

Memoir Contest Winner: How My Grandmother Risked Her Life for Votes for Women ... and Survived by Marguerite Kearns

by Matilda Butler on February 3, 2011

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Post #68 – Women’s Memoir Writing, ScrapMoir – Matilda Butler and Kendra Bonnett

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Scrapbooking our Stories, One Memoir at a Time



Want a story filled with history that will make you appreciate your right to vote? Stay tuned. Want a delicious wintertime recipe? Stay tuned. Today, Kendra Bonnett and I publish the second of four Honorable Mention award-winning stories. Our **memoir contest** urged writers to share a favorite story and recipe from a well-remembered holiday. Marguerite Kearns reminds us to consider the importance of remembering the women who helped gain our right to vote. We found this memoir vignette fascinating and think you will too. Enjoy.

Honorable Mention, Memoir Contest

HOW MY GRANDMOTHER RISKED HER LIFE FOR VOTES FOR WOMEN AND SURVIVED

Marguerite Kearns

Election Day is a holiday in some states. Whether it’s set aside as an official holiday or not, election day rarely comes and goes without thoughts of my grandmother, a suffragist, who devoted more than a decade of her life to the cause so that I can vote today. The other day I found a 95-year old article about my grandmother in *The Brooklyn Daily Eagle* dated September 16, 1915:

“SUFF” RISKS LIFE TO SPEAK AT FAIR: Mrs. Kearns Crawls Into Mail Car After Train Starts for Riverhead –NEARLY FALLS UNDER WHEELS– First Mishap at Mineola –Has Second Narrow Escape in Boarding Passenger Coach at Westbury.

The article goes on to explain the events associated with the day when my grandmother, Edna Buckman Kearns, was on her way to the county fair in Riverhead, New York where she was scheduled to speak in public about Votes for Women. When women gathered to discuss woman’s suffrage on Long Island or in New York City, Edna made it her business to be there. If a story could be told with a suffrage angle, Edna took advantage of the opportunity to spread the word about the urgency of women voting.



My grandmother, Edna Buckman
Kearns

My own life has been profoundly influenced by my grandmother, even though she wasn't around for me to be directly influenced by her. I never heard the story when I was growing up about how Edna risked her life for Votes for Women. This isn't surprising because Edna died a long time before I was born and I'm only now getting to know my grandmother by reading her papers, letters and articles. Voting is such a predictable part of life these days, it takes effort to remember that less than a century ago it was against the law for women to vote. This year is the 90th anniversary of the passage of the 19th amendment to the US Constitution in 1920. The struggle for Votes for Women took over 70 years. And along the way many women were motivated to speak up and push themselves beyond the boundaries. As an adult I pushed myself beyond the boundaries too, and when I pressed my mother to turn over my grandmother's archives to me, it didn't take long to realize the many ways in which I stand on Edna's shoulders.

When I discovered the article about Edna risking her life for women voting, I closed my eyes and imagined my grandmother Edna on a September morning in 1915. Edna said she rushed to meet an early train so she could speak at the county fair about suffrage. She grabbed the small iron ladder to the mail car as the train pulled out of the station and held on tight until someone pulled her on board. Then she rode to the next station without incident. As she arrived in Mineola, the next train for her journey was pulling out of the station. Edna jumped on board, only to find herself on the wrong section of the train. Here's Edna's account as she told those who gathered at the post office in Riverhead later in the day which was reported in the Brooklyn Daily Eagle:

"So I rushed for the engine, intending to ride with the engineer. Just before I reached the engine, I saw a door open a little way. I tossed my suitcase in and grabbed hold of the ladder leading inside. The train was gathering momentum all the while.

"'You can't get in here, madam,' I was told by a man within. 'This is the mail car.'

"'I must get in; I'll be killed if I jump back now,' I told him.

"Finally he managed to get me in, but it was hard work, because the little ladder they use in place of steps was straight up and down, and there was nothing to get hold to pull myself up. How I got in, I don't know.

"When we got to Westbury, I jumped down from the mail car and raced down the platform, frantically waving my suitcase to the conductor, who had already said, 'All aboard.' The train was going again, and I nearly missed it, but I swung myself up on the steps as they rushed past, and the conductor helped to pull me aboard –and I'm here, friends."

Edna's tale of mishaps had a happy ending in that she survived to tell the tale of risking her life to those gathered at the post office and many others heard the story through the newspaper account. Edna was feisty,

determined and dedicated. When she wrote articles or told stories, there was inevitably a suffrage angle for my grandmother. It could be an on-the-scene report from the 1914 march to Albany she made with activist Rosalie Jones to speak to the governor –or fundraising, speaking in factories, speaking from soap boxes on street corners, barnstorming Long Island in a horse-drawn wagon, parking the wagon on the sand at Long Beach and giving speeches, and participating in many suffrage events and campaigns, large and small.

Edna also presented canning demonstrations under the auspices of the Lynbrook suffrage club, a series which came about following a speech at Malverne, New York when Edna mentioned how that very morning she'd put up seventeen jars of peas and six of raspberries.

