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"Sippin' Bourbon Dressing"

On December 5, 1933, the 21st Amendment to the Constitution was ratified. Prohibition died a quick death, and few grieved. Some celebrated until the alcohol ran free in the streets while others, like my Pentecostal Uncle Ralph, mourned its passing. Like a rose coming to full bloom in spring, my Aunt Aggie, his wife, came to life. Aunt Aggie loved two things: family and Jim Beam sippin' bourbon as she called it. She'd gone 13 years semi-sober during prohibition, except for the occasional bottle smuggled to her from a speakeasy. Finally, as an American citizen, she could vote, be a practicing Irish Catholic, and buy her own liquor. No more shady dealings or permission from her husband needed. To Uncle Ralph's dismay, her bottle of sippin' bourbon had often been looked upon more fondly than he. Everyone in the family was aware of how much bourbon she consumed. She admitted it often enough in the absence of her husband. In spite of their religious and drinking differences, their marriage remained solid over the years.

Uncle Ralph and Aunt Aggie hosted the family Thanksgiving in 1935. The whole family converged at the appointed time. The women gathered in the kitchen preparing the assorted side dishes and sharing family gossip. As was her habit when Uncle Ralph wasn't in the house, the bottle of sippin' bourbon sat on the kitchen counter nearby as she prepared the turkey for its fate.

Uncle Ralph came through the back door unexpectedly and greeted the women in the kitchen. Aunt Aggie grabbed the bourbon bottle and shoved it inside the cavity of the turkey before Uncle Ralph could notice it. Apparently, she'd already exceeded her monthly allotment. He chatted with the ladies for a while, catching up on the family's comings and goings for the past year, then kissed Aunt Aggie on the cheek and went to join the men and their cigars. She

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laughed it off saying with a wave of her hand that what he doesn't know can't hurt him. I'm sure the ladies warned her that one of these days, the jig would be up.

When it came time to carve the turkey, Uncle Ralph followed family custom by first spooning the stuffing from the turkey into a bowl, then carving the bird. Aunt Aggie, infamous in our family for her turkey dressing, was about to become a legend. Before carving, Uncle Ralph dug into the cavity of the bird to dish out the eagerly anticipated dressing. First scoop he pulls out a serving spoon full of delicious looking dressing with a goodly portion of a Jim Beam Kentucky Straight Bourbon Whiskey label lying upon it.

Earlier when Aunt Aggie took the bottle out of the turkey, she hadn't noticed that the label had soaked off inside the bird. Uncle Ralph looked to his right at Aunt Aggie, who avoided his eyes and then he peeled the label off the top of the glob of stuffing and patted it onto her cheek. She reached up to remove it.

He stilled her hand. “No, dear. Be proud of your accomplishments.” They looked into each other's eyes as the story goes. Then Uncle Ralph added, “God knows you've worked hard for that badge.”

To date, that Thanksgiving Day remains the best family holiday story that's shared with each generation in turn.

In her honor, our family turkey dressing recipe is referred to as “Sippin' Bourbon Dressing”. Even though there's no bourbon in the ingredients, whatsoever. Well, it might be more accurate to say that, as far as we know, there isn't. Here's the recipe in case you're curious.

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Sippin’ Bourbon Dressing

2 bags Sage and Onion bread cubes (Aunt Aggie made her own)

2 sticks butter

2 onions diced

1 bunch of celery diced (no leafy parts)

1 quart chicken stock

4 eggs beaten

8 tablespoons sage

Salt & pepper

Directions:

In a frying pan, melt the butter. Add onions and celery and sauté until translucent.

Put the bread cubes into a very large bowl. Pour the vegetable/butter mixture over the bread cubes and stir.

Pour eggs over bread cube mixture and stir. I use homogenized eggs so I can sample the dressing for taste without worrying about salmonella.

Pour 3 cups of the chicken stock over the bread cube mixture. Add the sage, salt and pepper to taste. Stir. If the dressing seems to dry add chicken broth until all bread cubes are wet. A little at a time. Spray a 9 x 13” baking pan with Pam. Dish the stuffing into the baking pan, cover with foil and place into a 350-degree oven for thirty minutes. Remove the foil and let the dressing brown for an additional 15 minutes.

Sorry for the guesstimate on some of the ingredients, but the cooks in my family never measured anything. It’s infuriating. No recipes needed for them. No, just give them a pan, an apron, some room, and a little help from Congress.