

# Dreisbach-Dresbach Family Association Newsletter

February (part 2) 2020

*Dick Musselman is a member of the DDFA, a professional genealogist, a good friend, and a distant cousin, so when he recommends a topic for the DDFA newsletter to me, I listen! Shortly after he received the newsletter about Ground Hog Day, Dick wrote to me and suggested an issue on fasnachts. That idea was just too tempting to put aside, even if I had just sent out a newsletter a few weeks previously. So here you are - a newsletter about a Pennsylvania Dutch/Deitsch treat, the fasnacht (pronounced faws-nacht).*

**Fasnachts: What are they?** Fasnachts are deep-fried, yeast-raised, potato and flour based doughnuts, without the center hole, which are fried in real lard (i.e. rendered pigs fat). The traditional fasnacht has a coating of granulated sugar and has no jam or jelly filling. In fact, the real fasnacht needs none of these things, adding them would be gilding the lily. Traditionally, fasnachts are made and eaten on Shrove Tues, the day before Ash Wednesday, the start of the period of self-restraint called Lent. The word, *fasnacht*, is German and translates to "the night of the fast", an apt name for the final day before the 40 days and 40 nights of the Lenten fast, leading up to Easter.

**Lent Observances** today are generally seen as a voluntary commitment, but before the Reformation the observance of Lent was strictly controlled and enforced by the Catholic Church.

In medieval days, Lent meant eating only bread, beer, fish and vegetables! Ash Wednesday and Good Friday were total fasting days. On other days of Lent there was no food until 3pm, the hour of Our Lord's death. Water, watered-down beer and wine were allowed but no animal meats or fats in any form were permitted. No eggs. No dairy products (milk, cheese, cream, butter). No sweets, no fruits and nothing that was sweet was allowed.

If a person was caught eating meat or another forbidden item he/she could be punished by caning, whipping, or the removal of teeth!<sup>1</sup>

Lent also came at a time of year when food was becoming scarce.



*Fig. 1. Medieval painting of "Battle between Festival and Fasting", by Peter Bruegel the elder, 1559. Bottom middle of the picture - a fat man with a pie on his head, representing Festival time, sits astride a wine barrel. He jousts with an emaciated nun who represents "Fasting". People on the left of the painting are enjoying the day, those on the right are grim, thin and joyless.*

<sup>1</sup> <https://churchlifejournal.nd.edu/articles/a-closer-look-at-medieval-lents-toughness/>

Food put away for winter now had to be carefully hoarded. It had to last until the first crops appeared in late spring or early summer (depending upon where you lived). In that respect, Lent made a virtue of necessity.

The period immediately before Lent was marked by drunken, and sometimes lewd, festivals. All the food that might perish during Lent had to be consumed and the peasants took this opportunity for loud and lascivious festivals as well shown by the Breughel painting (Fig. 1) which depicts the battle between Festivities and Austerity, between Mardi Gras and Lent. The Festival is represented by a fat man, Lent is represented by an emaciated nun.

Not only was consumption of meats and meat products not allowed, the items themselves were not to be on kitchen shelves. The frugal housewife was not going to throw out good food, this meant the week before Lent was filled with preparing and consuming meat, sugar and fat-laden foods. It was Mardi-Gras - Fat Tuesday - time in the French speaking world. In Pennsylvania it was time to melt all the lard in the big kettle and make fasnachts!

There are three types of fasnachts, one made with baking powder, one with yeast - and the one that is typical of the Pennsylvania Dutch, which is made with potatoes, flour and yeast. All are deep fat fried and not as sweet as today's commercial doughnuts. Traditionally, fasnachts are square or triangular in shape and have a slit across the top (which is where, when you got a warm fasnacht, you put a big spoonful of homemade jam).

In the past, farm families were large and the expectation on the morning of Shrove Tuesday was that there would be heaps of freshly made, still warm, fasnachts on the kitchen table for breakfast. The women of the house got up very early to begin the process of mixing and "raising" the dough. As the aroma of frying fasnachts pervaded the house, the men-folk and children headed for the warm kitchen.

Always, there was somebody who slept in and made his appearance as the others were already seated at the kitchen table enjoying the warm treat. He was called "The Fasnacht!" and his appearance in the kitchen was greeted with loud applause and laughter - and he held this title off and on for the rest of the day. The morning of Ash Wednesday produced another good-natured label for a person who slept too long - "The Eshpuddlar". The last person to wake up and come to breakfast was given this name AND the chore to carry all the ashes from the stoves and fireplaces outside to the garbage heap.

