

Jim Casada Outdoors

May 2014 Newsletter

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A Day—and a Month—For Mothers

Mom has been gone almost a decade and a half now, and seldom does a day pass when I'm not reminded of her. Usually it is some small, seemingly insignificant occurrence which brings back powerful, poignant memories of a woman whose whole outlook on life seemed to be one of surpassing sweetness and serenity. She was seldom frustrated, and the sole time I ever heard her use a four-letter word was in the immediate aftermath of having given her thumb a mighty whack with a hammer. Even then, she was so mortified at the "damn" which escaped her lips that it seemed shame instantly replaced pain.

I shared an earlier, shorter version of the tribute to her which follows with my siblings, and each of them responded with their own recollections. My brother, who shares my tendency to think of things from the perspective of closeness to the earth, reckoned he might wear a single white flower from wild strawberries in tribute to the woman and the scrumptious wonders she could work with wild (or tame) strawberries, a home-made pound cake so moist it almost glistened and whipped cream. Of course his thinking along this line combined fond culinary memories with the old mountain tradition of wearing a rose (red if one's mother is living; white if she is deceased) on Mother's Day. He also harkened back to early childhood days listening to her sing in church and shared Alan Jackson's rendition of Mom's favorite hymn, the hauntingly beautiful "In the Garden."

My sister, for her part, rightly recalled just how loving and easygoing Mom was, never mind three sometimes tempestuous children and a husband who, as is the wont of males in the Casada family in general, could be difficult in terms of hard-headedness, almost cussed independence and a deep-rooted "I'll do it my way" outlook on life. Here is an excerpt from her

Jim's Doings— Recent and Upcoming

While attending the annual meeting of the [Professional Outdoor Media Association](#) a couple of months back, I participated in a couple of seminar sessions along with a fun event described as "An Evening with the Greybeards."

Also, while in Knoxville, veteran radio talk show host Charlie Burchfield, whom I hadn't seen in years, asked me if I would be willing to do one of his shows with him. Of course I was honored to oblige and over the course of some 45 minutes, with a few breaks for commercials, we mused on a whole bunch of things near and dear to my heart—turkey hunting, the literature of the sport, book collecting, notable outdoor writers from yesteryear, and wingbone calls.

I'm not sure whether I said anything even remotely worthy of note, but with Charlie's professional prompting I meandered around without much trouble. Maybe that's why Daddy always used to say, "Son, you've got a tongue that wags at both ends." No doubt there was considerable truth in that, but I feel compelled to add that the apple didn't fall far from the ancestral tree.

If you are bored stiff, need a cure for threatening insomnia, or simply don't have anything better to do, you can listen to my commentary by visiting <http://newstalkradiowced.com/>. That takes you to the website of the radio station. On the right side of the home page there is a block which reads "Listen to Gateway Outdoors." Click on

thoughts, and it goes right to the essence of Momma's personality and perspective. "When I think of Mom, the phrase 'she loved them anyway' always stirs my brain. This phrase definitely held true with the love she held for dad and us as we were not always an easy bunch to love with our independent, stubborn and judgmental ways. More importantly, I think the phrase is representative of the way she viewed the world as she always seemed to find that little nugget of specialness in everyone. I have no idea what helped her develop into the positive, warm loving adult that she was but somehow she was just about as pure of spirit as a human can be."



Mom a couple of years before she died with a birthday cake dotted with a few candles.

that and you are on Charlie's Web site and can get to the archived program where I was involved.

On the coming calendar of events I will be in Columbia, S.C., for the South Carolina Festival of the Book this coming weekend (May 16-18). I will be speaking on Saturday from 11:20 to 12:10, and then signing books afterward.

The presentation, in company with fellow sporting scribe Ben Moise and artist Stephen Chesley, will focus on the first of a series of five little books of the sort sometimes described as chapbooks. Each will feature rare pieces from the early career of Archibald Rutledge. I wrote the general introduction for the entire series and will also write material for one of the chapbooks on down the road. The first one, *Claws*, features Rutledge the storyteller at his best. I'll have the book for sale within the next few weeks.

Meanwhile, if you happen to be in Columbia and want to pick up a copy of the book at the Festival (or for that matter any of the other Rutledge anthologies I've edited) and have it signed, you know the schedule.

For full details on the event, which features a lot of big names in the literary world—such as Pat Conroy and Ron Rash—along with ordinary scribblers like yours truly, visit www.scbookfestival.org.

