



Appointment with Pohlman

Cooking For Christmas

By Ralph Pohlman

It's a funny thing, but the older I get the more I like the Spirit of Christmas Past. As the lines went in Dickens's *A Christmas Carol*:

Spirit: "I am the spirit of Christmas past".

Spirit: "Long past".

Spirit: "Your past".

So that is where I am. Remembering Christmas cooking, which was really baking, began in October with my mother making the annual fruitcake, dark, rich, filled with coloured bits of peel, then wrapped and tucked into the back of the fridge to ripen for a couple of months.

You'll notice that I didn't mention anything about brandy or rum. That's because there wasn't any. Not in our house. I could spend the entire column on that topic but let's just say that alcohol was never a part of our lives. Well, that's not exactly true either. My parents' attitude toward it, especially my father's, was very much a part of our lives. He was a veteran but wouldn't join the Legion because, you know, they drank at the Legion. He believed that half the world's problems were caused by alcohol. He may even have been right.

Anyway, I have loosened up considerably in that regard. (Please forgive me, Dad)

So, starting this past October, I made my fruitcake. I would have used my mother's recipe but it is long gone. Instead I used the one from the falling-apart *Better Homes and Gardens Cookbook* that I bought early in my marriage, in the late 50's.

The last part of the recipe reads as follows: Remove cake from pan, wrap in brandy (or fruit juice) moistened cotton cheesecloth. Wrap in foil. Store in the refrigerator for two to eight weeks to mellow flavours. Re-moisten cheesecloth with brandy weekly or as needed.

I bought a package of cheesecloth and wrapped my fruitcake. I used all of it so the cake was sort of encased in a cheesecloth blanket. It took a lot of brandy to "moisten" it, and by the time I wrapped it in foil it was dripping. Ah, well!

Now I'm in Florida, the brandy-soaked fruitcake is in the back of the fridge, and it is time to start the rest of the Christmas cooking. By the way, the word cookie comes from

the Dutch, *Koeptje*, meaning small cake. By the end of the 14th century, one could buy little filled wafers on the streets of Paris and by the 17th century, cookies were commonplace.

I have a list of cookies that I like to make, and some that I make only at Christmas. I will go through them sort of in order of priority, meaning that if I don't get to all of them, the ones not made are the least favourite anyway. First of all are my Mom's whipped shortbreads. She is over 30 years gone, but I still have the recipe in her handwriting and I like to hold it in my hand and pretend she is instructing me.

That is actually the magic of recipes. It is a handed-down wisdom and yes, it is a blueprint of rules of how to make something, but the real learning is between the lines. You have to do it. You don't learn to cook by reading about it anymore than you learn to play tennis by reading about it, or to make love. Between the rules and the meal is the ritual, which is like life, and which can be a tasteless blancmange or a spicy curry.

Where was I? Oh, yes - my Mother's whipped shortbread. Combine mostly flour and butter, some cornstarch and icing sugar and a little vanilla and beat the hell out of it until it is creamy, then drop teaspoons onto cookie sheets.

I try to make a different cookie batch each day and also try to make them faster than I eat them, and gradually fill the cookie tins. Here is my list, in addition to the above shortbreads: peanut butter cookies, raspberry poinsettia blossoms, noodle clusters (also known as spiders), pecan balls and Rice Krispie squares. There are others but those are the essentials.

The raspberry poinsettia blossoms I got from a Betty Crocker Christmas Cookies booklet. The principle is to make a basic flour and butter cookie dough and mix in a four-serving size package of raspberry gelatin. Shape into small balls, chill for a bit and distribute on a cookie sheet. Then make six cuts across each ball, about half way through, sprinkle some yellow sprinkles in the centre and, when they bake, they will spread out into wedges and sort of look like poinsettias.

That's about it. Of course there are other Christmas traditions, like my eggnog French toast and the Christmas Eve tourtiere (since I married a French-Canadian girl).

But that is another column.

Musselman's Lake Group Wins Award

This fall the Musselman's Lake Technical Working Group (TWG) received a water conservation award for completion of the Musselman's Lake Sub watershed Assessment and Stewardship Opportunities Report.

The award is presented by the Lake Simcoe Region Conservation Authority (LSRCA) to individuals and groups who have completed a project that improves water quality and wildlife in the Lake Simcoe watershed. The authority's mission is to provide leadership in the restoration and protection of the environmental health and quality of the lake and its watershed with community, municipal and other government partners.

In presenting the award, the LSRCA representative noted, "Musselman's Lake is a small kettle lake situated on the Oak Ridges Moraine in the East Holland River sub watershed. In recent years the lake has experienced increased water temperatures, excessive aquatic vegetation growth and a

blue-green algae bloom.

