

Jim Casada Outdoors

Jim Casada Outdoors

July 2013 Newsletter

Jim Casada
1250 Yorkdale Drive
Rock Hill, SC 29730-7638
803-329-4354

Web site: www.jimcasadaoutdoors.com
E-mail: jc@jimcasadaoutdoors.com

[Click here to view this newsletter in a .pdf with a white background for easy printing.](#)

The Sweet of Summer—Watermelon Days

As was so often the case throughout his wonderful writings, Mark Twain got it exactly right when he described the wonder of watermelons. In Twain's words, spoken through the medium of his engaging character Pudd'n Head Wilson, "it is the chief of this world's luxuries, king by the grace of God over all the fruits of the earth. When one has tasted it, he knows what the angels eat. It was not a Southern watermelon that Eve took; we know it because she repented." What a way that man of letters had. To my way he is the finest of all American writers, thanks in no small measure to his knowledge of and connection with the good earth and life's simple things.



Certainly one of my fondest, most enduring memories of summer centers on the pure pleasure provided by watermelons. I grew up in a family which loved the fruit, and no one took more pure pleasure from a slice of a juicy, red-ripe watermelon than my Grandpa Joe. Well, maybe I need to modify that a bit, because old Aunt Mag Parrish, a wonderful colored lady who lived close to our home, was every bit his match in the passion for watermelon sweepstakes.

Maybe Daddy had Aunt Mag in mind when he used to say, and he did so in a manner which might be interpreted in today's world of political correctness run amok although he was simply voicing commonplace thought at the time, "I never knew a white man who enjoyed watermelon more than Papa."

In my mind's eye I can see Grandpa Joe, attired in his standard summertime outfit of bib overalls, a lightweight long-sleeved shirt (I don't know that I ever saw him in short sleeves, and the only changes come cold weather involved adding long johns and a heavier shirt), clod hoppers, and a straw farmer's hat, walking home from a trip to town. There would dark spots under his arms from sweat, and below his straw farmer's hat there would be a few drops falling from a weathered brow creased with the lines of age. Grandpa, already stooped, would be

bent over even more thanks to the heavy burden he carried. It would be a tow sack holding the biggest, best watermelon he could find. In those days they didn't show up on local markets until late June or early July, and he had to have one as soon as the prices reached an acceptable level. Cash money was pretty much a stranger to Grandpa, so the four bits or so a watermelon fetched at the time involved a serious outlay to him. Nonetheless, the sheer deliciousness of a watermelon could pull that scarce commodity, cash money, from his pockets in a rare fashion. Invariably he approached the matter of buying a watermelon with all the deliberation the matter merited.

He might well have "thumped" a dozen or two before picking one, and if he had any doubts about ripeness Grandpa would ask that the melon be plugged. I was a fascinated observer in such transactions a number of times. You would never find a merchant today who would let you plug a melon, but it was commonplace in the 1950s and 1960s. Plugging involved taking a pocket knife, cutting a small rectangular piece from the melon, and checking it to see if it passed the taste test. Of course if it didn't meet Grandpa's high standards the melon was ruined, but standard thinking at the time held that a melon which wasn't ripe was worthless anyway. Merchants understood that and made no complaint about rejection of an inferior melon. Just try that today. Unless it's a roadside stand you are likely to be out of luck and stuck with an inferior melon, and returning one to a grocery store is likely out of the question. As for plugging, just try pulling out a pocket knife in the fruit section of Wal-Mart or Harris-Teeter and see what happens. The results are likely to be somewhat similar to those associated with a boy bringing a knife to school, never mind that was standard practice a half century ago.

Grandpa's melon of choice was a gigantic cannonball, aptly named because of its round shape. With its dark green rind and deep red flesh, it also happened to be my favorite as well. Roadside vendors would often haul a pick-up truck load of them up from Florida or south Georgia to the Smokies of my boyhood, and the savvy ones would create an eye-catching pyramid of these beauties along with one which had been cut open on display nearby.

Mind you, cannonballs weren't the only contender in the watermelon taste sweepstakes. There was nothing wrong with a prime example of the variety known as Georgia Rattlesnake, and these mammoths of the melon world often reached weights approaching or sometimes exceeding 50 pounds. Also, thanks to their oblong shape, they produced lengthy slices which let you hold them in your hands, rest your elbows on your knees, and got to eating with a will. Grandpa Joe also occasionally bought a Charleston Gray, since this was usually the first variety to appear on the local market.

