Mom swept her granddaughter off into the kitchen as her newest apprentice. Some lessons were a snap. To make eggs over easy without flipping them, for instance, Mom shared the trick of putting a lid on the frying pan, drizzling a few drops of water at the edge, and letting steam cook the egg top. Some lessons were more challenging. Gravy without lumps took two tries.

These cooking experiences continued throughout the week up until Thanksgiving Day.

By 5 a.m. the kitchen was a hive of activity directed by Mom and guaranteed to deliver the traditional Thanksgiving meal we all knew and loved. As noon approached, I watched in amusement as Clorinda opened the Stove Top® stuffing mix and under Mom's watchful eye completed a cooking task in five minutes that done in the traditional way would have taken a good two hours.

When the turkey came out of the oven at precisely 11:30 a.m. and a parade of heaping dishes made it to the dining room table at exactly noon, among them was a large bowl of Stove Top® Stuffing. We all ate it. And it was good. Grandma agreed.

Would stuffing from a box ever replace homemade sage dressing and become the new tradition at our holiday table? Probably not. But Mom keeps Stove Top stuffing mix on her pantry shelf, ready for the day her granddaughter comes for another holiday visit. ♣

— Carol Bodensteiner is a writer from Des Moines