

Hot Work

by **Joyce H. Munro**

Music to cook by: "My Funny Valentine," the Vedran Ružić Trio

I'm pretty sure I know how the fire started, though I can't be certain. Newspaper reporters weren't certain either. You can read evasion all over their conclusion: "The origin is supposed to have been a defective flue in the basement of the Riverside Hotel." Defective flue, my eye. Something more combustible happened down in the basement that night in 1875.

Eight o'clock—closing time at Nat's Oyster Saloon. Knowing Nat, he probably told his kitchen help to go home early, business was slow anyway. Then he stayed on alone to close up the place. His pride and joy. Recently opened in downtown Milton, Pennsylvania, on the lower level of his father's new hotel. The place of resort for gents *and* ladies. Good square meals at reasonable prices. Best desserts in town. Fresh bivalves served in any style desired. Raw. Baked. Stewed. Scalloped. Fried.

If you're like me, you eat your oysters on the half shell or fried. Forget chopped-up or soupy. My husband likes them fried, he, being from the south where frying is *de rigueur*. Ever since we moved to the Philly area, he's been on the lookout for restaurants serving decent fried oysters, but there's only one that meets the desires of his taste buds—the Oyster House in Center City. So on occasion, we have resorted to frying them up ourselves.

The recipe from Nat's day calls for dipping oysters three times. First in cracker dust, then in beaten egg, then cracker dust again. Dipping is done with the fingers—piercing oysters with a fork destroys the flavor (so said cooks in those days). Then they're laid in a wire basket and fried in a pot of lard so hot blue smoke rises from the center. It's not a

good idea for lard to boil unattended. But, knowing Nat, he was probably multitasking. And voila, the perfect ingredients for a block-buster fire.

I need to point out that Nat's was not the only place where the fire of '75 could have started. There were several oyster saloons in town where blue smoke rose over kettles of boiling lard. Oysters, once considered fancy food for fancy people, were all the rage, east to west, north to south. Good eating was the reward for hauling gobs of crude oil out of the depths of Pennsylvania. And newspapers, like the *Sunbury American*, carried recipes for good eats. They also reported tales of overeating. Like the one about an old lady who downed "two dozen fried oysters, a pound of crackers, three slices of fruit cake, half a mince pie and some apples, after which she was threatened with a spasm, and in the effort to prevent it, she sacrificed all the wine there was in the house."

Oysters sped their way from the Chesapeake Bay to towns like Milton by railway. Bedded down in straw and moistened with salt water, oysters made the trip in only sixteen hours. An hour or so later, as fast as shuckers could shuck, they'd be sliding down the throats of gents sitting at counters all over town. Followed by a pint of cold lager beer. Knowing Nat, he probably kept his place open later than other establishments and wore himself out. Feet so sore, fingers so achy. So weary, he didn't realize the fryer was still boiling away, crumbs from the last oysters popping into the air. Flash point—and poof!

The blaze that night was hungry enough to eat up a whole block of businesses. Nat wasn't hurt, at least not bad enough to make the newspapers. But four years later, Nat *did* make the papers. Another fire. This one blew him out a window head first when flames licked at gas pipes. The papers dispassionately reported that he suffered a broken arm and contusions.

Here's what happened. Nat was working at his restaurant and heard people yelling, Fire! He ran down the street and dashed into Brown's building to help Gus Lochman save his confectionery shop. But while he was grabbing goodies off the shelves, he got

tossed out unceremoniously. Brown's, a frame structure on Front Street, was reduced to glowing embers. And the cause of the fire? The usual suspect—a defective flue.

Then in 1880, on a warm and windy day in May, fire erupted yet again, this time at Milton's largest industry at the edge of town—the Car Works. And yet again, Nat's restaurant burned to the ground, as did his father's newly rebuilt hotel, his brother's bakery, and his sister-in-law's confectionery.

This was the fire of all fires, landing Milton on the list of largest conflagrations in North America. Residents saw their town burn from one end to the other. Their houses, businesses, schools, churches reduced to a blanket of ash six inches deep. Their just-planted vegetable gardens, shade trees where they carved their initials, canaries perched in gilded cages in their parlors. Tintypes of Granny and Pa-Pa. Letters from the battlefield back in the '60s. Marriage certificates. Locketts holding strands of their stillborn baby's hair. Ashes of all that was sacred, blown about the streets, into the west branch of the Susquehanna River, floating down to the Chesapeake Bay, metamorphosing into food for oysters.