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From my perspective, I think of Momma most often in terms of food (she was a splendid cook and this month's recipes and food hints are all from her kitchen and devoted to her memory) and the manner in which she not only tolerated but actively encouraged my passion for the outdoors. Never mind how many times I came home muddy, soaking wet or smelling of stink baits used for catfish, it was somehow all right. Regardless of the times without number I fouled up her pristine clean kitchen sink with guts from small game or feathers for upland birds, she always took matters in stride and smiled as she promised (and always delivered) a feast from earth's wild bounty. She greeted a gallon of blackberries, a picking of wild strawberries or a mess of fresh-caught trout like manna from Heaven, and the wonders she wrought with wild game make me wish we had had deer in those youthful days.

My mother's younger years were tough ones. She lost a parent while an infant; was raised by relatives who, while solid, decent folks, weren't overly endowed with warmth and joy; and moved incessantly from one place

to another throughout her childhood and adolescence. In fact, rootlessness, along with endless packing and unpacking, took a toll on her psyche. When she and my father married and bought a home not long before the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor, she told Daddy: "I never want to move again." For a period of well over 50 years, her wish was reality. The home they bought for \$2500 (putting \$250 down and reducing the mortgage whenever possible, in payments of \$5 or \$10) was Mom's until the end of her earthly days.

I have always envied her outlook on life. She found joy in the simplest things, remained eternally upbeat, showed kindness in some way every day, looked upon work as a blessing rather than a burden, and retained a bit of the childhood innocence she never had opportunity to enjoy in her youth. One indication of the latter aspect of her perspective was the fact that none of her children, and later her grandchildren, derived any more delight from Christmas season and special occasions than Mom. When she opened a present, got a surprise, blew out the candles on a birthday cake, or enjoyed something as simple as an ice cream cone, there was invariably a priceless brightness in her eyes and beaming smile on her face.

Of all my warm and wonderful recollections of Mom though, arguably the fondest ones focus on her role in my development as a sportsman. To my knowledge Momma never hunted, and although she loved to fish she would have been the first to acknowledge she was an inept angler. On the other hand she loved the end results of a successful day afield after small game or a productive fishing trip, and thoughts of the culinary wonders she could work on rabbits, squirrels, quail, or trout still set my salivary glands into involuntary overdrive.

She was a marvelous cook and a living, loving example of the old mountain adage which suggests: "Make do with what you've got." Mom scoffed at the concept of catch-and-release fishing. "You catch them," she would say, "and I'll release them—straight to hot grease." To her the idea of catching a fish only to return it to the water was absolutely ludicrous.

Momma's tolerance level for a sportsman husband and two similarly inclined sons was such that it might well have been the envy of the Biblical Job. She took early risings; muddy boots; tattered and torn clothing; squirrels, rabbits, quail, and trout cleaned in her kitchen sink; incessant talk of the outdoors; the occasional responsibility for feeding our hunting dogs; and much more in stride.

On a strictly personal level, she was an endless source of support and active encouragement of my boyhood hunting and fishing adventures. When Lady Luck saw fit to cast a beam of good fortune on my solitary efforts afield or astream, Mom would brag about my filled creel or weighty game bag in a fashion which filled a youngster with inexpressible pride. Moreover, when relatives or friends stopped by for a visit, she would often make comments such as: "You should have seen that fine mess of trout Jim caught yesterday." To an adolescent such praise brought pleasure beyond measure.

On countless occasions Momma drove me to a nearby trout stream or squirrel woods while Daddy ate his lunch alone (he had a 30-minute break from work for the midday meal, and since we only had one car the range of her chauffeur service was limited to distances which involved drives of no more than 10-12 minutes). Sometimes she would also meet me at day's end, although more often I walked home in the gloaming.

Although it never occurred to me as a youngster, one particular example of Mom's love spoke volumes about trust, tolerance, and just how different that world of the 1950s was from that we live in today. From the time I was 11 or 12 years of age, Mom (and Dad) allowed me to hunt and fish on my own or in company with friends of a similar age. Some of those outings involved several nights camping in the remote backcountry of the Smokies, and most of the fishing meant wading in roaring, potentially dangerous high country streams. There had to have been some anxiety, especially when I got home a bit later than usual, but there was also recognition of the need for youthful freedom and understanding that adolescents, while needing guidance, also had to find their own way.

Long after I was grown and gone from home Mom continued to be interested in my sporting activities. There was never a visit and seldom a phone call when she didn't ask about where I'd been hunting or fishing and how my luck had been. Those weren't idle inquiries. She genuinely cared, and right up to her death I could do her no

finer favor, bring her no greater pleasure, than to show up with a limit of wild trout cleaned and ready for the frying pan.

Doubtless many of you had mothers who blessed you in similar fashion. If so, on this one day of the year specifically devoted to the marvels and mystique of motherhood, you can join me in looking back with loving longing to the magic Mom brought to my life.



