

A SUMMER MEMORY...



Blackberry picking - a phrase that elicits many fond memories of summers with my maternal grandmother in Rural Hall, North Carolina, just a few miles north of Winston-Salem.

Every summer, I looked forward to visiting “Grammie” for a week or two, thankful to experience the familiarity of a warm, inviting, and safe environment. And I always waited impatiently for the day when Gram would say, “I think we’ll pick some berries today.” That meant the thrill of finding that “really big one” and taking our booty home to clean, eat, and make a cobbler, some preserves and sauces for ice cream.

My first recollection of picking berries though, was not so pleasant. In 1953, I was nearly five years old and my Mom and I were visiting my “Grammie”. The berries were ripe and calling us from the cow pastures across the road, so we prepared to do some picking. Grandpa had gotten me a pint can for my own personal stash, and I was very proud of the shiny little pail.

Grammie, my mom and I walked across the old country road, up the red clay tractor path to the pasture, and checked to see where all the cows were. (We didn’t want them to see us or they’d come running to be fed!) We found a large group of tangled vines in a shaded alcove and began to pick. The berries were large and juicy and I couldn’t help but put one in my mouth every time I put one in my pail. It was almost full when suddenly I heard my mom exclaim, “Snake!”

Now, you need to know that my Gram thought black snakes grabbed their tails with their mouths - hoop style - and chased you for miles. I always wondered what they’d do if they caught you. She never said.

At my mom’s warning, Grammie instantly grabbed me by the forearm and proceeded to run all the way back to the house, never once looking behind. My little legs were unable to keep up the pace and flailed along the ground as she dragged me away from that snake!

When we arrived in the basement at the house, my knees were scraped and bloodied, and my pail had only a berry or two left in it. I think I cried more over the loss of those precious berries than I did over the pain of my injured knees — that is, until I was seated on the covered toilet where my knees were doused with the cure-all of that era ... Mercurochrome!

I think I associated pain with blackberry picking for years after that. But it was always worth fighting through the briars, bugs, heat, and potential serpents to fill my pail with those sun-filled, juicy little prizes. They will always remind me of Gram on that hot summer day, and maybe that’s why I love them so much.