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Pie A La Mud

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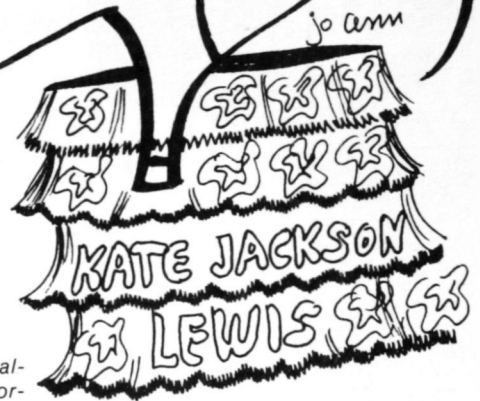
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ILLUSTRATION BY JOANN MEDDERS



Editor's note: Here's a good bit of nostalgia. The pie (or box) supper was an important educational institution for many years.

The announcement of an upcoming pie supper started a rash of excited preparation among the young ladies in my community. The general store sold enough crepe paper to decorate a small town's Main Street.

"What design will I use? What colors? How much paper do I need?" All required tough decisions. Each must be an unusual and "eye-catching box." It was supposed to be kept hidden from prospective buyers — but somehow a girl's beau managed to find out which box to bid on. His bidding prompted all the other fellows to bid — making him pay the highest price possible. Often a whole summer's wages went for one pie. The young lady's pride was injured if her suitor didn't pay whatever it took to get her pie. She just might find it convenient to let another swain walk her home that night.

The construction of a beautiful box required many hours and all the skill and ingenuity a girl could muster. Hers must be the most gorgeous of the lot. First, a basic crepe-paper covering was glued to a hat box. Then, hand-gathered ruffles were basted around the edges and flowers enough for a Rose Bowl parade arranged attractively around the sides.

Before baking the pie, the damsel did considerable sleuthing to learn what kind her lover liked best. The crust must be tender and flaky — yet stay intact until it reached the mouth. Such a pie required the greatest finesse from start to finish. Anything short of perfection would bring its maker embarrassment.

The day of the big event finally rolled around. Young ladies spent the entire day pressing their ruffled dresses, curling one another's hair, and applying makeup to their faces.

By pooling their money, local boys contrived to make lovers pay dear for their lady-loves' boxes. The pranksters kept quiet until one of their intended victims showed interest in a box. The auctioneer enjoyed the wild bidding that took place until the "fall-guy" retired from the race. Then the jokester's spokesman bought the pie and gave it to some "goof" who was sure to embarrass the young lady.

Numerous chicaneries were perpetrated behind stage curtains, too. Sometimes a lover claimed his box, escorted his companion to a desk, and sliced the pie — never thinking of mischievous "goings-on." His miss was first to be suspicious as she noted that her pie appeared to be chocolate instead of the coconut she had baked. To her chagrin and her date's dismay, one bite revealed that it was a mud pie — flavored with vanilla and topped with brownish meringue. Guffaws filled the room as the joke-victim rushed outside to expel the gritty mess.

The main event — the prettiest girl contest — was decided by collecting a penny for each vote. With nominees' names chalked on the blackboard, solicitors passed hats for money to put on candidates. Every lassie yearned and half-expected to get the prized box of chocolates — except me. I knew that prize was a thousand miles beyond my reach. Throughout

my childhood, I had been told that I was homely. Red-haired, splotted with oversized freckles and a bit overweight, I knew that I was unattractive. Once an unkind man said, "Did you know you're the ugliest kid I ever saw?"

By bleaching my freckles, applying facial make-up, and curling my hair, I improved my appearance. A neat fitting dress helped my figure, but my self-image score remained low.

For secrecy's sake, the boxes were wrapped in goods paper obtained at the local store. They were unwrapped when safely behind a stage curtain, numbers were placed in each box, and a corresponding one given to the buyer of the box.

Every young miss volunteered to work on the stage where her feminine pulchritude could best be seen. Some even contrived business as near the stage-front as possible and tried to appear busy at all times.

Content that men's pockets were near-empty, the chairman closed the contest and announced the winner. I was slow to believe what my ears registered so remained seated until a friend prodded me to my feet.

As I walked forward to claim the coveted prize, my image did an "about-face." No longer was I an uncomely lass — I was Cinderella, glass slippers and all, dancing with the handsome prince. ■