"To address these concerns, the Town of Whitchurch-Stouffville and the Musselman's Lake Technical Working Group produced a report to describe the environmental issues facing Musselman's Lake and its sub watershed, and recommendations to remedy or control these environmental issues.

"This report would not have been possible without the hard work of these two dedicated groups. This report will help to improve the health of Musselman's Lake, the East Holland sub watershed, and ultimately Lake Simcoe."

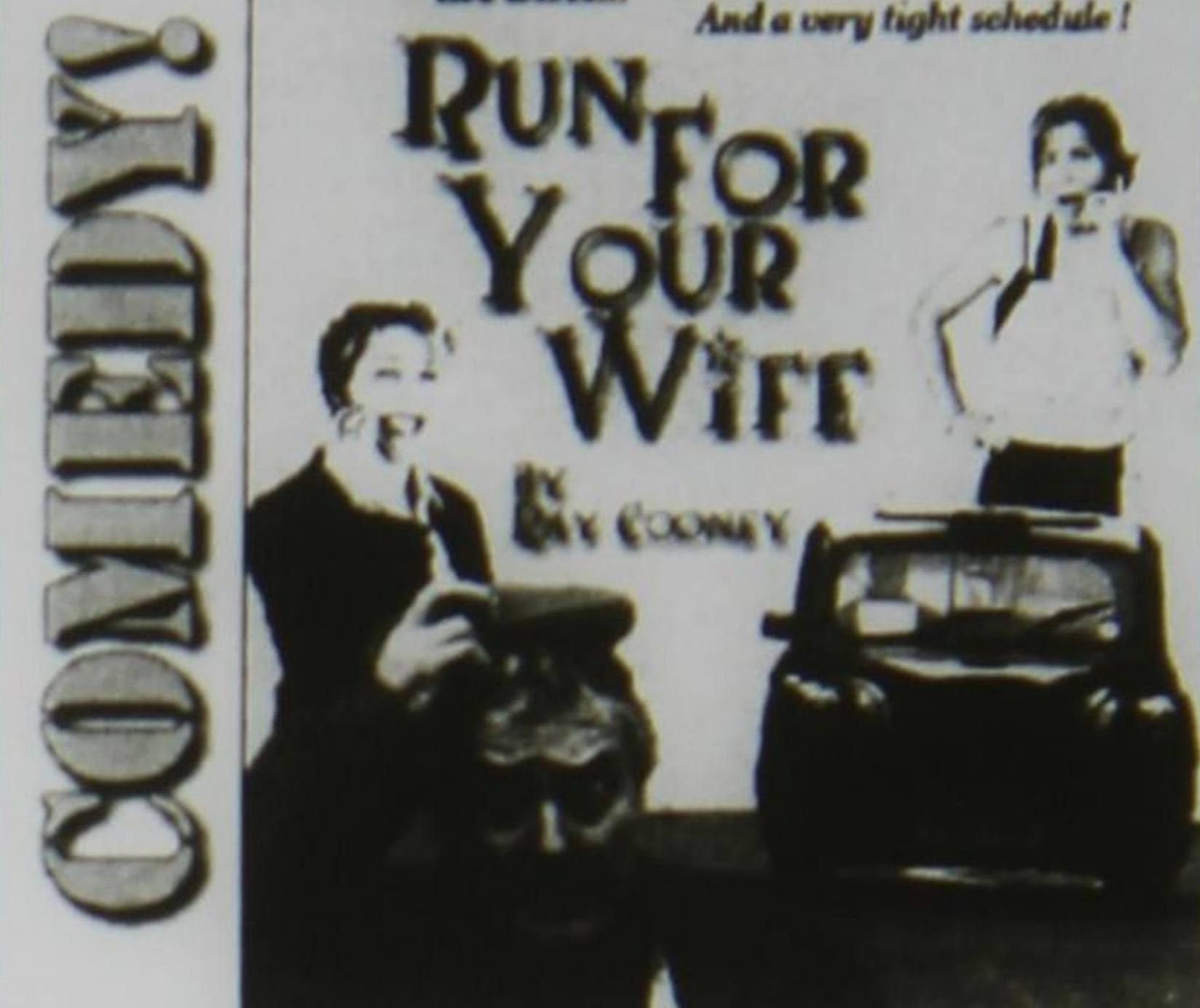
The members of the TWG were: chair Dan Heron, vice chairs Paula Viola and Phil Davies, Christa Sharp, Christine Laing, Kyle Jenkin, Kelly Gibson, Mark Carroll, Terry O'Connor, Ralph Toner and Brian Laing.

To see the final draft of the report visit www.lsrca.on.ca.

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