"I can campaign and I can can," Edna Kearns told the assembled women who immediately requested more information about canning and voting. The story was repeated in an upstate Oswego, New York newspaper which pointed out:

“. . .Mrs. Kearns is not different from the Oswego women interested in the spread of the suffrage cause. There is not one of them who has not gone into the hot kitchen this summer and canned all sorts of fruits and vegetables."



A jar of Edna Buckman Kearn's
canned corn -- almost 100 years old

Treasures such as a lone surviving jar of corn that Edna canned are part of Edna's archives which have been passed down to me over the years. The corn kernels Edna cut and steamed have survived almost a hundred years and are a reminder that just like women today, the suffragists cared for their families at the same time they campaigned. The aroma of freshly-picked harvest corn bubbling on the stove is an appreciation carried down through the generations.

Corn soup is a favorite of my niece Tara. When we had lunch together at a Santa Fe restaurant recently, a southwestern version of corn soup was on the menu. She ordered it and after appreciating the delicate balance of herbs and spices, we reminded ourselves of Edna's canned corn and discussed Tara's favorite corn soup recipe. It's as much of a treasure as Edna's archives that document how women persisted so that we can exercise the right to vote today. In today's contentious political climate, I find comfort thinking about Edna's work and that of thousands of other women that have made us a full part of the political system. Corn, for me, is a comfort food. And from now on, it's also associated with election day.

TARA'S CHICKEN CORN SOUP:

In honor of her suffragist great grandmother Edna



Chicken Corn Soup is one of my favorite summer meals; sweet corn doesn't grow well in New Mexico, so it's an extra-special treat for us. This is a family recipe, which originated when my grandparents were living in Pennsylvania Dutch country 50 or so years ago where my paternal Grandpa Carroll was pastoring. My grandmother's version was a bit different from my dad's, which is different still from mine — isn't that what makes recipes special, how they change and evolve while still remaining true to the original concept?

Measurements aren't exact but somehow it all works out. We always choose organic ingredients, for both environmental and taste reasons.

1. Start with a good-quality chicken (we prefer the [Pollo Real](#) organic chickens, which have an intense chicken flavor). Boil it until fully cooked, like you would for any chicken soup — chicken, carrots, celery, a bay leaf or two, salt, and pepper.
2. While the chicken is cooking, take at least 12 ears of sweet corn (organic, so they're not genetically modified) and cut the kernels off the cobs. Then scrape the cobs with the back of the knife, getting the corn "milk" out. It's the tasty part.
3. Remove the chicken from the pot, let cool slightly, and debone; strain the broth.
4. Put the chicken pieces and all the corn and its "milk" back in the broth. You may want to add additional extra good-quality broth if you need it. (Often a quart or two helps get the appropriate thickness.)
5. Now make the "rivels." Beat one egg in a bowl and add as much flour as humanly possible to make a very stiff dough. I often like to add chopped parsley or salt and pepper toward the beginning. Then add the dough to the gently boiling soup using two spoons — one to hold the dough above the soup and one to cut off tiny pieces that fall into the soup. Depending on the size and consistency of these rivels, they'll need to cook anywhere from 5-10 minutes. (My Grandma Rachel used to make very small rivels — about 1/2" once cooked — but I'm generally not that patient.)
6. While the rivels are cooking, coarsely grate a couple of carrots for color and add them to the soup. When the rivels are fully cooked, turn the soup off and add about 1/2 cup of finely chopped parsley. Season with salt and pepper to taste. (I tend to add the pepper pretty heavily, because I like the taste; my grandmother didn't agree with me there!)
7. Let sit for 10-15 minutes, to cool just a tad, and serve.

* * *

Marguerite Kearns lives in northern New Mexico.



Fresh New Mexico corn

FOR MORE INFORMATION: Edna Buckman Kearns' suffrage campaign wagon was exhibited at the New York State Museum in Albany, New York during March and April of 2010. It will be exhibited there again in the future. For more information: www.suffragewagon.org or the blog, suffragewagon.wordpress.com

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[Donna February 12, 2011 at](#)

Marguerite, what an incredible heritage and history. I live in central NY not too far from Oswego and your grandmother was such an important part of my rights too...what a fabulous memoir and I love the soup...NM is one of my favorite places...thx for sharing this very powerful story from a very brave woman!!



[Nancy Julien Kopp February 13, 2011 at](#)

A wonderful word portrait of a strong woman, your grandmother. You can be justifiably proud of her.

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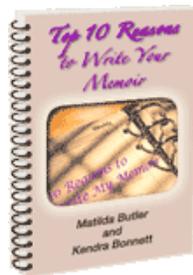
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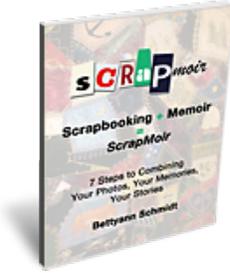
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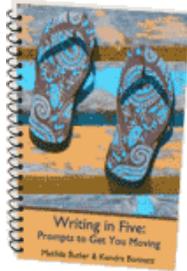


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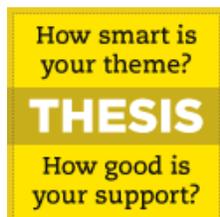


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