

I Owe My Life to a Watermelon

By Cindi Jones

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I owe my life to a watermelon – sweet, juicy, and vine-ripened to perfection. Although I wasn't born until 1957, the story of my existence started in 1936 at the Eisenbarth family farm stand in Torrington, WY where my 18-year-old grandmother was selling watermelons. Her customer was a handsome 22-year-old man just passing through town. Grandma told me it was love at first sight (or "bite"...I know, bad pun).

My grandmother, Margaretha Eva Eisenbarth, grew up on a farm about 4 miles from Torrington. She was the youngest of thirteen children. The last three kids were girls – not a good gender configuration to help on the family farm. Margaretha was allowed to attend school through the 8th grade, which was not uncommon at that time. But she was needed on the farm and her school attendance suffered. On her 4th grade report card, she missed 26 out of the first 60 days; in 7th grade, she missed 15 out of the first 30 days, but was able to maintain an 80 - 90% GPA.



By the time Margaretha (now known as “Marjorie”) was 18 years old, she and an older brother were the only children living at home. They helped out on the farm with the assistance of a few hired hands. Her parents - father, Carl, now 70 years old, and mother, also named Margaretha, now 66 years old – were German-Russians from the Black Sea who immigrated to the U.S. in 1902. Marjorie’s first nine siblings were born in Rohrbach, South Russia; she and her last three siblings were born in Colorado.

Marjorie wrote that she had a happy childhood. “My parents were good Christian people. They worked hard. We all worked hard and, you know, it didn’t hurt us a bit, even though I’m sure at times, we envied the City Kids!” Although the Eisenbarth family was by no means rich, Grandma told me she never felt poor because they had what they needed to get by. But, as much as she loved her parents and her siblings who all farmed nearby, she privately hoped that farming sugar beets, alfalfa, corn - and even watermelons - wasn’t in her future.

German-Russians loved watermelon and it was a staple at many social gatherings. In true German-Russian fashion, none of the fruit was wasted, including the bitter seeds and rinds. The seeds (the ones that didn’t get spit at annoying siblings) were dried and used for later plantings in both the Old Country and the U.S. The fruit and rinds were often pickled. When Winter set in, pickled watermelon was a sweet reminder of Summer.

Back to the watermelon story... My grandfather, Gilbert Christensen (aka “Gib”), a Dane, was one of nine kids in a poor farming family in Kearney County, NE and Decatur County, KS. Because Gib was needed on the farm, he was 22 years old before he finally earned his high school diploma. Shortly after graduation, he and his brother left Kansas to find work in Klamath Falls, OR. They had traveled about 350 miles of their 1,500 mile journey when they stopped in Torrington and bought the watermelon from Marjorie’s farm stand. He was the 22-year-old man just passing through town. Striking up a conversation, Gib asked Marjorie what there was to do in Torrington. She told him about the weekly Saturday dance at the Grange Hall. He went to the dance and according to Grandma, they “fell madly in love.”

Gib extended his stay in Torrington to be near Marjorie so he got a job hauling sugar beets during Torrington’s beet harvest. Gib needed to get to Klamath Falls with his brother, but he promised he’d come back for Marjorie. She wrote, “I felt like dying when he left. But he promised me when he got a job, he’d get me and, bless him, he did exactly that.”



After writing each other for a few months, he formally “proposed” in a letter postmarked January 11, 1937. The lead-up to the proposal went like this: “I really got some good news the other day. The boss asked me if I wanted a steady job. I am making \$115 now and if I stay, I’ll get a raise in the spring.” Now, for the proposal: “But I’m going to need a cook tho if you’ll be the one.” I guess that’s the way one proposes long-distance – no phones, no texts, no beating ‘round the bush!

Just as Gib promised, he returned to Torrington a few months later and they married April 18, 1937 with her family and friends in attendance. I doubt fresh watermelon was on the menu because it was too early in the season. Perhaps they had pickled

watermelon instead!

