

So my Beloved and I went to a family reunion last weekend— the second such ordeal for her within the first three months of our marriage. Nonetheless, she bore it with her usual grace, charm and aplomb, with the result that now both sides of the family would just as soon disown me and adopt her.



The reunion was fun. Long tables with lots of pictures, curios and memorabilia from years past. A monstrous, catered cholesterol fest featuring the best of Earl Dukes Barbecue, a couple of ancient family recipes I haven't seen on a table in 20 years – including my grandmother's rice pilau and my great-aunt's meringue cookies and homemade pound cake – and of course, that pinnacle of pure, unadulterated sugar shock, a Bamberg 17-layer caramel cake.

We even had a table with commemorative T-shirts, family tree CDs and recipes. We probably should have also set a table laden with nothing but personal angioplasty kits.

It's always fun to catch up with people you haven't seen in awhile, particularly this bunch. I am lucky; not only do I come from a large and interesting passel of kinfolk, but the best part is we all like each other.

The older I get the more I realize that's a pretty rare luxury. I think of all those family vacations when I was a little kid. I was probably 11 years old before I learned that the definition of the word "vacation" was not "everyone pile into an unair-conditioned station wagon complete with whiny children and flatulent dog and drive 8,000 miles to spend a week in Bamberg, S.C., and Garden City Beach." I had never heard of going to places like Disney World or Cypress Gardens. A ski trip to Aspen would simply have been unheard of. And when my friends spoke of their family vacations, I could only correct them by saying, "I didn't see you in Bamberg."

Despite that limited definition of the word, I have great memories of those family vacations. I mean, both sets of grandparents, an army of cousins, the family farm, a town you could explore from end to end in a 10- minute walk, all in the same place? How could one not have a good time?

Of course, there were certain things one had to endure. For example, the church – and mandatory attendance thereof – loomed large in our lives.

Therefore, getting in trouble for cutting up in church also loomed large in our lives, at least in the lives of three boys born about three weeks apart from each other. One is now a state judge; one is a doctor with the World Health Organization; and well, you're reading the third one right now.

But it's a wonder any of us lived long enough to talk about those times now. Large Southern families tend to practice a good deal of ancestor worship and ours is no exception. So in addition to catching up with folks from the present -- cousins, uncles and aunts I haven't seen in awhile -- there are also the usual stories from years past re-told. And the amazing thing is, after all these years, I still got a few nuggets I had never known before.

For instance, I had to look no further than my plate, which I had hamelessly loaded several times, most notably with heaping helpings of Grandmothe's rice pilau. As it urned out, even that simple but wonderful staple of our family dinner table had a story. It even has a pretty fancy title: Rice of the 7 Jewels. Rice pilau is a traditional Lowcountry dish and my grandmother, of course, had made hers in that tradition for years. But after World War II, she added a twist.

During World War II, my grandfather was called up from the reserves and was sent to serve in the China/Burma/India theater. A pretty high ranking officer and adviser to the Chinese

National Army, he found himself one night at an important state dinner -- seated next to none other than Madame Chiang Kai-shek. During the course of dinner, my grandfather remarked that the rice dish they were eating bore an amazing resemblance to, guess what, grandmother's pilau recipe. Madame Chiang proceeded to rattle off the ingredients -- it was exactly the same, except the Chinese version had water chestnuts and mushrooms.

When my grandfather came home, he told Grandmother about that night, and from then on, she added water chestnuts and mushrooms to hers.

And I tell you what: I don't know what it tasted like before Madame Chiang's contribution, but it is one of my all-time favorites today. Wonder what they'll be talking about in 2107?

More important, wonder what they'll have for dinner?