

## Booyah, Busha, Chickens and King Sobieski

Val's family on her mother's side, the Gutowski's, have a Labor Day weekend gathering of family, friends and neighbors called Booyah. What makes it especially meaningful is that the celebration is held at the old homestead that belonged to Val's grandparents, Anna & Constantine Gutowski. On this 60 acre farm, Anna (better known as Busha or grandmother) and her husband Constantine (called Jaja or grandfather), raised 8 children to adulthood (3 died at childbirth or during childhood). They had about 20 milk cows, using horses to plow the field. The Booyah tradition actually started after the farm, now fallow after Busha's passing in 1994, was bought by Busha's granddaughter Cathy, Val's first cousin. Thanks to Cathy, the original Gustowski homestead has been kept in family hands for more than 100 years. Cathy and her partner Deb built a beautiful, modern log home on one corner of the property but the old house, milking and hay barn still stands.

Booyah actually refers to a dish, peculiar to Wisconsin. You can't find it anywhere else. We've lived in several states and visited all 50, but have never encountered booyah anywhere. You can get your fill of booyah recipes online but it is basically a chicken stew with lots of vegetables, cooked in large quantities. The key word is large. The Gutowski's booyah is cooked in a 55 gallon drum with a false bottom and a gas burner underneath. Net, there is somewhere around 25 gallons, which is a lot of booyah. Booyah is sometimes cooked over a wood fire, making it more rustic. Today, Booyah is more than a recipe, but a celebration as well.

Married at 17 and widowed at 52, Busha carried on with the family farm, helped by her younger sons and later a daughter-in-law. Everyone has a favorite Busha story. But since we started out talking about Booyah, the main ingredient of which is chicken, let's have a Busha chicken story. Busha kept a flock of hens in her backyard, supplying her family with eggs and a little cash. Val and her cousins reveled in collecting the eggs every morning whenever they visited. When the hen's egg laying days were over, they became soup, stew or fried chicken. Into her 90's, Busha still took on the task of dispatching the chicken. Fortunately, I've been able to preserve a picture for posterity. During one of our visits, I captured the exact moment when Busha's hatchet went right into the hen's neck, stopping the action with the blade flush on the log which served as a chopping block. In the background was Val, who looked like she was blanching. Busha then threw the headless bird into a 5 gallon bucket, where it thrashed around for a few minutes, blood splattering the white bucket, before it finally went still. We're skipping a few steps, but Busha's resulting chicken soup puts Campbell's to shame.

Now it is Cathy's turn. Deb and Cathy have quite a menagerie, perhaps a way for two professional women to link to the past. They have hens and roosters, even have a quartet of black ducks, which are gorgeous. I had never seen such ducks before. Their feathers are black and shiny, with an iridescent sheen. But I'm digressing. There was an excess of roosters, so Cathy decided to reduce the rooster population. She grabbed one by the neck and feet, and with one motion, stunned the bird by hurling the head part against a wall. Sort of a like a baseball coach playing fungo with a rooster. Then came the hatchet. It is not quite the same technique Busha used, but just as effective. Cathy thought Busha would have been pleased with her style.

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Busha may have had an unfair advantage since the chickens would come to her during feeding time, facilitating capture.

Busha had 20 grandchildren, 36 great grandchildren (some born after she passed) and 26 great great grandchildren (all but two born after she passed). But among the descendants she had then, birthdays were never forgotten. There would always be a birthday card. Whenever Val and I visited with the kids, each would be rewarded with a couple of crisp dollar bills, sometimes even a fin. I never saw a list, or notations on her kitchen calendar, but she never missed a birthday. Maybe she just kept it in her head.

When I met Val more than 40 years ago and first visited the family farm, Busha already had indoor plumbing. I was constantly reminded by Val's cousins that this wasn't always the case, that they had to use the outhouse. The outhouse was still there, but the hole filled in. Wisconsin's winters are pretty cold, so night time visits were probably limited during the outhouse days.

The name of Busha's town is Sobieski, with Val's relatives on both sides also living in towns like Pulaski and Krakow. There has got to be a colorful story waiting to be told about these towns and their original inhabitants. Who first settled, who named the towns, why Wisconsin, etc.? Why not Chicago, which has a huge Polish population? Did they all come from a certain area of Poland? For much of the 19th century, there was no country of Poland. There had been a Polish empire extending into the Baltic countries, but wars resulted in the land carved up among the other powers like the Austro-Hungarians, Prussians and Russians. Sobieski is the name of a 17th century Polish monarch named Jan (John) III. Pulaski, of course, comes from Kazimierz Pulaski, the Polish nobleman who fought alongside George Washington and was later killed in action. Sadly, Pulaski didn't live to see the British surrender at Yorktown. There is hardly any state that doesn't have a town named Pulaski. Krakow is the second largest city in Poland. Unfortunately, there appears to be no Wisconsin historical group that has written an account of how these little towns came about. When I say little, I mean tiny. The last combined census of Sobieski and Krakow was little more than 600. Pulaski is the booming metropolis with 3,500 inhabitants.

There must have been some communication between the settled migrants and those still laboring in Europe. One might have stated: "*Drodzy kuzyni, Wisconsin is beautiful. The winter is just like ours (cold). There are plenty of woods for lumber and fuel. Game and fish are abundant. Come soon. Tobj kuzyn, Mieczslaw.*" I'll have to research their history.

Through the years, the celebration has gotten bigger. May it continue. Dziękuję Deb and Kathy. Booyah! Na zdrowie!

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