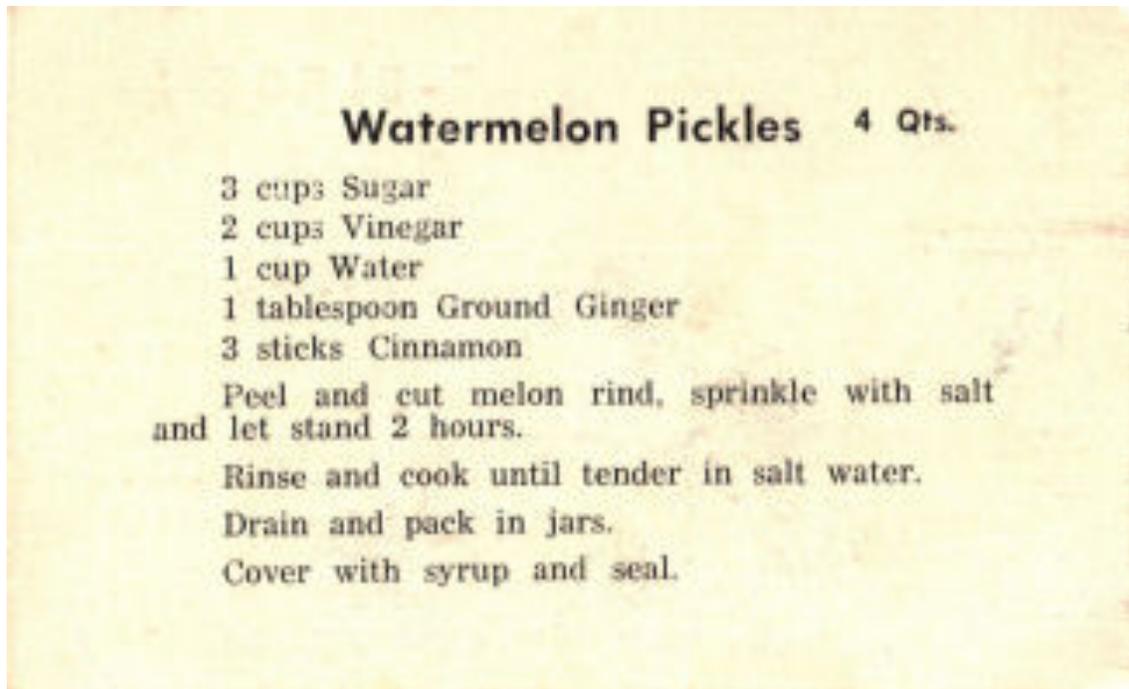
Gib and Marjorie both agreed neither wanted to farm. They moved to Klamath Falls and Portland, OR, and finally to San Jose, CA where Gib worked in the infancy of the aerospace industry.

So, I exist because of a watermelon. I can’t think of a more sweet and delicious fruit to owe my existence!

How to Pick Out a Watermelon

Grandma could pick out a good watermelon every time! I can still hear Grandma telling me how to select the sweetest, ripest melon.

- Pick out a symmetrical watermelon that isn’t bright green – dull green is better.
- Make sure the watermelon is heavy because sugar weighs more than water.
- “Thwap it” with the palm of your hand – it should sound hollow, not dull.
- Look for a yellowish-orange spot on the watermelon. That means it was allowed to ripen on the ground longer and will be sweeter.
- Look for brown lines or spots – those are “bee stings” which means it was pollinated by the bees and it’ll be sweeter.



NOTE: There are more pictures accompanying this story on the SVCGR website including their wedding certificate and the wedding party. However, you will need a website login to view them.

<https://www.svcgr.org/german-russian-watermelons>

September 28, 2020 Update - Deanne Ellsworth

Cindi, really enjoyed reading your story. It got me reminiscing about my ancestors and growing up. Here is my version of the watermelon recipe

4 lbs rinds or 1 watermelon peeled and cubed and soaked over night in 1 gal water with ½ c salt.

Next morning pour out water, rinse good and add:

8 c sugar

4 c water

2 c vinegar

3 sticks cinnamon

3 teaspoons whole cloves

3 lemons, sliced

Boil about 3 ½ hrs until rinds are clear. Pour into bottles, add syrup and seal.

You'll have to try these.... Really good.... Deanne