

## **Chili and Cornbread Can Save a Family**

We all have a keen sense of smell. I suppose we can all stipulate that various luscious, smelly foods seem to take dominance when it comes to nostalgic remembrances. Whenever I smell simmering chili in the pot and fresh cornbread in the oven, I am overpowered with some memories and specific occurrences from my youth and I can't help but reflect.

We were fairly poor back in those days – at least relative to 21<sup>st</sup> Century standards. Dad was an Idaho school teacher and mom did not work and together they had six hungry kids to feed and clothe. One need have no other information to deduce our standard of living. Everyone was expected to pitch in, work, and do his part.

One chilly, fall evening dad, Mike and I went to the sawmill and picked up a dump truck load of 2x4 ends and pieces. We used this wood to burn in our big pot bellied stove and keep the house warm. It was our only source of heat throughout those cold Idaho winters. The wood was dumped in our yard and dad took the truck back to the neighbor's house up the street where he had borrowed it. Now it was up to Mike and me to rick this wood or stack it so it would dry out and burn better. That meant we had to load the wood in our arms, haul it back near the shed, and stack it in neat, uniform piles.

We hated ricking the wood. It was hard labor and we felt abused and picked on for having to do it. To add to our misery, the rest of the family was in the nice, warm house resting and watching TV – at least that's what we imagined.

As we begrudgingly went through the motions of wood stacking, our minds were busy figuring out how to get out of doing this terrible chore and even better, how to get even with dad and mom for forcing such hard labor onto their sons. We decided that this night would be our last in this family. We would run away and live like Huck Finn and Tom Sawyer down by the river. There was an old abandoned cabin down there and we would live in that. Of course, that meant that we wouldn't have to go to school anymore, either. The idea seemed brilliant!

After much discussion it was decided I was to go in the house, sneak into the food room, take some canned goods off the shelf and pack them into my backpack. Mike would be busy grabbing our sleeping bags and a few extra blankets. Of course, we would also throw in our knives and guns – I had a Buck knife and a .22 and Mike had his shotgun. One never knows when he will be set upon by wild animals like bears or wolves. Plus, we would need to kill a deer once in awhile to stay alive. Our packs would then be topped off with some warm winter clothes and we would then be ready for a life of happiness living on

our own with no more damn chores to do. We went over every detail and had it planned very carefully.

I imagined mom weeping over the loss of her sons and dad feeling terrible for making his sons do hard labor. I had a feeling of smugness as I thought about how these people were going to regret their parenting mistakes. I figured they would just have to learn their lessons the hard way.

Suddenly, dad opened the door and said, "You boys finish that load you have and then come in for dinner. Mom has everything on the table ready to eat."

As he closed the door, the smell of chili and cornbread wafted out of the house and right into my nostrils. Man that smelled good! My mouth started to water as I imagined that good chili being washed down with cold milk and topped off with cornbread, butter and honey. But no! We had a plan – we were running away and there was no forgetting that plan.

I neatly stacked the wood that I had and Mike did the same. As we walked back toward the house, he said, "What do you think? Maybe we ought to eat dinner before we run away. At least we will have one last decent meal before we're gone for good."

I agreed. We would sit with the family for one last meal together before we set out. But after that, there was no looking back. So we walked in the house and washed up for dinner. Running the warm water over our cold hands hurt, but it was refreshing to be warm again.

We sat at the table in our usual spots and loaded up. Our bowls were filled with scrumptious thick chili with giant chunks of hamburger. Large portions of cornbread were placed on our plates. The steam rose off the bread as it was cut in half and the butter was spread. The heat from the bread caused the honey to melt and become runny as it soaked in and ran down the side. A huge pitcher of cold milk was on the table for refilling our glasses as we chugged it down. Everything was perfect – too perfect, in fact, for running away. How can one turn his back on something as heavenly as great food? That and the question of intense warmth and comfort crept into my mind. I looked at Mike out of the corner of my eye and he wasn't looking back.

A half hour later, we had finished eating. I followed Mike into our bedroom.

"Are we still going through with our plan?" I asked, a little apprehensive about his answer.

"Well, let's wait until this weekend, he said. That will give us more time for packing and getting everything ready."

Deep inside, I knew we would never follow our plan to fruition. Why? Great food and a warm house will always trump kids' spur-of-the-moment plans to run away. I suppose that has been the case for centuries and will most likely be the case for years to come. No question about it, parents have that one 'ace up their sleeve' when it comes to keeping their kids living at home until it is the proper time for them to jump from the nest and venture out to live on their own.

Throughout the years, every time I am privileged to smell chili and cornbread I am immediately taken back to that Idaho homestead where I, as a young boy and my brother learned the essence of life – that hard labor is ok, but only when good food, warmth of home, and family are the rewards.