

Popcorn Proves to Be Delicacy, Mince Meat a Mystery

Reprinted from Tundra Times
February 3, 1964
By HOWARD ROCK
Times Editor

"Mother, what's happening? What are you doing?" Aunt Mumangeena exclaimed backing away apparently half afraid. Soon she was in the corner back of the room looking at me incredulously.

"Mother, you should stop that. It might hurt you."

Aunt Mumangeena always called me "mother" because I had been named after my grandmother who was Mumangeena's mother. It was embarrassing at first because, after all, I was getting to be a big boy. After being called mother by my aunt for a long time the resentment gradually lessened. After all, Aunt Mumangeena was very fond of me.

"Don't be afraid, Aunt Mumangeena, I'm just fixing up something to eat," I said, amused.

"If that is something to eat, it certainly make strange noises," she answered unbelievably.

Chore Boy

I had just come home from the schoolhouse after chopping kindling and carrying half full buckets of coal. I wasn't grown enough yet to carry full buckets. The teacher had hired me to do those chores after school during the school week. I probably wasn't the best worker but I had one advantage. I could speak little better English than most of my fellow pupils.

Strange Pay

It was Friday and it was my pay day. As I worked, I anticipated my week's pay. I never knew what I was going to get. I got something different each week. One week it would be a can of tomatoes, another week, a can of peaches, a bag of beans, rice, a can of tea or coffee, and so forth.

One Friday, after work, the teacher paid me something I couldn't figure out — as mightily as I tried. It was an oblong package about two inches thick, four inches wide, and about six inches long. It was in a paper carton and I couldn't tell what was in it.

The teacher tried to explain, but since my understanding of the English language was still limited, I couldn't fully make out what he was talking about. He kept spelling out P-I-E and then he would say PIE. The more he tried, the more confused I got. I vaguely remembered hearing the word before but I didn't bother to find out what it was.

After making a valiant try to make me understand, the teacher finally gave up. He thrust the package into my hands, shrugged, and said, "Here, you go home now."

I left obediently, clutching the package. Instead of going home to Mumangeena's and Uncle Nayukuk's sod-igloo, I ran to my parent's house which was nearby.

Lived With Aunt, Uncle

When I was seven years old, mostly through Aunt Mumangeena's insistence, and since my parent's house was crowded, it was decided that I should live with my aunt and her husband, Nayukuk. I didn't mind the arrangement too much because Aunt Mumangeena loved me.

She proved it by doing extra little things for me and affectionately calling me mother. My uncle didn't seem to mind one way or the other. He was not a smiling man but once in a while he would smile at me and that made me feel good. He was not a talking man either but he would say a few words to me occasionally. He said them

gently as if he wanted to take my hand and take a walk on the beach.

In spite of Uncle Nayukuk's reticence, I felt at home with him. It must have been an unspoken devotion between us.

Family's Curiosity

When I entered my parent's home, my brothers and sisters, including mother, looked up. Almost in unison, they asked, "What is that in your hands?" Father had not yet come home from hunting.

"Amai," (I don't know,) I said.

"Let's see what's in it," my sister, Akniachak, demanded.

I opened one end of the package and pulled out the contents. The oblong object was covered with transparent paper. I opened the end and smelled. So did my brothers and sisters, and mother, too.

"It smells something like prunes and yet it's not," mother said. "What does it say on the container?"

"I don't know what it is but I can spell the letters. M-I-N-C-E M-E-A-T. The teacher told me it was MINCE MEAT but I don't know what it's for," I answered.

Is It Meat?

All of us tasted it. It tasted sweet but it didn't taste like fruit. I didn't know what MINCE was but I knew what MEAT meant. I told mother what I could make out of the package.

"If that is meat, it's the strangest kind of meat I have ever tasted," mother said resignedly. "You better take it to your aunt. That woman can eat anything and she'll probably like it."

I hurried home, Mumangeena was boiling some seal meat for

our dinner, Nayukuk came back, from hunting shortly after I did. He brought home two seals. My aunt was overjoyed because Uncle Nayukuk didn't always hunt because he was somewhat lazy. When he did go, he usually brought something home.

Mystified

When I entered the igloo with my week's pay, Mumangeena became curious at once.

"Mother, you got paid today. What is it this time?" she asked.

"I don't know. Here, you taste it," I offered.

She pinched a piece off and put it in her mouth. She chewed on it gingerly. There was a questioning look on her face.

"This stuff doesn't taste like anything I've ever tasted. I don't think I like it. I wish the teacher had paid you a can of peaches. How good those peaches are," Mumangeena said.

When Nayukuk had taken off his hunting cloths, his wife offered him a piece of my pay, saying "Mother was paid today with this stuff. See if you like it."

Mumangeena gave him a mouthful. He chewed on it for several moments and then walked over to our little Arctic stove, removed the lid off the top opening and spat his mouthful into it. He went to the side of the room and sat down without comment.

