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ON KEEPING THE FAMILY FED

MONA

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“I’m a daughter of the soil!” Mona often declared. And she was. At 100 she was still tending her geese, her tomato plants, and her roses. I got a clipping from a yellow rose she has nursed to a flourishing bush despite the challenging climate of the high desert country where she lived. That off shoot is still growing for me, but only wants to grow straight up, as high as it can. A yellow rose of Texas. The state where Mona was almost born as her progressive, young Socialist parents were driving a covered wagon across that country to New Mexico, with an invalid grandpa in the back and sixteen hunting dogs along side.

Mona was my mother’s first cousin. She was born on a quilt on the ground beside the wagon, a premature seven months blue baby. Her father, who performed the delivery, wrapped the scrawny infant in a shirt and set it aside as he tended her mother, figuring she wouldn’t survive. Mona lived to be 102 and had one of the sharpest minds and wit I ever knew.

Mona married at 17, to get away from her intense choleric mother (no bones about that) jumping out of the frying pan into the fire. The husband was an Irishman with a mop of appealing auburn hair, a grin to knock your socks off and a voice that could ‘Danny Boy’ your heart strings till you wept. They said he could charm the toes off a duck. And the man could dance! But he would drift in and out of his family’s lives faithful only to his bottle and getting Mona pregnant seven times. This would leave her spittin’ mad at him, but more so at the hospitals where she delivered that were under the thumb of the Catholic church and no woman could get a scrap of advice or support for birth control. But Mona would embrace each new baby with tough mother love and go on.

Much farther down the line, the same feisty mother she escaped as a girl was there regularly for each crisis and for the babies, and Mona wrote her mother the following;

Saturday nite

“Since you so kindly sent stamps mabe I can mail your letters. We have been broke all week.....

I wanted to tell you about the good luck I had. Jeff hauls the veg and old fruit from the wholesale house here for the pigs. He don't get it every day, but about 3 times a week. I nearly always get some fruit and veg good enough to eat. That helps a lot. But last nite he brought apples that had the dry rot. And I got enough to make 2 gal and 1 qt. of apple butter, 10 jars of my peaches spoil , I saved them tho, had to make them into butter tho. I then had 5 jars, 1/2 gal left after I cooked the peaches down so I got them filled with no cost but sugar. I really don't care for so much butter , but I had no good lids so I had to fix them with sugar.....

It was hard scrabble existence but Mona raised all her children. And more. She would boast that no one ever left her tidy, modest homes hungry and without a bath. “You could get twice as much meal for the same price as flour so you just learned to make gravy with it!” “You could buy a bolt of gingham to sew up dresses and make one for the baby with only half a yard.” So Mona was always able to make do and spent her last years in a cl “little home that scrap built” in the high desert. As long as she could get her hands to the earth she was content.

With my husband, I've raised a big family too, six altogether. We had five teenagers at once including three strapping six 1/2 foot boys who would down a quart of milk and 1/2 a loaf of bread just for snack after school, and regularly snagged cans of soup to hide under their beds.

Our neighbors got left over produce from the grocery store ('not for human consumption') to feed their cattle and invited all of us to help sort it and take some home. This got us through five years of raising those teenagers and was as good a community sharing as you could get. We'd wander over twice a week to chat neighborhood news and sort the produce. Often a whole case of pineapple had only a few moldy ones on top. We had abundant meals of fruits and vegetables.

Each summer, I would take the kids to follow the crops... Cherries first. Those “U Pick” farms never made a dime on the Poer tribe. The kids would swarm into the orchard and up into the trees, easily gobbling down three cherries for every one that went into the bucket. Then came apricots, plums, peaches, pears, tomatoes and apples. I would try to find unsprayed, organic local trees and bargain for them. The hot summer kitchen steamed with the of canning quarts and quarts of produce but I

knew it was good fruit and where it came from and needed to make the most of it.

I didn't talk about where I got the food for the family and neither did the kids. They went to a private school that had a fair number of well-to-do families that never cut the rotten spot off of anything to save the good fruit. But I do talk about it now.

Now suddenly it is all cool! Fashionable even! We were resourceful and shopping local. Now the books, magazines, blogs, and articles proliferate with classy, full color environmentally PC pages peppered with words like 'green' 'organic' 'sustainable', 'local', 'community', getting cyber kids to the earth etc.- that's what we always did! We had home gardens, caught water in a cistern from the roof at our mountain summer home, had a composting toilet (read 'outhouse') And hung the clothes on the line to dry.

Perhaps its time for another generation to think about becoming daughters and sons of the soil. Times are changing. It can be done.....Mona and her generation did it, we did it, and always have!

Nancy Jewel Poer and her husband have White Feather Ranch where they raise bio dynamic beef, have a large orchard and garden. She lectures nationally on death and dying, the spiritual feminine, Waldorf education, parenting, and America work.