

IT WOULDN'T BE CHRISTMAS WITHOUT...

by Helen Gowan

My Grandmother's epergne is ready for its annual appearance as part of my increasingly limited holiday display. The term epergne was given to given to elegant fruit bowls designed for table centerpieces in the eighteenth century. You'll see them in period movies or museums. Eventually they were downsized for the lower classes. My grandmother was born in 1876, married to a steamfitter in 1900, and my guess is that my epergne may have been a wedding gift. Alas, I will never know; she died some fifty years ago, and my mother died some twenty years ago, and if I heard anything in my childhood about the piece's provenance, I forgot it long ago. In my grandmother's time it would have been filled with fruit of the season, and graced the dining room table which was covered by a white damask cloth, or later, by one of the many ivory or snow white crocheted tablecloths she produced regularly for her family and friends. It would have been polished weekly along with the silverware and serving pieces that were her pride and joy. My mother, an only child, would have inherited the task of restoring the silver to its original gleam every week and before guests came to dinner. She acquired it as a cherished object when my grandfather died in the thirties and Grandma came to live with us in Illinois.

Mom carried it with her through many moves around the country, and it was part of my childhood, too. Formality gradually declined over the years, along with the use of damask table linens that had to be ironed before and after every use, and the advent of two generations of four child families. We still had dinner with everyone present at the table as long as my father was working. The epergne was reserved for holidays and birthdays. I enjoyed the ritual polishing the silver before these occasions. Later, when Mom lived in a series of apartments the epergne appeared only at Christmas time, sometimes holding colorful balls of yarn, sometimes glittering ornaments resting on fresh holly leaves.

The bowl spends the year out of reach in the back of my kitchen cabinet gathering tarnish. I have to remove the coffee and cocoa and tea making products from the shelf in order to remove it. There is yearly a question in my mind whether or not I should polish it. Every polishing removes a layer of tarnish, silver oxide, and the tarnish has developed over the years to an iridescent patina, lovely in its own right, with gleaming silver, gold, rose, and purple, reflecting the lamplight. I may leave it this year.

If you were not the favored child to have inherited an epergne and its memories, here is what mine looks like. It is a modest 5-1/2 inches tall, 4 inches at the base. The bowl begins 3 inches up and widens to 9 inches, with a simple flowered silver overhang at the top, a devil to polish, even with a soft toothbrush. It is ornate for my taste, and out of place on the sturdy Mission oak coffee table that is usually covered by opened and unopened mail, but at holiday time the table is rid of this detritus of daily life and polished to a luster worthy of the epergne. It wouldn't be Christmas without it.