

Stories for dinner

by [Rodney Clapp](#) in the [August 21, 2013](#) issue



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My wife I took our annual summer trip to Oklahoma, and as usual we visited a host of relatives. Among the deceased relatives I keenly miss on these trips are my grandparents.

My last remaining grandparent, Grandma Clapp, died three Octobers ago. All four grandparents lived in decent health through my high school years. Growing up I lived on a farm just a quarter mile from Granddad and Grandma Clapp's house and 13 miles from the small town where Grandma and Granddad Adams owned and operated a grocery store.

Thanksgiving and Christmas were always extended family events. But we also got together for Sunday lunch (or "dinner," as we called it). Sundays alternated from one grandmother's table to the other's.

We would go directly from church to the designated house. Usually some aunts, uncles and visitors also gathered around the table. We took turns saying grace at Grandma Clapp's house. Grandma Adams, for her part, had a collection of small cards with Bible verses. One lay at each plate, and each person at the table read a verse in turn.

The food and gallons of iced tea were always excellent. There were, of course, lots of roasts and fried chicken and pork chops, with mashed potatoes and gravy. I remember broccoli in hollandaise sauce and other enhanced vegetables. And there

were always desserts. I especially enjoyed Grandma Adams's peach cobbler, with plenty of doughy crust. Grandma Clapp was a master baker of pies—cherry pies, pumpkin pies, coconut cream pies—and she made an unforgettable chocolate cake, with fudgy and coffee-laced frosting.

The meals may have been too rich in calories, but they were also wonderfully rich in conversation. Stories were the main course of fare—stories about characters who visited the grocery store, reports about incidents on the farm, and a stock of stories rehearsed over the years—stories that defined the family and often brought a laugh.

Mom told stories of growing up in the grocery store and claimed her earliest memory was lying in a red crib in a back room of the store. Dad remembered his growing up years with two brothers, who roamed the cow pastures and captured a menagerie of wild animals they then tried to domesticate. In one case, they sufficiently tamed a badger (the trick, Dad said, was catching the animals when they were young) that it became a house pet. Once they scored a skunk and used a pocket knife to puncture its stink bag. Or so they thought. The skunk sprayed a neighbor's dog a few weeks after the not-so-successful operation.

Granddad Clapp told a story on me. Visiting in diapers as he stood atop his tractor to fuel it, I found his water jug on the ground. I unscrewed the top and started chucking rocks into the jug. "Young man," Granddad asked, "Do you want me to spank you?" He loved my snappy retort: "Granddad, do you want me to go home?"

One story involved Grandma Adams, who was always up for a good joke. I was in early high school, and a Bible study group that I led would be meeting at Grandma and Granddad Adams's house that Sunday night. Somewhere I had gotten the idea that one of the "treats" should be slices of soap dipped in chocolate. Grandma and I were soon in the kitchen, heating chocolate and cutting up bars of Ivory. My mother paced at the back of the kitchen, fretting that someone might get sick or be offended. "Oh, Barbara Ann," Grandma scolded her daughter, "just leave the kitchen. You never were any fun!"

I could add countless other stories of my grandparents' care and constant presence—of pets gifted, of nights spent with one or the other grandparents while Mom and Dad were out late, of working alongside Granddad Clapp on the farm, of getting trained to sack groceries at the Adams Grocery. It was a privilege and a gift—one of the greatest gifts of my life—to grow up immersed in the lives of these

hardworking, quietly godly, life-loving elders.

As I enter my late fifties and may soon become a grandparent myself, I look back on one other aspect of my grandparents' lives and their example—how they lived a lifetime of marriage and became deep, unwavering companions to one another. That topic calls for one last story.

When Granddad Clapp was in his seventies, he suffered from acute emphysema. (He had begun smoking before he was a teenager and did not quit until he was in his late sixties.) It had reached the point where he barely had the breath to make it to the bathroom and back to his easy chair. One day, leaving the bathroom, he fell and could not get up. Grandma couldn't raise him, so she called for help. Then she took a blanket, lay beside him and spread the blanket over them. Together, embracing, they waited.