Once he had toted the watermelon home, no matter what the variety, Grandpa would shed his burden and get out one of the big galvanized tubs which were commonly called "wash tubs." That had once been their primary purpose, but by the time my memory kicks into play these tubs and their companion wash boards had for the most part been supplanted by washing machines with a hand wringer. In their traditional "waste not, want not" approach to life though, mountain folks found many other uses for the former wash tubs. They were fine for soaking quartered apples in a slightly brined solution prior to canning them. We also used them to hold green beans after a bushel or two of an old-time variety known as White Princess (if anyone knows a source of seed of this heirloom variety I'd love to know) had been strung and broken during family sessions on the porch in the evenings. Another service was to hold corn cobs when kernels were being cut off as part of the preparation of soup mix. Once a tub of cobs had been accumulated, they were carried out to the hog lot where the pigs had a feast. Nor was work on the vegetable garden and canning front the extent of their usefulness. Wash tubs were mighty useful for washing both babies and dogs. They had the virtue of lasting forever. I have one hanging on a wall in my garage right now that has to be at least 75 years old, and it is as functional as the day, well before I was born, that Grandma Minnie bought it.

My favorite use, however, was the application Grandpa Joe brought to the forefront when he had purchased a watermelon. He would have made arrangements to have a 25-pound block of ice delivered from the nearby ice plant. Folks increasingly had not only electricity but refrigerators, but there was still enough business for the ice man to keep the plant busy. Grandpa would carry the tub to a shady spot alongside the cannery, place that block of ice in the tub, and then take an ice pick and reduce it to slivers and chunks. At that point he added water until the tub was about half full. Then the watermelon was placed in the tub to be left for several hours. For a young

boy anticipating the first watermelon slice of the season, those hours passed at least as slowly as those on Christmas Eve, although Grandpa had a knack for finding “projects” to fill in the waiting period.

These might involve something fun like making a slingshot, going fishing in the nearby river, listening to his grand tales of his boyhood in the latter part of the 19th century, or gathering bait for a post-watermelon feast angling expedition. Or more mundane matters—hoeing corn, gathering “garden truck” as he called it, pulling weeds for the hogs, or any of the never-ending string of chores which needed to be done—might be on my dance card. It didn’t really matter, because along with eager anticipation of enjoying watermelon Grandpa Joe always knew how to entertain his loyal sidekick.

Eventually, when I thought that another hour of waiting would be torment beyond my level of tolerance, Grandpa would grin and mutter, “Well, we ain’t waited long enough but a reckon we’uns will go ahead and cut that melon before you blow a gasket.”

The actual act of cutting was, at least in a boy’s wondering eyes, a momentous occasion. Grandpa would take a butcher knife he had made from an old saw blade, with handcrafted wooden handles held in place by a trio of brass rivets, and insert it in the melon. The knife would be as sharp as the razor blade Grandpa used for his weekly Saturday afternoon shave (which came right after his weekly bath, “whether I need one or not”). If the melon, bedazzling in dew-like moisture from condensation, was a really ripe one, the knife wouldn’t enter more than an inch or two before there would be a wonderfully satisfying sound followed immediately by a truly glorious sight. The melon, bursting with juicy red goodness, would split in half.

Grandpa would then carve off two hefty slices, shaped like a new moon that had somehow become fat, and hand one to me while carefully sprinkling his own with salt. He would then utter the same words with which he invariably ended blessings at the family table, “eat hearty” (in his blessings he went into more detail, saying “You’uns see what’s before you; eat hearty”). I didn’t need a second invitation, and those first two or three bites, taken from the heart of the slice where there were no seeds, were like fleshy nectar from the culinary gods.

Speaking of seeds, all the traditional watermelons had them, and in abundance. None of this wimpy, petticoat-like stuff of “seedless” ones you get toady (and pay a premium to boot). The seeds were, at least from my perspective, beneficial. After all, they provided abundant ammunition for seed-spitting contests, with competitions for both distance and accuracy offering great fun. Moreover, Grandpa Joe always saved seed from a melon or two that was especially sweet and large. They would be the basis of his own crop of melons the following year.

Watermelons did exceptionally well in the lower portion of his expansive garden. It was fairly sandy soil, thanks to being close to the river, and the fruits love sandy soil provided it has some loam and fertilizer in it. Since Grandpa Joe raised chickens, fertilizer was never a problem (although you have to be careful with chicken manure—it’s so full of nitrogen you can “burn” plants through applying too much of it). Long before Minnie Pearl ever joked about it on “Hee Haw,” I heard Grandpa talk about his melon vines growing so fast that there was danger of wearing the bottom of melons out as the vines dragged them across the soil.

He enjoyed sharing that bit of folksy humor with me, especially since when he first told me, gullible soul that I was, I checked the ground for drag marks. He also loved to joke about melon vines growing out of your ears if you swallowed a seed, and to my inordinate delight I recently said the same thing to my 12-year-old granddaughter and she swallowed the bait hook, line, and sinker. Although Grandpa Joe was too “delicate” in his talk to mention it, you would also find local wags pointing to a visibly pregnant woman and commenting “she must have swallowed a watermelon seed.” To my way of thinking, then and now, it was all good, innocent fun.

