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Marge Cooke Porteus

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Mother, Frankie Cooke, and the author, Marge Cooke Porteus in 1943.

*A memory to savor.*

## Mother's War on Poverty

By Marge Cooke Porteus

Poverty program advisors could have learned a great deal from my mother. Living with her was an education in economy, psychology, Christianity, and patience. Mother had gained her authority from experiences as a child growing up in a large, poor family who homesteaded in Indian Territory and from rearing six children during the hard times of the twenties and thirties. Those experiences, plus her sense of adventure and her ingenuity, created a most unusual person.

I began to realize her uniqueness only after I had my own family and after she spent several months in my own home. I was amazed and amused by her war on poverty, even though we were above the poverty level.

I had grown up realizing that she never threw anything away. The realization started when she brought a crocheted rug similar to those she had made and scattered around the house when I was a child. It was made from deep, rich colors and was exceptionally beautiful. She was a little hesitant about offering it because, as she said, "You younger kids don't always appreciate such things, and you might be offended by something made from throw-aways. Needless to say, I appreciated it and I wasn't offended."

I once mentioned how much I liked a skirt made from identical gores that a friend was wearing. Mother said that she could cut a pattern, a knack she learned when there wasn't money for patterns. She didn't want me to invest in material, not even inexpensive material, until we tried the pattern on something old.

We looked through my odds-and-ends box (I inherited her keep-everything instinct). She kept going back to a long length of heavy, rough tan material left from drapes. From that she cut the gores and made a skirt. It turned out so well that she made a matching jacket. I wore it to work, and I liked it so well that I even chose it to wear to a professional



Cindy Conkle, granddaughter of the author of this story, displays a quilt made by Frankie Cooke. The quilt was made from recycled tobacco sacks.

meeting.

Not only did I gain a suit from my scrapbox, but she made me quilt block pattern pillows and a wool couch throw that were the envy of local Americana collectors.

At her insistence, and since I worked, I let her take over the cooking during her stay. She was a connoisseur of all leftovers; no food was thrown away. As always, leftover vegetables went into the soup kettle, but one day I saw her sneak a couple tablespoons corn into her meat loaf. I asked about that. Her reply was, "Didn't you know that I always put a few vegetables with their juice into my meat loaf?" Later I discovered that her meat loaf might also include leftover cooked oatmeal as well as bread crumbs. They might be one kind or mixed. I always mash them because my own family knit their brows at leftovers-especially vegetables.

We live in Colorado apple country, so every fall I glean enough apples for my year's supply of applesauce. While Mother was here, I made the mistake of taking her with me to glean. We picked up all I needed for a year, but she wouldn't stop. Instead of a bushel, we had over three because she couldn't stand to see apples go to waste. She made all those apples into applesauce and canned them "in case there isn't a crop next year."

As a teenager, one of my favorite after-school snacks was Mom's junk cake. I had never thought much about it; but when my family liked it, I asked her how she made it. She just smiled and said there was no recipe. I badgered her until she finally said, "It's just some junk I've been saving. I used all those crumbs in the bottom of your cookie jar and scraped the jam out of those nearly empty jars in the refrigerator."

Her instructions were vague. "Cover all the crumbs you

*continued*

have with milk. Put in the jellies. Add other stuff to make a batter."

I pressured her for a few more specifics. After she left, I experimented; here's her recipe for junk cake. Call it *pot-pourri* if you don't like the word *junk*.

1-1/3 cup cookie or cake crumbs (not enough crumbs? Use cereal)

3 eggs

1/2 to 1/4 cup jelly and/or fruit

1/2 cup more liquid: milk, juice, or maybe rum

1 tsp. nutmeg

1/2 tsp. allspice

3 tsp. soda

1/2 cup cooking oil

1 cup sugar

2-1/4 cups flour

In large mixing bowl, place moistened crumbs, eggs, jelly and liquid. Mix well. Add other ingredients. Mix well. Pour into greased and floured tube pan. Bake 350 degrees for 45 minutes to one hour.

NOTE: Mother was Frankie Cooke (Mrs. Henry), who lived all but the first few years of her life in Thomas. ❶

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