Mom (top right in red checkered top) in her element standing next to Dad and in company with a number of grandchildren, daughters-in-law, nephew and his wife, and grand-niece and grand-nephew

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MOM'S COOKING

Although there are some recipes below from Mom, I thought it might be useful to begin this section with mention of some kitchen hints she passed along, unknowingly in most cases, to family members.

The first focuses on fried chicken. In our family Sunday and fried chicken were virtually synonymous. Every time I hear Bobby Bare's grand old tune, "Chicken Every Sunday" (almost predictably, it was written by Tom T. Hall), I think of Mom, her wonderful chicken, and the aromas which wafted through the downstairs portion of the house before we headed off to church. Rare indeed was the day of rest when we didn't dine on fried chicken.



FRIED CHICKEN AT ITS BEST

Once breakfast was finished and we kids were busy getting dressed up in our Sunday-go-to-meeting attire, Momma would get the chicken started. She double battered it for starters—which meant a dip in beaten eggs, coating with flour, another dip in the egg mixture, and a final coating of flour. Then the chicken went into a

gigantic cast iron skillet and was fried, on relatively low heat, until golden brown. I think the slow frying helped, but it was the next step which may have really made a difference.

Mom would carefully take each piece from the frying pan and transfer it to a large glass baking dish, being careful as she did so not to disturb the golden brown crust. She would then place the baking dish in the oven on low heat—150 degrees or so. There it would remain while we were in church, nice and hot, maybe cooking a tad bit more, but most significantly, “drying” out so that the end result showed hardly a hint of grease.

CORNBREAD DONE RIGHT

Momma baked cornbread several times a week. It was always done in the same cast iron skillet used for frying chicken, and I can't recall a pone coming out any way other than golden brown on top and a darker, crustier brown where the batter touched the skillet. In part the keys to her scrumptious cornbread involved the ingredients—slow-ground cornmeal which she ran through her sifter one time to remove the biggest pieces of corn hull, buttermilk, and a bit of grease from fried fatback.



She also was meticulous about “seasoning” her iron skillets. That meant avoiding soap and cleaning only with hot water, followed by liberal rubbing with a piece of streaked meat before she put the pan away until its next use. Then, when it was time to bake cornbread, she would rub it again with streaked meat, usually after having heated the pan a bit atop the stove so it would do a better job of soaking in the fat. That meant that when the batter went into the oven to bake it was in a thoroughly seasoned pan. When done, the pone usually would slide from the skillet with a vigorous shake of Momma’s wrist, and when she had to slip a spatula beneath the baked bread to loosen it, invariably she would mutter to herself, “I should have seasoned the pan a bit better.”

HOLY GREEN BEANS

Although Momma never used the term, after her death we frequently referred to a big pot of green beans as “holy green beans.” In other words, they had had the hell cooked out of them. In Mom’s household there was none of this tender-crisp, cooked with a touch of olive oil nonsense when it came to green beans. You strung and broke the beans (an heirloom variety which I haven’t seen available in years, White Princess, was the family favorite) and put them in a big pot with plenty of water. Two or three slices of streaked meat (that’s what we called it although you also hear it referred to as streak o’ lean, fatback, salt pork and the like) were then added and the pot set on a burner. Once the water was brought to a rolling boil Momma would reduce the heat and the beans would simmer, all the while absorbing some of the streaked meat’s salty goodness, for hours.

Incidentally, basically the same approach was used for cooking various types of dried beans, crowder peas, cabbage, mustard or turnip greens, poke salad (the final go round after it had been cooked and drained twice) and the like.

CHOCOLATE COVERED STRAWBERRIES

Mom preferred wild strawberries, and anyone who has ever eaten them will soon realize that they far transcend their “tame” cousins. However, because of their larger size, this “recipe” (if you can call something so simple a recipe) works better with tame berries.

2 (or more) squares semi-sweet chocolate
Capped strawberries

Melt chocolate in a cup set in very hot, but not boiling, water (or melt in microwave). Dip individual berries in chocolate, remove and place on waxed paper. Refrigerate to harden chocolate. They may be served any time after chocolate sets.

PECAN CRUNCH SWEET POTATOES

1 stick butter
2 eggs
2 teaspoons vanilla
1 cup sugar
3 cups cooked, mashed sweet potatoes

Combine butter, eggs, vanilla and sugar. Add to mashed sweet potatoes and spread mixture in a baking dish.

TOPPING

1/3 stick butter, melted
1 cup brown sugar
2 tablespoons flour
1 cup finely chopped pecans

Mix topping ingredients and crumble over potatoes. Bake at 350 degrees for 25-30 minutes or until bubbly and golden brown. This has long been a traditional dish at Casada family gatherings.

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