Grandpa’s first home-grown melons would come in about mid-August. We would have enjoyed a number of “store bought” ones by that point, but there was always something special about the first one taken from his patch. For starters, Grandpa could unfailingly determine ripeness in them, with the key criteria being whether the little “pig’s tail” curlicues which grew on the vines had turned yellow and begun to wither. Then too, there’s a quiet pride and self-satisfaction in enjoying something you seeded, nurtured, and watched grow. Anyone who gardens readily understands that sense of accomplishment and well being, and as we as a society become

increasingly remote from a self-sustaining way of life, I think we are losing a lot in terms of stand up straight, walk proud, and be pleased with possessing a solid work ethic. Or, to put it another way, I strongly suspect that many of the perfectly healthy and capable folks using SNAP cards (I see them in the grocery store every time I go), are rank strangers to the sense of self-worth which can come from growing, making, canning, and otherwise providing a portion of what you need for sustenance.

Getting back to seeds, Grandpa and I often enjoyed our melon, along with seed-spitting contests, in the presence of his free-range chickens. If they saw a watermelon feast in progress they would flock forthwith to the spot, knowing that a treat in the form of lots of scrumptious seeds was in the offing. Sometimes we fed them the rinds as well, although that was not always the case.

Grandma Minnie always wanted the rinds from two or three prime melons saved. She would make runs of watermelon rind pickles, and their red, white, and green colors were a colorful treat as one of many types of pickles (bread-and-butter, okra, dill, Jerusalem artichoke, and the like) which graced sideboards at Christmas and other festive family gatherings.

The hogs also got their fair share of watermelon rinds, and any time you dumped a bunch of them in the feeding troughs there would be a great deal of oinking, shouldering fellow porkers aside, snuffling, and general excitement in the porcine playground which was the pig lot. In short, as was true of so many other things, when it came to watermelons nothing was wasted.

I haven't eaten a watermelon rind pickle in far too long, and it has been a coon's age since I shed my shirt, sat down with a icy cold slice of melon dripping with goodness, and got marvelously messy. Still, I try to keep my hand in (well, more specifically, my mouth) by spitting a few seeds each year, and my ability to go through a big piece of watermelon like Stonewall Jackson's cavalry through a band of Yankees caught off guard remains solidly intact. Invariably when I do so my mind carries me back to carefree boyhood days when watermelons were a source of unending wonder and joy beyond measure. If you are blessed, truly blessed, you have similar memories of a grandfather, a neighbor, an old colored woman, or someone else with whom you shared such delights. For my part right now, I think I'll listen to Tom T. Hall's superb venture into songsmithing, "Old Dogs, Children, and Watermelon Wine," and while doing so dig into a nice slice of the ultimate summertime fruit.

[Back to Top](#)

Recent Reading

1. Archibald Rutledge, *An American Hunter*. I'm re-reading this and other Rutledge prose books (I guess I'll eventually have to get to his poetry too, but I don't find it particularly appealing) in connection with my planned biography of him. His writings are chock full of autobiographical information.
2. Archibald Rutledge, *My Colonel and His Lady*.
3. Lord Birkenhead, *Rudyard Kipling*. Kipling was an intriguing figure, and this is perhaps the best critical biography of him. I love his writing (prose and poetry).
4. H. M. Hole, *Lobengula*. A life of the African leader who lived in the time of Rhodes, Selous, and the creation of Rhodesia.
5. Susan Wittig Albert—I've read a whole bunch of her stuff lately, along with several of the mysteries set in the Edwardian era which she co-authored with her husband under the pseudonym Robin Paige. I enjoy her knowledge of herbs and other plants, the recipes she includes in her books, and her ability to weave a fine tale. On the other hand, she makes too many mistakes and false assumptions when she writes about guns and her views on things like global warming creep into her mysteries in a detrimental fashion.

[Back to Top](#)

SUMMERTIME EATING

Summertime fare is especially attractive thanks to freshness and, if you raised the food, the satisfaction associated with putting food on the table. Here are some personal favorites or family delights associated with seasonal provender.

WATERMELON RIND PICKLES

While most recipes call for cutting away the outer peeling and removing any red flesh next to the rind, Grandma Minnie left the rind intact as well as a bit of the melon next to the rind.

BRINE

4 tablespoons salt
1 quart water
Watermelon rinds

PICKLE SYRUP

8 cups sugar
4 cups vinegar
8 teaspoons whole cloves
12 cinnamon sticks
Pinch of mustard seed (optional)

Cut the watermelon rind into one-inch cubes and allow to soak in the brine overnight. The next morning drain off the liquid, add fresh water, and cook the rinds until tender.

