

## HAPPY MEAL

4-28-2015 by Harry Zirkelbach  
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Food alone does not make a meal happy.

With that opening, here's a few words on a time when, for me, every meal was joyful, unique, memorable, centered on family.

My father was born in Erie Pennsylvania, 9th and East Avenue, the only boy with four sisters. The family would move between there and Pittsburgh several times before Dad's father disappeared while the family lived in Pittsburgh; dad 12.

Dad would support his family by working there as Machinist, continuously, then marry in 1921.

Mom's family anchored in Pittsburgh, her dad a railroad executive. In the first twelve years of that marriage the two children would meet only Mom's relatives.

Early 1932 Dad was given employment by an Uncle in Erie; that May our family relocated there. Turned out to be a permanent change. There, our parents found a house in the very neighborhood dad where had been born. His relatives resided in this community, east side of town.

Immediately our family began joining Erie relatives for meals.

Grandma Catherine Z was raised in Erie; her sisters were here. The oldest Margaret (forever Aunt Mag) and husband John (Uncle Johnny to us) had a large house to accommodate their ten children. These were Dad's friends of his youth.

Aunt Mag was a lithe as a summer breeze kissing a blossom.

Uncle Johnny, huge-shouldered handsome, looked an older man.

But there was more.

At some moment before our family arrived in Erie, Uncle Johnny had a stroke, lost the ability to walk, struggled to speak.

As other relatives couldn't accommodate this family at table, and Uncle Johnny's limitation, the extended relationship gathered at their home for a meal, all holidays, and after many a Sunday Mass.

All were accustomed to the routine. Uncle Johnny had been provided a large throne-like chair, plenty of pockets and hiding places. His presence, the focus for conversation and meal.

No relative was wealthy. Yet at every meal with Uncle Johnny and Aunt Mag, the table overflowed with nourishment. All this Aunt Mag coordinated magically; arranging details with the women in advance, without the advantage of a phone.

Each meal began with a Thanksgiving prayer, the only genuinely quiet moment of that gathering. Then the servings. When twelve or fewer adults were to be fed, the large Oak table seated them, Uncle Johnny's chair the focus.

If more, another smaller table was available for the children.

The food was routine in choices; fresh baked bread, meat, potatoes and vegetables of several varieties, and then the generous slice of cake or pie, hot from the oven. The food was always German-delicious; by listening, the children learned about life, relatives and friends, the world outside those walls.

Still, it was the fresh food, the aroma of all, the habit of "cleaning the plate" that added to this memory of what it means to be part of the extended family of man.

Aunt Mag, & Uncle Johnny's happy meals, taught by their smiling, generosity with food, time, love, conversation, hospitality, simplicity.

That began in 1932, just yesterday.  
It is that fresh in my memory.