Fasnachts are way too good to be eaten only once a year, but also too hard to make, and require too much lard, to be made very often. The result is that in Pennsylvania Dutch areas, church groups and other organizations like farm-based Grange Halls, occasionally hold "Fasnacht Suppers". The menu varies, but all are based on serving fresh, hot from frying, fasnachts.

My first memory of fasnachts is from when I was about 5 years old. We lived at the edge of the country, just outside Allentown, PA. Across the street from our house was a farmer's field and the farmer plowed it with



*Fig. 2. Traditional, square shaped fasnachts, covered with sugar and with a diagonal slit on the top.*

two big horses. It was 1948 and even then the suburbs were encroaching on the countryside. There was a small housing development was just down the road from our house.



*Fig.3. The author (Marcia Dreisbach Falconer) at age 6, when my best friend was Barbara Merkel.*

My best friend, Barbara Merkel, lived a block away. I didn't know this at the time but Barbara was an orphan. Her parents had been killed in a car accident when she was a baby and she was being raised by her grandparents. Her grandparents seemed quite old to me. Her grandmother had salt-and-pepper hair pulled straight back into a bun and she wore a long dress always covered by an apron. Her grandfather was mysterious. He appeared in the kitchen - which is where all life occurred in their house - grunted something, got what he requested (coffee usually) and went back outside to his large garage. He drove school buses and repaired them.

Their house had electricity, but it did not have running water. There was a pump over a water trough that was just outside the kitchen, housed in the unheated porch that also served as a mud room. When you needed water, you took a jug out to the porch, put it under the spout of the pump and then vigorously pumped the long handle up and down. The water came straight from a well - cold and delicious. I loved pumping for water.

In the kitchen was a big, wood-fired stove. Beside the stove was a bucket of wood. Barbara's grandmother would lift up a round plate on top of the stove with a wood-handle, to reveal the fire burning inside. Then she would add wood and the metal plate was plunked back in place. On the rear of the very large stove sat a very large metal teakettle. It was kept filled with water. When hot water was needed, Barbara's grandmother would gather up her apron, use it to protect her hand, lift the heavy tea pot and pour the nearly boiling water into another pot or mug or wherever the water was wanted. The stove had, to me, mysterious doors. Some opened to reveal big or small ovens. Others were actually drawers. The whole stove was HOT and we were warned away - although we both could feel the heat well enough that we knew not to touch the surface. That stove produced miraculous pies and cookies as well as a variety of breads and buns. I was fascinated by it since we had a very ordinary gas stove at our house.

There were other interesting things at Barbara's house. There was no bathroom - but there was a two "holer" outhouse midway down the yard. To get to it you went out the kitchen back door, past the pump and through the porch, then out another door, down two steps and along a cement pathway until you came to the wooden outhouse. It had a crescent moon cut in the door. Inside there was a standard height "hole" but beside it was a much lower and smaller "hole" that was made especially to fit Barbara (and me). There was also a jar of something white. To this day I have no idea what it was, but after using the outhouse, you were to shake some of this white powder into the hole. There was no electricity in the outhouse, but there was a hook to hang a lantern.

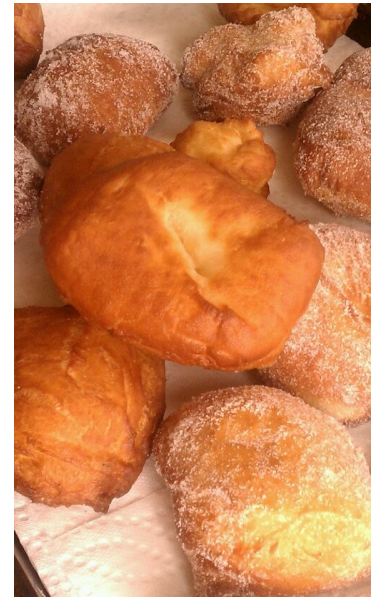
When I stayed overnight with Barbara, we shared her bed. It was a single bed with a very high, dark walnut, headboard and a rounded, dark wood foot end. I always found her bed a little scary. The other fascinating thing about staying overnight was the "pot" that went under the bed. It was made of heavy china, was, as I remember, totally white, and had a wood lid with a knob. This "thunder mug" was for use during the night so that one did not have to light a kerosene lamp, walk down the dark staircase, turn and enter the kitchen, walk through the kitchen, out the door, through the cold porch, open the outside door, go down the steps and down the walk and turn left to go into the outhouse. Squatting on the cold thunder mug was better, and very impressive to me - I was used to electricity and a regular bathroom toilet.