Then prepare the pickle syrup, boiling the mixture and then allow to sit for 15 minutes. Add drained watermelon rind and cook until the cubes become somewhat transparent. Process in sterilized jars. Properly done, this sweet pickle will be crunch, tasty, and appealing to the eye.

SUMMER FRUIT SALAD

Summer's abundance of fruit, headlined by watermelon, lends itself to fresh salads. This one, a favorite of mine, now resides in the refrigerator. It will be one of our contributions to a neighborhood Fourth of July picnic tomorrow. Cube watermelon, cantaloupe, and honeydew melon. Add fresh blueberries and blackberries. In this instance, the latter two will come straight from my yard, thanks to the fact that I have 40-year-old blueberry bushes which are 10-feet high and covered with berries as they are every year. Similarly, I have a patch of thornless blackberries (yes, you can accuse me of being a bit of a wimp, although in my defense I would wager that there are precious few folks my age who have picked more gallons of wild blackberries than yours truly. They were a prime source of income for me as a boy at the whopping rate of two bits a gallon. Talk about hard-earned money!

Simply combine all the cubed melon and the berries in a big bowl (or half of a hollowed out watermelon) and serve. I like a spoonful of sourwood honey on a bowl of fruit, although from a sweetness standpoint it really isn't needed.

ROASTED GARDEN VEGETABLES VINAGRETTE

Currently we are in a situation we face every year during the heart of the summer; namely, the garden threatens to produce so much we can't even give it away. However, my wife has discovered one dandy way of using vegetables for a hot meal in the evening and then offering the leftovers cold.

Slice vegetables such as new potatoes, Ichuban eggplant (the long, thin kind, which I prefer to the big globular types), yellow squash, and zucchini. To them add whole green beans (strung) or asparagus, brush everything with olive oil and roast until tender in the oven. Take out enough to eat hot and then cover the remainder with your favorite vinaigrette and leave overnight in the refrigerator. Served cold for lunch it's a real treat.

ANNA LOU'S COBBLER

Anna Lou was my mother and an absolute wizard in the kitchen. She enjoyed cooking, made the finest fried chicken I've ever eaten, and regularly during my boyhood put up more than 400 quarts of fruit and vegetables. Her recipe for cobbler was the essence of simplicity, and one of its virtues is that you can use so many fruits and berries to make it. Among those I have personally prepared are strawberries, raspberries, blueberries, dewberries, blackberries, huckleberries, peaches, and apples. If available, combine two or three types of berries in a single cobbler and maybe include some peach slices as well.

1 cup all-purpose flour
 1 cup sugar
 2 teaspoons baking powder
 1 cup milk
 ¼ cup butter or margarine (melted)
 2-4 cups fresh berries or fruit

Combine flour, sugar, baking powder and milk; stir briskly with a wire whisk until smooth. Add melted butter and blend. Pour batter into a 9 x 13-inch baking dish. Pour berries (amount depends on your personal preference and whether you want a cobbler with lots of dough or one with lots of berries) evenly over batter. Do not stir. Bake at 350 degrees for 30-40 minutes or until golden brown.

BEAUFORT BOIL

Also known as a Low Country Boil and by other names, this is a favorite South Carolina dish. I'm including it because I love it and because a week from when these words are being written it is on the menu when a couple of good friends host yours truly, Miss Ann, and some others as we honor a couple of outdoor writers (also good friends and stellar turkey hunters) from out Arkansas way, Jim Spencer and Jill Easton. I don't know that the recipe Lisa Snuggs (our hostess) will use will be exactly like this one, but I'll guarantee it will be close.

23 pounds smoke beef or venison sausage, cut into one-inch lengths
 1 package seafood boil seasoning
 6 ears corn, shucked, silked, and cut into halves
 6 to 8 blue crabs (optional)
 4 pounds whole shrimp

Fill a large stockpot with two and a half gallons of water and bring to a boil. Add the sausage and seasoning and boil for 10 minutes. Add the corn and boil for an additional 10 minutes. Add the crabs and return to a boil. Add the shrimp and cook until the shrimp turn pink. Drain and serve in a large bowl, atop a platter, or pour out on a wooden picnic table. Sometimes potatoes are included as well. Unless they are small or cut up, they will need some cooking before going in with the sausage. Makes 6 to 8 servings.

[Back to Top](#)

Thank you for subscribing to the Jim Casada Outdoors newsletter.
 Feel free to contact Jim with your comments, questions or suggestions at jc@jimcasadaoutdoors.com.

[Home](#)

[Contact Us](#)

[Links](#)

[Search](#)

[Privacy Policy](#)

[Archives](#)

Send mail to webmaster@jimcasadaoutdoors.com with questions or comments about this Web site.
Copyright © 2004-2011 JimCasadaOutdoors.com. Last modified: 07/09/13 .
Web site design by [Wordman, LLC](#)