

A Family Tradition: Grandma's Squaw Berry Bowls

Yesterday was November 12, 2009, the ninth year of a new century. One that Grandma Augusta Shineman Barshied (1872-1940) was never to witness. I was 10 years old when Grandma passed from this earth. Nevertheless I knew her as a hard working farm wife and mother. Her whole life was spent on the two farms which were less than a half mile apart on Seebers Lane, south of Canajoharie, New York. Grandma was born on the Shineman farm just west of the Barshied farm where she was destined to live for all the remainder of her life. That destination was arrived at when she became the bride of William E. Barshied (1867-1949). Why was November 12, 2009 special for me? It brought back the memory of Grandma's diary entry of November 12, 1928, two years before I was born. The entry read, "Carmeta and I went to the woods today to get Squaw Berries". Aunt Carmeta Barshied (1904-1998) was a lifelong school teacher. So my trip yesterday to the Stone Arabia wood lot was a celebration of Aunt Carmeta Barshied and Grandma's footsteps of 81 years ago. The tradition progressed as my father, Willis Barshied Sr. (1906-1990), sometimes also made Squaw Berry Bowls. He found the berries as he tramped through the woods while hunting. I started making the bowls 50 years or more ago to give to special places, friends and family members.

I will now follow my own footsteps of November 12, 2009. The forest floor lies covered with leaves. They cushion each step and protect the plants that lie dormant until spring arrives again. Under the pines and hemlock the rays of November sun strike the beds of yet green plants lying close to the forest floor. Some of the plants bear bright red Squaw Berries. The berries are sometimes called partridge berries. Doubtless a roving partridge would find these a choice part of their food. This may account for the scarcity of the berries. There is doubtless a much more proper name for these berries but one I do not know. The berries themselves are definitely not plentiful. Can we find enough today to carry on a tradition? If so I will follow the steps of my forebears and gather these bright remnants of summer before. The winter snow begins to make its blanket over the forest floor. The berries will be left on a short piece of stem and deposited in a bag with some carefully chosen green moss. These two ingredients along with some woods soil will suffice to make the bowls that will remind us that another year has slipped away and a new one will follow in its wake. We hope the finished bowl will last until another replaces it the following fall. Grandma's direction for care of the bowl would be not to drown it with water, "just set it outside a short time where it is cool and when brought back into the warm house the condensation will provide enough moisture". Traditions are sacred so please help to preserve this one.

Postscript

I write this for those into whose hands this story falls and who have never been given a Squaw Berry bowl. You must ask, "What in the world is a Squaw Berry bowl?" The answer is simply that it is a small glass bowl with a cover which holds a cherished tradition. The bowl holds a special chosen mat of moss around a bit of woods soil. A pinch of charcoal will also help preserve the contents. The berry stems are cut about an inch long then thrust into the moss using long tweezers. You too can start a tradition with the knowledge that when the snow melts in the spring as it always has and always will the forest floor will again come alive with nature's gifts.

Skip Barshied

Stone Arabia

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