Nothing left to hold onto. Other things people held dear—like their emotions, their brains, muscles, immune systems—charred as well. As psychologists have told us, the trauma of massive destruction can lead to depression or long-term anxiety disorders or debilitating physical ailments. Some individuals never regain hold.

What happened to Miltonians that May day is similar to what happens to soldiers. It happened to Nat during the Civil War. Back in the spring of '62, Nat's regiment of the Pennsylvania Reserves, the Thirty-Fourth, was charged with protecting the nation's capital at Fort Pennsylvania, on the outskirts of Washington, D.C. It was there that Nat saw—as up close and personal as a fort full of soldiers can get—President Lincoln and General McClellan, who came out to review the troops. McClellan was the bigger draw. He was a Pennsylvanian and how those soldiers loved him.

Nat's regiment was ordered to Manassas, Virginia, then deeper south to Fredericksburg and on to Richmond, where they engaged in the Seven Days' Battles and lost to the Confederates. Then up to Bull Run, then up farther to South Mountain, then over to Antietam. Then back down ... then up ... then over ... then down ... Along the way, the Reserves were picking up a reputation for their "magnificent and stubborn valor," as McClellan put it. They were also picking up diarrhea, rheumatism, frostbite, typhoid fever.

At some point on the war path, after the battle of Antietam, when the regiment turned south again, Nathaniel Huth bolted. Emotionally or physically or both, he abandoned the cause and for that offense, he was dishonorably discharged by the General Courts-Martial in November of 1862. His motive for bolting will never be known, but it certainly didn't help that McClellan, his beloved General-in-Chief, had just been ousted by Lincoln for not pursuing the enemy aggressively enough. The Reserves were fuming mad when they got word—they had sworn they would stand by him. Some of those reservists, no doubt, acted out that fall.

Nat was nineteen, stood five and a half feet, and, judging by his photo taken later in life, weighed a hundred pounds. Judging by that same photo, his slack-jawed, shell-shocked expression probably infuriated the court; they wanted to see loyalty and energy in that face. The charge against Nat was an action considered egregious, like falling asleep on post, vulgarity in the presence of a lady, gross intoxication, or insubordination.

Nat did not come home unscathed. He did not come home, period. After his discharge, he went west, just shy of the Ohio border, where he met and married Martha Jones of Portersville. But his heart and his livelihood were in Milton, so he hauled Martha, pregnant with the first of eleven children, back home where he could make the tasty morsels of his dreams.

One after another, when they were old enough to hoist themselves up and grip the cold marble slab with their fat fingers, and their eyes followed the rolling pin back and forth

on the pastry table, that's when Nat would have commenced his children's education in cookery. Those round, rosy faces intent on kitchen work. Sieving, mixing, kneading. Their non-stop baby chatter. Rolling, greasing, grating. Could children have more fun than this? Mashing, spooning, tasting.

And one after another, Nat and Martha's children took to cookery. All but four. Willie who died of scarlet fever. Ralph who died of spinal meningitis. Mattie, of diphtheria. Marian, cholera. And with each child's death, the kitchen mourned. Lamentation falling in the stew pot, scooped into dishes served to customers who, unless they saw tears in Nat's eyes when he served them, ate unknowing.

Father Huth and Mother Huth they were called after they moved to Brookville, Pennsylvania at the turn of the century. But what about Henry the earlier father and Catherine the earlier mother? All it took was migration up the Schuylkill River in the 1850s, then a couple of block-buster fires to lose track of begetters. Maybe Nat's children asked him where great-granddad came from and all he knew was some place in Germany. Maybe they asked what their original name was and he said Hutt, Hoot, or Hott. Maybe they asked him to say something in German and all he knew was *Sie lustigen kleinen dummen Kopf*. Thus, the current elders became the only elders.

The skimpiest family tree I've ever heard of, penned on a scrap of paper and tucked in a Bible, reads in part: "Mother Huth's father's mother was ... Father Huth's father's name was ... Your great grandmother Huth's name was ..."

