

Lillie's Legacy

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The box containing my family treasures displays the brilliant colors of the rainbow. Like the box, the contents represent experiences that are vividly colored with reflections many centuries old; these memories will last an eternity. The wonderful family treasures contained in the box include a picture of my maternal grandmother, Mama Lillie, her wonderful teacake recipe, a cup and saucer from Japan, and a Lipton tea bag.

My family treasures date back to the 1800's when my great-grandparents gave birth to my grandmother on February 14, 1902, in Wilson, Louisiana, located in East Feliciana Parish. My great-grandparents worked as sharecroppers and resided in separate living quarters with my grandmother Lillie and her sister Maggie. They lived on land owned by a white family, Mr. and Mrs. Belise. My great-grandmother passed away suddenly when my grandmother was only seven years of age. Mama Lillie received no formal education and was unable to read or write. She was reared by Mr. and Mrs. Belise, while serving as their cook and housekeeper until age seventeen. My grandmother remained loyal to them until their deaths. After moving to Baton Rouge, Louisiana, she met and married my grandfather, and they later became the parents of five wonderful children. Mama Lillie passed away on May 7, 1998, but her legacy lives on through my family treasures.

Although she was unable to read or write, Mama Lillie's wisdom and life experiences spoke volumes, which remain forever written in the hearts of those who knew her. Ironically, the only writing she ever produced was an "X," which she used to sign her name. Her picture in my

family treasures is signed with an "X."

Growing up next door to her, I often benefited from her wonderfully-prepared and tasty meals. Her recipes were not written on paper, but she never failed to accurately add just the right ingredients, yielding great results. She freely shared her recipes, though she challenged the recipient to "make sure you get it right."

One such shared recipe was Mama Lillie's tea cake recipe, my next family treasure. While she was still alive, I wrote her recipe on index cards and shared them with her and other family members. She smiled and thanked me as I read the recipe to her. Each holiday, I now bake cookies in her memory, using her recipe.

I can well remember the many times we made teacakes together. I sat in the warm kitchen on a stool as I watched her skillfully mix each ingredient with a wooden spoon. She never gave me measurements, but always instructed me to watch and learn. She also did not care to use modern kitchen tools, sharing that her method was always best. She rolled the dough onto a floured kitchen counter top and began to form each cookie by hand. She then set each perfectly-shaped piece of dough on a large cookie sheet and placed this into the oven. I was filled with excitement and anticipation as I watched the cookies bake through the oven door.

Next, she placed a pot of water on the gas lit burner to boil. I knew immediately it was tea time. While the aroma of freshly baked teacakes filled the kitchen, she placed five tea bags in the pot of boiling water and turned off the burner. I was amazed that she never used a tea kettle. She allowed the tea to cool before she added one-half cup of sugar to sweeten it. In the meantime, the teacakes had become a light golden brown and were ready to be removed from the oven. She reminded me that they had to cool before I took my first bite. She reached in the cupboard and pulled out a set of cups and saucers as the heavenly smell of teacakes filled the

entire house. She poured tea into each cup and placed the cup and saucer onto the dining room table.

To embody these memories, my next treasure is a Lipton tea bag. She never bought any other brand, and, today, I only drink Lipton tea. Also, since we always used our special tea set, my last family treasure is one cup and saucer set passed down to me from Mama Lillie. It was a part of a collection of porcelain dishes, each bearing the image of a perfectly shaped yellow rose bud and bloom. She received a twelve-piece place setting from my uncle, a World War II veteran, who purchased the dishes in Japan during the war.

Before enjoying our teacakes, Mama Lillie would instruct me to have a seat at the dining room table. The sweet aroma filled the air as she placed the delightful teacakes on the table directly in front of me. As we sat and enjoyed the fruit of her labor, she shared numerous stories about her experiences growing up in rural Louisiana. Her accounts and advice have been passed from generation to generation. During Thanksgiving and Christmas, we recall the stories and share different words of wisdom passed down from Mama Lillie, as we enjoy our teacakes.

Mama Lillie's Teacakes

3 eggs (slightly beaten)

2 cups of sugar

1 cup of butter (softened)

4 cups of flour

2 teaspoons of baking powder

½ teaspoon of nutmeg

1 teaspoon vanilla flavoring

Pinch of salt

Cream butter and sugar.

Add slightly beaten eggs, flour, baking powder, vanilla, salt, and nutmeg.

Roll out dough on floured countertop and cut.

Place each piece of dough onto cookie sheet.

Bake 12-15 minutes at 400 degrees.

Makes about 9-10 dozen.

Serve with a hot pot of Lipton tea!