"I don't think we can do anything with this stuff," said Mumangeena, ruefully. "It's kind of funny sweetness, isn't it, mother?"

She put the mincemeat into its container and tossed it behind the stove. I do not know what she ever did with it after that.

Exciting Time

It was around the last part of March and the men and women were busy getting ready for spring whaling. It was an exciting time of the year in the village. Aunt Mumangeena was busy making mukluks and a new reindeer skin parka for Nayukuk. He would need them when he went out with my father's crew as a helmsman.

I kept doing the chores for the school, sometimes hurriedly because I didn't want to miss the nice custom of whaling captains when they pass out tidbits of muktuk, caribou meat, sourdough biscuits, Eskimo doughnuts, and other things, to the children of the village after the crews put new coverings of oogruk skins on their whaling umiaks.

Anticipation

Friday came around and I had a pleasant feeling of anticipation of what I was going to be paid again that day. When I finished my chores, I knocked at the teacher's door. He opened it and asked me in.

"Well, this is Friday once again," the teacher said. "Let's see, what shall we get for you this week. Yes — I think I know."

He walked into a room and came out after a couple of minutes carrying a paper bag.

"You know what these are?" the teacher asked.

"Yes, sir," I answered with pleasure.

"A frying pan will work fine when you prepare them. Be sure and put a cover on it," he instructed.

I had seen them prepared before and I knew exactly what to do, but I suddenly realized that Aunt Mumangeena didn't have

a frying pan. I began to think of what I was going to use. I thanked the teacher and walked out.

Improvisation

I ran home to our little igloo and entered. Mumangeena was puttering around getting some meat to cook for our dinner. Nayukuk was filing and sharpening the four-pronged hook on his sealing line. He had not gone hunting that day.

As soon as I got into the house, I asked, "Aunt Mumangeena, have you got an empty coffee can?"

"Yes, mother, there is one or two over there in the corner. What do you want it for?"

"Can I have it? I want to cook something in it," I said anxiously.

"That's ridiculous. Coffee can so small. How can you cook anything in it?"

"I will. You wait and see," I promised.

I took the can and went outside. I took a piece of driftwood and put it on a little sawhorse we had. I put the can over the end of it, took an axe and made a slit over there in the corner. When I went inside, I got a hammer and a couple of small nails.

Aunt Mumangeena was curiously watching me and so was Uncle Nayukuk.

"What is mother going to do now?" my aunt asked herself.

"Wait a while and you'll see," I said, hammering a piece of kindling a foot long on the can for a handle.

I showed the contents of my week's pay to Mumangeena and Nayukuk.

"They look almost exactly like ground willow seeds to me."

(Continued on Page 12)

Arctic Survival—

(Continued from Page 11)

What are they?" my aunt wondered.

I put some of them into the can and they rattled tinnily. I could feel suspense building up in Aunt Mumangeena and Uncle Nayukuk. I put the cover on the can, opened the stove door and placed it over hot embers.

"Mother" Not Rational

"Such goings on!" my aunt exclaimed. "You're not very rational today, mother. If you're going to cook those things, why didn't you put water on them?"

"They don't need any water," I answered proudly. "Come over here and watch me while I do this."

She sidled over close to me and watched with interest and wonderment. I moved the can from side to side and forth and back in small swift motions over the hot coals. I could sense Aunt Mumangeena keeping time with her head as I manipulated the can.

The First Pop

All of a sudden, there was a distinct "POP" in the can and a simultaneous "PING" as the object hit the tin cover. Mumangeena jerked and let out a cry.

"What was that?" she asked worriedly.

Other pops began to follow in quick succession. Aunt Mumangeena emitted quick little cries and began to get alarmed. She got up on her feet and began to walk backwards watching intently.

"You better stop that, mother. It might hurt you!"

I smiled at her.

The pops continued rapidly in the can. When they subsided, I pulled the can out of the coals. My aunt was still in the back of the room watching warily, not daring to come close.

"Come and see what I did, Aunt Mumangeena. Don't be afraid. Come and see these," I pleaded with amusement.

She came forward gingerly. The can was still hot so I put my mittens on and took the lid off. There they were, a coffee can full of clean white fluffs — and what savory aroma they had.

My aunt looked at them, then at me, for several moments. Her eyes were wide and then she suddenly broke into a loud laughter. Uncle Nayukuk was also looking with much more interest than I have ever seen him display.

"I know them! I know what they are! So that's the way they do them. What do you call them? I have forgotten."

"Popcorn, Aunt Mumangeena!" I volunteered proudly.

Both Mumangeena and Nayukuk had eaten popcorn before but they were completely ignorant of how they were made, nor did they have an idea what they looked like before they popped.

I offered the contents of the can. Mumangeena chatted happily as she ate while Nayukuk was silent but obviously enjoying the popcorn. The canful was quickly consumed.

Swallowing her last mouthful, Aunt Mumangeena looked at me and smiled.

"Mother, you better make some more of those — those —"

"Popcorn," I said with glee.