

Aunt Clara's Applesauce

Somewhere in every family there must be an Aunt Clara. Oh, not by that name certainly, but a character like my Aunt Clara. She was the undisputed matriarch of the Jones family. She never really claimed to occupy such a regal position, but if any of her nieces and nephews, reaching back several generations, were queried as to who held the reins in the family, without an exception, it was Aunt Clara, they'd say. She was my mother's father's sister, and she was a stern, yet loving, no-nonsense lady. And her applesauce changed Thanksgiving dinners for years for the Joneses of Southern California.

Now Aunt Clara never married. Nobody seemed to know why that was so, and she never mentioned it. Possibly, somewhere back down the years and even into the last century, there may have been a beau, a romance, a love affair, a rejection, perhaps, for some reason. But whatever it was, the mystery was safely tucked away in the recesses of her memory someplace. She chose teaching as a lifetime career. Apparently she was good at it, because she rose in the ranks of the profession quickly, and "Miss Clara E. Jones, Principal," became her title in and around Huntington Park in the nineteen thirties and forties.

When Thanksgiving rolled around each year, the custom for the Jones family, who were tied either by blood or by marriage to the matriarch, gathered at her home for the feast. And feast it was. Even during the depression years of the nineteen thirties, Aunt Clara's house on Thanksgiving Day was filled with the rich aromas of turkey and ham, mince and pumpkin pies, and dressing and candied yams, and you name it. She wasn't much of a cook; she was a professional principal, not a homemaker. But on Thanksgiving her nieces and the wives of her nephews rallied together, took control of her little-used kitchen, and created a culinary delight. The kids -- and early on I was one of them -- trampled over the front yard and into the street tossing footballs and sailing balsa wood gliders. The girls just giggled. The fathers, on the other hand, circled up alongside the wood shed in the back yard, next to the garage, passed a pint around and talked man talk.

Aunt Clara, as always, supervised the seating. A hurried grace was said by someone, and at her signal the meal began with steaming plates passed along the makeshift tables. As I said, she was no cook. However, one Thanksgiving several years before she died, she presented, with a flare, a bowl of applesauce she had created in secret. It was the sourest, bitterest applesauce ever to pass a palate, and with the first taste, one's eyes couldn't blink, and one's mouth puckered. Sour green apples, cooked down -- no sugar, no spice, no nothing. It was bad, real bad. But some gracious soul, anxious to impress the matriarch, made a life-changing comment out loud: "Auntie, that's the best applesauce I've ever tasted." From that moment on every Thanksgiving dinner held in her house, contained a huge bowl of Aunt Clara's applesauce. And as well as I can remember, the bowl got bigger and more sour as the years passed by. And always some unthinking niece or nephew

would say , “I’ve never tasted such applesauce, Auntie,” and a smiling Aunt Clara would pass the bowl again, “There’s plenty more,” she’d say. And she was right.

Tom Harvill, January 22, 1998