

# Letting Go By Holding On

by Nicole Strevell-Childrose

A few years ago I found myself faced with the ongoing challenge of trying to cook meals that would please the very wise taste-buds of my 91 year old grandfather. Would I under-cook the vegetables? Serve too spicy a sauté? Might the meat turn out to be cold or tough? How do you actually simmer a roast to perfection? Exactly by what method in the world would I feed my Depression Era grandfather a satisfying and respectable meal? I resorted to what I knew best, historical research. What I found was that my family heritage was built on Columbia County roots that ran very deep. As a history professor, I categorically felt much more comfortable among books than I did at the stove and quite surprisingly, I realized that it can be a little bit easier to let go by holding on to your family heritage.

A minimalist I am not. I like to keep tiny treasures. I found it incredibly difficult to part with family heirlooms left behind when my mother recently passed away. I inherited a

great work ethic, strong sense of identity and a passion for cooking from several generations of New England women. Cooking helped me heal. As a so-called Millennial, I couldn't quite reconcile the generational gap of cooking for Grandpa. I wasn't fluent in the kitchen, but I tried. When he was well enough, he subtly explained why he preferred potatoes over rice, having survived a long stint in the Pacific during World War II. He showed me the logistics and systems for roasting, basting, mashing; the rules of the kitchen if you will. I channeled my mother's determination for cooking far too much food and enjoyed the reward of sharing leftovers with family and friends. Still, there was a missing link. My food just wasn't quite the same as my mom's. After doing a bit of searching, I stumbled on my mother's favorite cookbook, a *Betty Crocker*, sixteenth print, 1972 edition. It is in worn out condition. The pages provide an aroma of thirty-plus years of slicing, dicing, mixing, chopping and braising. Some of the



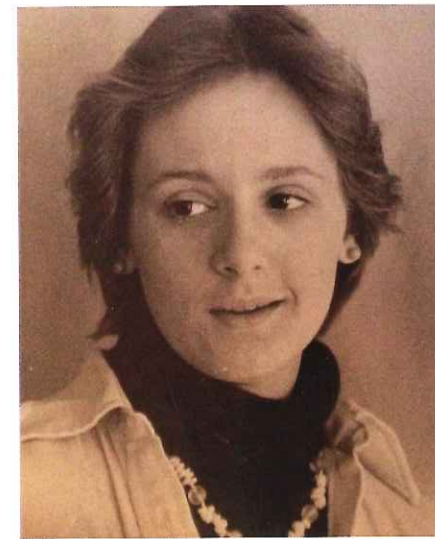
The cookbook

pages are crispy with overuse. Mom was a messy cook, always rushing to create a perfectly satisfying meal between managing her farm and caring for others. The pie section is riddled with globs of crust. I knew I found a treasure.

When I pulled out the book our family became nostalgic. This tangible object reminded them of our family history. This history reminded me of the colonial legacy left behind by Martha Ballard, as told by historian Laurel Thatcher Ulrich. Ballard's diary was found in rural Maine and painstakingly interpreted by Ulrich, a Harvard University history Professor. Forty years of her colonial life are detailed in everyday, mundane normalcy. Her diary provides one of the best detailed insights into 18th century domesticity. The homemade

document also offers firsthand perspective of gender issues and social patterns of her time. For example, how Ballard balanced her roles as mother, wife, and midwife. She was a bundle of energy, courage and compassion. Martha Ballard was absolutely no nonsense and her work was never done.

Mary Mable Knott, my mother didn't keep a diary, but her cookbook provides insight into a more modern 21st century world that will someday become ingrained in historical record. Mary's work was also, never done. At times I am still doing it! I often think: "How will future women make sense of our times?"



My mother Mary Mable Knott

Mary, born in Hudson in 1959 was the daughter of Corine and Bernard Knott. Corine White, a Vermont native married Bernard in New York in 1946. Bernard was born on November 1, 1921 in his parents'

home in Stockport. One of seven boys Bernard was raised on Atlantic Avenue. He told me stories about selling soup on foot to mill workers as a young boy. He worked on local hay farms, threshing and eventually repairing mechanized diesel equipment. Patriotic and stoic, Bernard left the Chatham, New York army base to serve during World War II from 1941 to 1945 in the South Pacific. He was a mechanic and tech sergeant in New Guinea and the Southern Philippines. Cooking was one of the ways that I closely connected as an adult to my grandfather. Our traditions and love of homemade food runs deep. My mother's cookbook became as important of a bonding tool as it was a practical tool in my domestic progress. The separate spheres of gender and domesticity from Ballard's time were certainly not part of my upbringing. However, I was raised by a very active, stay-at-home mother who was largely the influence for me to become a first generation college graduate.

One of the hardest things in life is letting go. I was confronted by this painstaking challenge three years ago when my mother suddenly and peacefully left this world. My passion for teaching and learning social and cultural history and to be sure a degree

of raw practicality has enabled me to try to let go by hanging on tightly to the things that my mother did on a daily basis. For me, it has been a time to overcome personal challenges and most importantly, tapping into my roots that hold me up. My mother's sudden passing forced me to find out who I really am in more ways than one. Like Ballard's history which was told through historians from her diary, my mother's cookbook has served as a piece that opens up conversations across generations of women. When I recently found out that the *Betty Crocker* was given to Mary by her mother in law Esther as a wedding gift, I learned more about my paternal family and their rich European history as Jews who survived the Holocaust in Poland. As immigrants to the United States, family, cooking and spending time enjoying American meals were critical to their assimilation.

As a history professor, my life's work is spent focused on themes of the past. When I teach courses at Columbia-Greene Community College, I find classes most memorable to my students when they connect the content to their own lives. It is critical to have a historical literacy to connect those dots. It is intense when it hits you right at home. ■