

I bought a bushel of peaches at Yoders of Tustin, but it will be a day or two before they are ready to can, freeze, and be ripe enough for jam making. I peeled and sliced a couple to eat this evening, and it made me think back to all of the peaches and other fruit that passed through the kitchens of my mother and grandmothers. Apples were homegrown, berries were either garden raised or wild in the woods and marshes, but peaches had to be purchased. Our cold spot here fifty miles from Lake Michigan has proved to be a daunting environment for any less than hardy fruit. Even the most cold-hardy peach trees freeze out here.

I guess it is no wonder. This past week—on the morning of August 24th, to be exact—we awoke to a thermometer reading that edged below the freezing mark. There was ice on the windshield of the pickup and on the seat of a tractor parked outside. The grass between here and the barn showed small patches of frost.

It was not until later that I went into the garden. There were many black leaves on squash, cucumbers, and melons. The buckwheat ground cover also had patches of frosted leaves. This is not an uncommon occurrence this time of year, but it is indicative of our microclimate here that others, even in our close neighborhood, did not experience frost. I guess the gods of fall and winter know how much I prefer their seasons to the heat of summer.

So, though we try to grow as much of our own food as possible, we do buy some fruits, including peaches.

I started thinking about peaches and how we always had canned peaches though we can't grow them ourselves. That led to memories of stories I heard on my father's lap when I was a little girl. He sat in an old Morris chair by the west window, close to the natural light and the lamp that stood on the table by his chair. Ulcerated eyes years before—probably acquired in the dusty atmosphere of the grain threshing crew—made his sight very diminished. Still, he was a daily reader, and sitting close to good light made it easier for him to read the daily newspaper and many, many books.

I would climb up into his lap as he sat in that chair and demand a story. His stock of homegrown stories was not extensive. But, I did not care. I either wanted to hear about: 1—the lamb and girl who found refuge in the haymow during a cold rain, 2—the night spearing ventures they took on the Pine River years before, 3—the weekly adventures in the choppings (the name the local people used for the second-growth forest in the area, now a national forest), or, best of all, 4—Going to the Peach Country. I know that they did make these trips to an area closer to the lake where fruit was grown, but it may be that my father invented the details. But, I liked the story.

He told of riding in the wagon behind the team of draft horses, a trip that took more than one day. They picked the peaches themselves, loaded the wagon, and on the afternoon of the second day away from home, started back. I assume they camped one night, and they did not reach home until long after dark on the second day of the return trip. This is really the part of the story I was waiting to hear and the only part that I remember well. Dad recalled that his father pointed out the North Star and said that it would take them home,

since it gave my grandfather a good indication of where he was on the flat area that they called the plains. I think this was the fascination for me in the story. I can mentally picture that loaded wagon, sleeping children, and Grandfather Lars watching the starry sky and piloting the family home.

So, every time I smell the aroma of the baskets of peaches that sit in the entry by the kitchen, I am back in the story of The Peach Country. Not a bad place to be.