But the most unusual thing of all was that Barbara and her grandmother, and her grandfather, spoke only Pennsylvania Dutch! Her grandfather certainly knew English, but never used it in the house. I would guess her grandmother also knew English although I never heard her use it. The entire conversation was always in dialect. At our house we used the occasional phrase of dialect and a number of words were sprinkled throughout the conversation, but we did not speak Pennsylvania Dutch. That said, I quickly picked up sufficient words to be able to play with Barbara and even to hold conversations with her grandmother.

Now what, you may ask, does all this have to do with Fasnachts? Well - every year, on Shrove Tuesday (the day before Lent began), Barbara's grandmother made fasnachts. I was invited to come on Monday afternoon, have dinner with Barbara and her grandparents, sleep over in the big walnut bed and then wake up early on Tuesday morning to help make fasnachts.

Her grandmother had been up a long time before we got up. We ran through the cold house to get to the warm kitchen where we dressed in front of the big kitchen stove with the warmth pouring from it. Then we sat at the kitchen table while Barbara's grandmother brought us bacon and eggs and fried bread instead of toast. There was hot chocolate in big heavy mugs. Once done, the table was cleared and we were ready to start making fasnachts.

Barbara and I took turns "mashing potatoes", although I suspect her grandmother had already done most of the mashing. Then the magic of making yeast breads took place. A dough was created from mashed potatoes, flour, warm milk, eggs, butter, sugar. We were allowed to knead the bread and then it was put to rise. When it was ready, Barbara's grandmother called us and we rolled out the dough. Her grandmother actually did most of this, but we made our own batch of fasnachts. They were put to rise again and then cut into squares. We watched as her grandmother dropped them into the big pot of hot fat that stood on top of the stove. As our squares cooked, they popped up to the top of the fat. They were turned over and then scooped up and tossed onto newspaper to cool. When cool enough to touch, we sprinkled granulated sugar all over them (and probably all over the kitchen table and floor as well). Then we sat down to eat them - still warm, light, airy, sweet and utterly delicious.



*Fig. 4. Fasnachts as I remember them appearing on the kitchen table at Barbara's house.*

### **A recipe for Fasnachts:**

2 cups milk  
1 cup mashed potatoes with no milk or butter added  
1/2 cup sugar plus 1/2 tsp sugar  
1/4 pound (1 stick) butter  
1 package rapid rise yeast  
1/4 cup lukewarm water  
6 1/2 cups flour divided into 2 cups and 4 1/2 cups  
1 egg  
1 1/2 tsp salt  
3 lbs or 1 large can Lard or Crisco for frying

Scald the milk. In large bowl combine scalded milk and mashed potatoes. Add 1/2 cup sugar and the butter. Mix with electric mixer and cool to room temperature. Dissolve yeast in 1/4 cup warm water with 1/2 tsp sugar. Then add to potato mixture. Add 2 cups flour and mix. Cover with a towel and let rise in warm place for 25 minutes.

Beat egg and add salt to it. Add this to the potato flour mixture. Add the remaining flour and stir with a large wooden spoon. Turn onto well floured board and knead for 3 to 5 minutes. Add more flour to prevent dough from sticking to your fingers.

Grease a large bowl. Put the dough into the bowl, cover with a towel and let rise in a warm place for 2 hours or until double in size.

Put the rise dough on a lightly floured surface and roll until 3/4" thick. Cut dough into 3" to 4" strips, then cut strips into squares. Cut a slit in the top of each piece with a sharp knife.

Arrange dough pieces on trays about 2" apart. Cover with a towel and place trays in warm place for 45 minutes to an hour, or until the pieces have doubled in size.

Heat lard/shortening to 365F (use a thermometer). Deep fry the pieces, turning one time, until both sides are golden brown. Drain on paper towels. Sprinkle with granulated sugar when room temperature.

ENJOY!



From: <http://www.grouprecipes.com/36211/pennsylvania-dutch-fastnachts.html>