

# My Life in Pie

## “Little House” on Another Prairie

I blame Laura Ingalls Wilder for my constant craving for homemade pies. On the pages of her Little House series of books, I learned that Ma could make pies out of almost anything: green pumpkins (*The Long Winter*), black birds (*Little Town on the Prairie*), dried apples (*By the Shores of Silver Lake*), and even vinegar (*Little House in the Big Woods*). In fact, the only time when Ma did not bake a pie was when their eponymous little house was on the prairie, where “stewed dried blackberries and little cakes” were the closest things that Pa and the girls got to a proper dessert and that was only at Christmas dinner.

When I was eight and speeding through every book by Wilder that I could find—eschewing *Farmer Boy* till the very end because it was, eww, about a Boy!—every sentence about pie making and eating was pure magic to me. They still are. While I have put away now, along with other childish things, my calico sunbonnet (I will leave it up to you, dear reader, to decide whether I mean this figuratively or literally), I have kept close to my heart and my open mouth Wilder’s vivid evocation of the Good American Pie.

Like many quintessentially American fare, pies were foods that I read about but that I rarely ate at home when I was growing up. Our home back then was the small town of Boiling Springs, North Carolina circa the mid 1970s. The exigencies of the Vietnam War, displacement, and refugee relocation had landed my family at one end of the Bible Belt and, in retrospect, smack in the middle of Pie Country.

I say “in retrospect” because it is only as an adult that I have come to realize that my family must have been surrounded in Boiling Springs by some of the finest examples of Southern pies. Where were the fresh peach pies, the lemon meringues, the sweet potatoes, and the coconut creams? None of them ever made it through the door of our trailer home. Or perhaps they did but only in their most inferior and disappointing guises.

I remember begging my mother at the supermarket check-out line and finally getting (she probably thought of it as just punishment for my bad behavior) a waxy paper encased Hostess fruit pie, its inside oozing a lava-like flow that carried with it round deflated orbs that I took on faith were “cherries.” I remember a slightly better version of these handheld pies that we would sometime get from fast food restaurants. These pies were better because their fillings—uniform, rectangular pieces of apple enrobed in a gel speckled with ersatz cinnamon—were warm, and their crusts were crispy though somewhat redolent of fries, as they were probably both cooked in the same vat of oil.

Where were the round, oven fresh beauties that brought smiles and exclamations of joy from Pa and the girls? The lard crust rolled out that very morning by Ma, the filling full of brown sugar and spices, and, of course, the love that Ma baked inside each and every one of her pies.

That Wilder was some writer! Or perhaps I was projecting just a bit back then, elevating her simple sentences about a humble dessert into a pastoral about all the things that were missing from my daily diet.

My mother was not Ma. Raised in Saigon with its boulevards dotted with French patisseries, my mother thought that American pies were the distant, country cousins of French tarts. When compared to a *pate sucre* or *pate brisee*, the American piecrust was just too thick and leaden for her taste. She also thought that pies, like all American desserts, were too sweet, causing her to shiver even on the warmest days. (My mother eventually came around when she met the fresh strawberry pie, with its towering mound of berries held together by a cornstarch or gelatin thickened red “glaze.” We all have our unexpected Achilles’ heel.)

My father was not Pa. My father's brand of self-sufficiency—his multiple university degrees, his fluency in French and English, his ability to swallow his pride—would get us out of our trailer home (an electrical fire would also hasten the move), but what he had already seen of the world would never allow him to utter that mantra, "all's well that ends well," that Pa did so often, miraculously shrugging off in the process all the care and the weight of his agrarian world.

With or without a sunbonnet, I was not Mary, Laura, nor baby Carrie. Even back then, I understood that the closest character I could be in Wilder's books was an Indian child, and you remember what Ma said about Indians don't you? *"I don't like Indians around underfoot."*

Our little family was on a prairie though. We were alone and surrounded on all sides, not by a wide sea of tall grass but by its emotional equivalence. We were isolated in our not knowing, our not belonging, and our not home. All of the things that we put in our bellies those first few years in Boiling Springs might as well have been green pumpkins, black birds, dried apples, and vinegar. No wonder I dreamed of making pies out of them, of transforming these disparate and the improbable things into something good and tender, and feeding them to those whom I loved.

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