No dates, no places, no stories. This is the whole of Father and Mother Huth's family tree, a paper version of Charlie Brown's Christmas tree with six bedraggled branches. I learn about this scrap of paper during Christmastide, the season of gift-giving and feasting. Some gift, this sparse tree with its flimsy information.

Henry Huth's descendents may not have talked much about their past, but they molded it out of spun sugar and fondant and marzipan. Huths were, and still are, bakers and

confectioners. A family-wide, generations-long love affair with sweets. You can follow the scent of rum-laced fruitcake as Huths moved across Pennsylvania into Ohio, over to New Jersey, down to Washington, D.C., opening bakeries with trendy names like Vienna, Globe, Bon-Ton. And who knows how many Huths have baked in the privacy of their own kitchens, gluey-doughed fingers leaving prints all over cabinets in the search for nutmeg.

The recipe for Nat's fruitcake, handwritten on a card, is tucked away in my recipe box. Every year around Christmas time, I get it out and I remember when my Dad baked hundreds of pounds of fruitcake each year. Yes, hundreds. Then came a deal to bake the cakes for Woodward & Lothrop Department Stores in Washington, D.C., until they learned Dad didn't have a commercial kitchen license. Over the Christmas holidays, Dad and I emailed about fruitcake, not that I planned to bake any. But he reminded me of a few things anyway: "This is important—put a pan of water on the bottom of the oven, otherwise cake will be too dry. Use brown kraft paper for pan liner, but grease the pan too."

And where did Dad learn these insider tips? From his Father Fred who learned from Father George who learned from Father Nathaniel who learned from Father Henry who learned from Father name unknown. It is rude to tell fruitcake jokes in my hearing—I have blood kinship with the stuff.

Nat's fruitcake is the type that improves with time, though not as much time as fine wine. The recipe brought by memory from somewhere in Germany to Reading, Pennsylvania around 1819 and adapted through the generations, thanks to ever-more-convenient ingredients. Three types of raisins, plus currants and dates and figs and prunes. Pounds and pounds of candied fruit, walnuts, eggs, a minimal amount of flour. Nat must have used a wash basin, not a bowl. And it was a hands-on situation. Elbow-deep in batter. Then he'd plop it in pans and let it slow-bake for half a day. Along about fruitcake-mixing time each autumn, Nat's growing children likely soured on kitchen work.

But he wouldn't let them bolt. Nat had rules for cooking and rules for children, which none dared break. Customers craved fruitcake—the baking must be done.

The ritziest Christmas gift I ever received was a “Little Lady” stove. A real electric stove for cooking real food. There it gleamed on Christmas morning, under the tree, surrounded by a pile of mini-sized accoutrements. Mixes for pie crust, gingerbread, pancakes, cookies. Pots and pans, cookie cutters, rolling pin. I cooked all the mixes in short order, one after the other, then scoured the kitchen for something else to make. Mom gave me dollops of left-overs to cook in my mini sauce pot, biscuits to reheat in the oven. My culinary education was well on the way when my brother decided to sauté something made of plastic directly on the stovetop. Then he satisfied his urge to bake using a model airplane. The oven didn't actually catch fire, it just smoldered for the longest time after the babysitter yanked out the plug.

Nat got a new oven after he moved to Brookville, Pennsylvania and opened a bakery on Main Street. A modern oven that could hold a constant heat, perfect for crusty breads and delicate sweets. But when Nat hung out his shingle, he was dealing with stuff other than the sweet stuff. Three children and a daughter-in-law lived with him in the apartment above the bakery. Within a year, the daughter-in-law died in childbirth. That same year, a granddaughter was born blind. Two more granddaughters and a grandson died the following year. Knowing Nat, he bristled at small things, grumbled at kitchen help, punished the dough with his fists, ramming his wordless homage into yeast rolls, sold to customers who spread them with jam and ate unknowing.

