

Homemade Joy

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I touch a spoon of my favorite Cookies & Cream ice cream to my mouth; I feel a sudden yearning for home, the grinding of the old ice cream freezer, my mother tying her apron before assembling ice cream ingredients, my dad smiling as he turns the crank. I close my eyes. I am back on the Smith farm, eating homemade ice cream on a warm Sunday afternoon.

After church, my heart skips as my dad pulls our 1938 Ford V8 into the driveway beside the icehouse in Cambridge, Nebraska. He buys a block of ice and heaves it into the trunk of the old Ford. The Smith Family is going to make homemade ice cream!

I change out of my Sunday clothes and hurry outside. Dad drops the block of ice into a gunny sack—a burlap bag. "Whack, whack, whack," He pounds the ice into small chunks with the flat side of an ax; the square ice block crumbles.

Following the recipe inside her head, my mom mixes the ice cream ingredients—eggs laid by our chickens, milk and cream from our milk cows, sugar from a bag in the cupboard, and Watkins Vanilla from the traveling Watkins man. I savor the vanilla's delicate aroma as Mom pours the mixture into the metal canister. She positions the dasher (wooden paddles) in the ice cream can.

I bounce from one foot to the other as I watch Dad place the canister into the old wooden ice cream freezer and attach the hand crank. He reaches into the gunny sack and scoops ice into the wooden freezer. "Clunk, clunk, clunk," pieces of ice hit the metal canister. Tap, tap, tap. Dad packing ice around the can is music to my ears. With a quick motion, he sprinkles rock salt over the top of the ice. And the adventure begins.

Standing close by, I watch Dad balance on a stool made from a tree stump and grip the handle of the freezer. The gears grind as he cranks the handle. The metal canister swishes and spins inside the wooden ice cream freezer. Ice and water slosh as the rock salt melts the ice. I watch the water trickle from the hole in the side of the freezer. There is a clattering sound as Dad adds more ice.

Dad nods, "You want to turn it?" I loved turning the crank on the old freezer. Sitting on the stump of wood, I twist the crank around and around, with visions of ice cream whirling in my head.

"I better take over," and he reaches for the handle. The grinding got louder, and it was harder to turn the crank. The ice cream is freezing.

"Ready?" Dad opens the canister, and Mom dumps in the flavoring ingredients. Sometimes it was strawberries or peaches, but today she pours in the Smith family favorite, Grape Nuts. The taste of a rich vanilla ice cream, with the crunch of the Grape-Nuts, is like nuts in a Snicker Candy Bar.

The muscles on Dad's arms bulge as he struggles to turn the freezer's crank.

I pepper my him with questions, "Is it done yet? How much longer?"

"Just wait."

The ice cream is mixed and frozen. Dad takes the dasher out of the canister, sets it on a plate, and I nibble bits of ice cream off the paddles; it reminds me of licking the bowl after making cookies.

Finally, I scoop ice cream into my waiting bowl and lift a spoon of the icy dessert to my lips. The ice cream melts in my mouth, and my taste buds soar with excitement. The warmth transforms it into sweetness. How can I resist smiling as I eat my ice cream?

The summer ritual of taking a turn on the crank of the freezer fades, but the sound, smell, and taste of making homemade ice cream wander through my brain. It is more than ice cream. Family, friendship, and tranquility made that summer Sunday afternoon on the farm special.