

Thanksgiving in Keisterville
Bill Hoover
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Thanksgiving is my favorite holiday. It has been ever since Christmas presents lost primacy in my sphere of holidays. There's much less pressure on me, fewer expectations to deal with. But, the real reason is fond memories of Thanksgivings in Keisterville (Keister). I'm of course referring to grandmother (Nana) Leichliter's home. Grandfather (Braden) Leichliter was gone to the Lord by the time I was old enough to remember him as a living person. Stories I've heard about him are who he is to me.

The Vails and Kitty were always there for Thanksgiving since they lived in Keister. They made my weekly trips with mother to Keister bearable. When they moved away it was my respect and admiration for grandmother and her plight as a widow that lowered my resistance to mother's insistence that I accompany her. The arrival of other aunts, uncles and cousins made Thanksgiving special. I can't over emphasize the importance of playing with my cousins. Large families were a blessing in this regard. Nick, Nana, Barbara, Milton and Robert Bush usually came in from their home across the DC line in Maryland. Nick was a joy to be around, always smiling and talkative with great stories to tell. Van, Helen and "Jim" (Van) also came on a regular basis, at least as often as for Easter. It was an extra special holiday when Uncle Brad made the long drive in his Oldsmobile from Laramie, Wyoming. Uncle Pete's family came on a regular basis, mostly for Easter, even though he worried about being a bother. I have no idea where everyone slept, nor how they survived the horribly uncomfortable beds at grandmother's house.

The weather was usually warm enough to play outside in the huge yard, checkout the chickens, find treasures in the workshop building, swing on the porch, or on the tree swing. The store up the hill was usually open the day before and after Thanksgiving. Grape Nehi, RC Cola and popsicles were my shopping gold standard. Hide and seek was the game de jour, but we had to use caution if we wanted to hide in the house. The adults were working on the meal, catching up on each other's lives, and hoping that none of us were getting into too much trouble. The bathroom was on the second floor. It was usually off limits for hiding for obvious reasons. A couple of dozen bladders in the house created a serious demand. It was also the place where our Aunts gathered to talk about the really important things in their lives. I'm not certain exactly what these were and it was obvious that little boys shouldn't ask about them. (Maybe Pat knows?)

The highlight of the holiday was of course the feast. If there was a prize for maximizing the number of people who could fit at a table of a given size, grandmother would have won. She had bread and rolls made ahead of time. The low wooden cabinet along the wall to the left as you entered the kitchen from the back door was perfect for working the dough. Nana was maybe 5'2" tall. Pots, pans, etc. were stored here. A large built-in cabinet was at the end of the counter, and another at the other end. The stinky sink was immediately to the left as you came in the back door. The sink stank only because of the high sulfur content of the well water. The door to the dining room was on the right. The stove and refrigerator were on this wall. A potbelly stove and doors to the basement and living room were on the far wall. The kitchen was the largest room in the house, thank goodness. By today's standards the kitchen was very uninteresting, very utilitarian. Remembering its appearance does, however, help to bring back memories. What's important is that it was the center of life at grandmother's home. What better place to gather to cook, have philosophical conversations, and be a whole family again. Grandmother never seemed stressed by all the work required, I guess because feeding a large family was her primarily role in life. At the time it was hard to imagine that she would ever actually become an old person, but time won out on her.

Grandmother procured a huge turkey from a local farmer. I think they came ready to cook, but she most certainly could have dealt with a live one. She regularly butchered one of her chickens for special Sunday dinners. Homemade bread was used for stuffing. Onions came from the garden. Butter may have

come from Aunt Hazel's cow. Green beans and potatoes also came from the garden. The mashed potatoes were rich and creamy, and the gravy was void of almost all grease. "Leichliter gravy" was and still is made by browning the drippings in the roaster until the grease is floating atop of the coagulated renderings. The grease was poured off, water added to dissolve the renderings, and flour added for thickening. And, no, the gravy wasn't lumpy. Grandfather (Braden) was the gravy chef, but he passed the skill down to Nana, Edith, and many others. (The recipe is in *Chicken and Biscuits*.)

At table Aaron, Van, or Nana gave the blessing and the serving dishes started to fly from one hand to another. Desert was usually pumpkin and several other kinds of pies that had been sitting temptingly on the low wooden counter. They were usually safe since grandmother made cookies for us young ones. Ginger cookies and toll house, were common. In later years store bought cookies were allowed to pass through Nana's portal. There were never any food fights. Everyone got along and there was plenty to go around.

The conversation really got serious for the women during clean-up and dishwashing. Even if automatic dishwashers had been available at the time Nana wouldn't have had one and if she did it would not have been used at Thanksgiving. Cooking requires a higher level of attention than dish washing. Thus, the "girls" could focus on their conversations while washing dishes.

The men apparently always ate too much, or they lacked sufficient energy to digest the meal. Thus, it was nap time. If available the beds up stairs would work for serious napping. The large horsehair couch, loveseat, and a few chairs otherwise had to do. The excuse that turkey makes one sleepy because it contains the important amino acid tryptophan was unknown then. But the men didn't need an excuse for napping. It was best for them to stay out of the kitchen anyway considering the likelihood that they were a topic of conversation there.

Later in the day the family was usually reunited by various card or board games. Card playing was apparently an integral part of life for Braden, Nana and their offspring. (What games?) We young ones could be found playing war on a bed upstairs. The girl cousins always had dolls in hand for company. We boys would show off our pocket knives and be jealous if one of us had a genuine Swiss army knife. I actually had a Bowie knife for most of my youth. No, I didn't take it to school. A pocket knife was adequate to meet my needs in school. There were still lots of goodies in the kitchen, creating an ebb-and-flow of foot traffic for pies, cookies, pieces of turkey, rolls, and an occasional question from adults about the capacity of our stomachs.

The Hoovers returned to California, Pennsylvania when mother thought the clan could survive the rest of the day and night without her.

One Thanksgiving my family followed Van's to their home in Cleveland. Getting there in our 1937 Ford was no big deal, but returning was another matter. The snow started on the trip to Cleveland. The next morning 10 to 14 inches of snow had fallen. "Jimmy" and I had a great time in the drifts. As I recall we weren't able to return home until Monday. Helen did a good job stretching limited supplies. Van may have made a trip to a store by foot. I don't remember if the trolley was running.

As close as I can come to recreating Thanksgiving at grandmothers is having as many family members as possible with us for the day, cooking a big meal that includes Leichliter gravy, playing board games, and telling the young folks about what Thanksgiving, a real Thanksgiving, was like in the "good old days" in Keisterville, Pennsylvania.