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Quickly, he turned to retrace his route, but his empty footsteps in the snow had disappeared amidst the gnarled gray tangle of bare plum and sumac bushes. He was deep in the middle of the thicket, deeper than he'd ever been. He began to panic, and lost his sense of direction. The wind burned.

He positioned his shotgun vertically in front of him, and moved left, plowing into the snarl. Suddenly the short bushes in his path exploded with the flutter of flying quail, and in one smooth motion, he tucked the butt of the gun in his shoulder, saw his father appear on the slope to his left, heard the dogs running to his right, caught a good lead on two quail flying close together, picked out the first and gently squeezed the trigger. The automatic twenty gauge boomed, ejected the shell, and rechambered a new one while Matt drew a bead on the second blur moving in a gentle arc ahead. He shot off another round and the blast made him numb.

He tried to move, but he was spent. He felt as though he were standing in a vacuum, where sight and sound did not exist. He hadn't seen the first bird fall, but he knew the second one had folded like the hawk he had imagined.

Sal picked up the quail, wings beating the dead air around the dog's mouth and pranced back, head held high and proud, as if she had done all the work. He could see his father taking the bird from the dog, smiling, the way his mother said he did when he saw Matt for the first time.

He lowered the gun slightly, his vision blurred from the excitement and the cold. The smell of gun powder hung in the air, and blood raced through his body, tingling his cold toes. He heard his father coaxing the dogs to work. Matt stared at his shotgun. The heat from the barrel had formed the oil into an odd moire pattern. A dullness had spread over the receiver from the spent powder, and sweat from his left hand had displaced the oil on the forestock, leaving his handprint on the finish. The receiver, hot from the burning powder, warmed his hands as he caressed the cordite from the steel.

D-e-a-d, he thought, dragging each letter apart, stretching the victory across the prairie for every living thing to hear. The tension and the cold he had felt were gone, a peaceful calmness had settled over him. He took two shells from his breast pocket and loaded them gently into the magazine, noting how smoothly they slid forward, how securely each one locked into place ■

Building the Thanksgiving Plate

BY KEITH LONG

If in the deep, dark future, archeologists dig up the remains of my family photo album, they'll probably remark at the regularity with which we ancient peoples ate so much. I cannot remember a time when more than eight members of the Long family sat down to a meal together that somebody didn't get up and take a photo.

So there we are, strung throughout the album, woofing down mashed potatoes, chasing black-eyed peas around the plate, and smirking over strawberry shortcake.

Archeologists will point to the photo album as solid evidence that 20th-century humans spent 97 percent of their time eating, and the other three percent of their time unwrapping gifts while sitting by some tree they killed.

They will establish a number of theories on the evidence: 1) that ancient peoples had a higher metabolism rate; 2) that ancient peoples didn't have many hobbies; 3) that ancient peoples stayed continuously around a food-laden table for protection against wild, carnivorous beasts, and 4) that ancient peoples competed fiercely for the title of "fattest of the tribe."

Maybe the archeologists will find another family album of those kids in the Mountain Dew commercials, and see that humans had recreational activities other than eating. I know for a fact that some families go skiing, some go golfing, some go hiking, some go spelunking, some go shopping.

But not us. We eat.

If it's a Fourth of July photo, then we're cooking hamburgers and hot dogs on the grill. If it's New Year's Day, we're doing glazed ham and the black-eyed pea thing. If it's Christmas, the photos are of a table stocked with quail, potatoes, biscuits, and gravy. If it's Ground Hog Day, we probably sent out for pizza.

But the feast of feasts in the Long archives is Thanksgiving. Thanksgiving lasts four days, and, besides the objective of giving thanks, eating is number one on the agenda.

The traditional turkey-laden banquet intimidated me as a kid because there was so much to eat and so little plate space. I had this fetish — up until the time I entered college and partook of cafeteria gruel — of letting my food, or should I say foods, rub up against each other.

"Yuck," I complained, "my green bean fell into my mashed potatoes."

"Eat it," my father said, "it's all going to wind up in your stomach, anyway."

I knew he was right, unless I could manage to dribble most of my green beans onto my shirt, my pants, my socks, and the kitchen floor.

Even worse was the green-bean juice slipping all over my other foods. The mere idea of green-bean juice and spuds made my stomach flip. Then, in college, I got to observe the football team at the dinner table every evening, and nothing has been able to turn my stomach since.

I began to get elaborate with food organization, studying the various food groups' structures and tensile strengths. The Longs' Thanksgivings began to take on a much more interesting and satiating aspect.

I was lucky enough to sit directly across the table from my Uncle Haskell Long during a very impressionable age. I took lessons from him in plate-building, an art he perfected way back when he was under 260 pounds. I haven't perfected some of his more refined skills, but I'm still young and have good intentions.

One of his favorite moves is to tell a joke at the table, and then make off with the dressing dish while everyone else's grip has been feeble with laughter.

I'm not quick enough for that yet, but I've picked up some things, which is good, because plates don't seem to be getting any bigger these days.

Inflation never hits where it's really needed.

Haskell's plate-building effort begins even before the meal is ready. It's best, I've found, to follow Haskell into the dining room and watch him orchestrate the seating places and the setting down of the food so that he can obtain optimum reach and elbow space.

Elbow space is important on Thanksgiving, because there's always a big crowd and the place mats are squeezed tightly together. Space would be no problem if everyone were right-handed. That way, we could all protect our territory with our left jab and shovel the food with our right.

But I'm left-handed and have suffered minor cuts and abrasions when improperly placed at the Thanksgiving table. The obvious answer for me is to

settle onto an appropriate corner of the table, thereby providing me with full flapping power but limiting my reach capacity.

Consequently, during Round Two, I can either disturb everyone by asking that stuff be passed my way or I can get up and mill around the table, forking and spooning stuff over relative's shoulders. Neither is very satisfying.

The most important steps to plate-building involve the first few items, and after saying grace, Uncle Haskell begins building his plate with a slab of white turkey meat, and then borders the inside with the biggest chunk of dark meat he can uncover. Then he spoons a heap of dressing on top of the white meat, building it up so that the lump of dark meat looks puny by comparison.

Then he ladles on the gravy, generously, thus putting together the infrastructure of the Thanksgiving feast without taking up more than a quarter of his plate space.

Next come the vegetables. The order of appearance here is significant and I have a difficult time getting stuff passed around in the proper order, but that is never a problem for Hack. He merely holds up the line until he gets what he needs.

Corn comes first, because it stacks well against the stuffing. The green beans, although tending to sprawl, come next, against the corn, and spilling all the way over, if necessary, onto the dressing.

Hack anchors the green beans with a slab of cranberry sauce, and then stacks in the leafy vegetables, most of which I still don't know the names of.

Then there's the miscellaneous veggies, consisting of whatever was in the cupboard that year: hominy, peas, okra, etc. With a flourish, Haskell closes the remaining plate space with the saladry: pea salad, carrot salad, raisin salad, and maybe even salad salad.

These last items, because of their sporadic nature, must be applied with a mason's touch to allow for the hot rolls and/or biscuits. For Haskell, there is never an "or" situation. Only "ands," as in "Please pass the rolls *and* biscuits."

If, after all this planning, there is a crunch on plate space, I've noticed that it's perfectly fitting to Uncle Hack to just let the rolls and biscuits ride alongside the plate, provided they don't get bumped by a tea glass into someone else's territory.

I've never heard Uncle Hack complain about plate size, although I have witnessed mutterings from the table about his plate's height.

But the man's a genius of the first rank. Ah, the things he's taught me about dessert ■