Then his youngest daughter, Helen, and her husband moved in. Who knows what Nat thought when Helen married John Frazier, a newcomer, come to Brookville to establish a new industry—horse racing. I'm guessing Nat took John's ambitions in stride, maybe went out to see that plot of level ground John wanted to buy and build horse stables, a race track, start a racing association. Nat didn't invest in John's schemes, but eventually the tables turned. John became business partner with Nat. They registered the

corporate name, Huth & Frazier, and modernized baking operations, streamlined delivery of bread around town, won prizes for their baked goods at country fairs.

Maybe John's horses stopped winning races or maybe Helen begged him to quit traveling so much, stay home now that they were expecting a child. Maybe it was the lure of a well-stocked bakery, begging to be expanded into a retail chain. Apricot tarts, pfeffernüsse, raisin biscuits, shortbread, laid out in precise rows. Trays of butter küchen and almond crusted French bread. Layer cakes, custard pies. Stacks of light and dark breads and rolls. Oh, that tantalizing yeasty aroma. Oh, the lusciousness of it all. Oh, the sales potential.

I own all sorts of baking pans. Square, round, sheet, bundt, loaf, mini-muffin, muffin-top, brioche, spring-form, tart. But I have never owned a lady-lock pan. I didn't know such a thing existed and it didn't, until Nat Huth invented it in 1914. And with this invention, I realized I didn't know Nat as well as I thought. But this I know: lady-locks were all the rage, like oysters, at the turn of the century. *Fulhorns* in German. Puff paste horns filled with sweet buttercream or pie dough horns filled with savory cheeses. This delicacy could be filled with almost anything, if it was finely minced and sauced. I'll bet Nat would cook up a dozen lady-locks filled with creamed oysters if you asked him.

There was such a demand for lady-locks, he had to invent a new device to bake them faster. Instead of rolling out rich pastry dough late at night, I figure he was over at the machine works, cutting tin sheets into exact forms, bending them with a forcer, applying solder, the bead of molten metal like thin royal icing flowing over his arthritic fingers, stinging. Tiny bits of sparking metal showering the lard-soaked apron he forgot to take off, so weary, dropping the arc welder, slapping at his apron before it could combust and burnish his wrinkled skin. But someone was there to keep fire watch because soldering is "hot work," the risk of fire ever-present. Burns, heat stress, heat stroke.

Decades later, folks in Brookville would wander into Uzi's Pastries on Main Street and ask for buttercream lady-locks, but they were out of luck. Nat was the last baker in town

who made them, just across the street at Vienna Bakery. It's a pizza parlor now. Still standing after all these years. Amazing it never burned down. Baking is hot work. Ovens, stoves, gridirons, broilers. Fired up ten hours a day, spilling out temptation. In those days the walls glistened with butter, the air was cinnamony and Nat's skinny wrists, protruding from rumpled shirt sleeves, quivered.

Father Huth they called him. When he asked his children and grandchildren to come over, they left their homes straightaway and gathered round the pastry table, eager to taste the latest concoction in his search for culinary goodness. When he won blue ribbons for lofty loaves of bread, I'm sure his wife displayed them in the sales room. When he created a four-tier wedding cake festooned with doves and blossoms, they took his photograph, in batter-smearred apron, next to the cake. And on the day of his funeral, businesses in Brookville closed. In honor of the slumped and inelegant bakerman who made them the staff of life and indulgent confections.

There are a couple of things, not-so-sweet things, Nat didn't know about. That his son-in-law never did turn Vienna Bakery into a retail chain. That his daughter and a daughter-in-law were hospitalized at the same state hospital for psychosis of an indeterminate nature. That his grandson was a prisoner of war in World War II. That his great, great granddaughter gazed at his photo and laughed at the sight of him. Then she cried as she came to understand what his eyes, droopy and dispirited, had seen. What his mouth, loll and parched, had tasted. His fingers, bent and swollen, had touched.



Nathaniel Huth, Proprietor of Vienna Bakery, c. 1910
Courtesy of Jefferson County History Center, Brookville, PA

Joyce H. Munro's work can be found in *Broad Street Review*, *NewsWorks*, *Hippocampus*, *Minding Nature*, *The Copperfield Review*, *Topology*, and elsewhere. She writes about the people who kept a Philadelphia estate running during the Gilded Age in "Untold Stories of Compton" on the Morris Arboretum blogsite <http://cms.business-services.upenn.edu/morrisarboretum-blog/>.