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Sometime in the early 1960's, my mom came home from Penney's Warehouse with a cheap set of avocado green plastic bowls. Disposable and intended to last just until she found something nicer, we ended up pulling them out of the cupboard for years. While many of life's moments are quickly forgotten, others are like those bowls, turning up in our thoughts over and over again.

Those green bowls often held the bounty of family popcorn nights. Settled in front of the television watching "*The Carol Burnett Show*," dad would suddenly say, "anyone feel like a little popcorn?" With that, my sister Liz and I would spring up off the couch to help.

Dad followed his own process for making the corn. He began by digging noisily through the assorted pots and pans crammed beneath the cooktop. At last he'd emerge with the popcorn pan, its bottom pocked and bowed out by years of shaking the contents over the stove's hot coils. Dad then added the perfect amount of oil – just enough to cover the entire bottom of the pan – and a single kernel of Orville Redenbacher's.

Liz and I watched as the cooktop began to glow a bright orange-red beneath the buckled pan. As we tried to peer in, Dad held us back with a tan outstretched arm, telling us he worried that our favorite *I Dream of Jeannie* pajamas would catch on fire.

We listened to the gentle sizzle of the oil as it heated up. When the single kernel finally went off with a blast, we knew the oil had reached the perfect temperature. Dad poured more kernels into the pan, jostling it to coat each one evenly with oil. Never measured, always eyeballed.

A maestro in the art of popping, dad held the lid so it partially covered the pan. With his other hand he grasped the handle, shaking the pot back and forth over the heat to keep the corn

moving. In this manner he let the steam escape guaranteeing the fluffiest result and also avoided any scorched morsels.

The popping began slowly with a few kernels pinging against the underside of the lid, and then took up a more furious pace as more and more hurled themselves about inside the pan. Dad kept a close eye on us as errant seeds sometimes flew out through the slit between the lid and the pot's rim.

When the puffy kernels filled about half the pan, dad removed the lid entirely, trusting the popped kernels to hold in those yet waiting to burst. The aroma filled the warm air as the finished corn pushed its way up to the brim. Dad listened closely for the slowing pops to tell him it was time to tip out the batch into mom's biggest stockpot since we didn't have a bowl large enough for the demands of popcorn night.

Depending on how many of the five kids were home, dad stopped there or repeated the entire process. When all the corn was popped, he dropped half a stick of butter into the hot pan, swirling it gently over the burner until it melted completely. Drizzling it onto the popcorn, with a table knife in hand he gently folded the butter throughout the entire lot, making sure every fluffy kernel was kissed with flavor. Last came a generous sprinkling of salt.

Liz and I gathered up the green popcorn bowls and followed dad back to the den where the family waited, ice-cold bottles of Coke open and ready.

Almost fifty years later, I still recall the salty, buttery goodness of that perfectly prepared popcorn. We used the bowls themselves to scoop out the servings. My fingers slick with grease as I found the bottom of my bowl – usually more than once. Someone in the family always took a crack at the Old Maids left in the bottom of the stockpot – some of the duds partially popped, crunchy and slightly charred.

Before you knew it, Carol Burnett was tugging on her earlobe signaling that it was time for bed.

As the years went by, the bottom of that popcorn pan continued to buckle and round out, the metal becoming thinner and thinner with each use. One night, it finally gave way. A tiny hole appeared and then widened, rendering the pan unable to perform its sole duty. The bowls eventually found their way to Goodwill.

Later in college, my friends had Air Poppers and West Bend Stir Crazy machines that were certainly no match for dad – the corn too dry, chewy, or oily. Worse, in a popcorn travesty, I worked at a theater hefting huge sacks of already popped corn into the concession stand’s warming machine to later be drizzled with “buttery” topping. Dad would have never approved.

When my kids were small, I loved the convenience and speed of microwave popcorn. It sure beat washing an oily popcorn pan. All I had to do was pull at the opposite corners of the bag to open it and be mindful as the steam escaped. The emerging aroma was the exact opposite of what rose from dad’s batches – clearly the unnatural, chemically charged scent of a processed product.

Sometimes a popcorn wagon tickles loose my childhood memories, especially if the tight kernels are bathed in real butter. It smells right and tastes good but it’s nothing like the pillowy, puffy corn I remember from my youth.

But maybe that’s the point. A memory can bring you back to a specific place and time triggering powerful feelings, but it can’t bring back the people. It’s hard to remember how dad’s voice sounded. Maybe his corn wasn’t the best in the world after all, but when I remember him making it I feel like he is near. I see the crinkles around his eyes as he smiles at me. Life was

easy and comfortable back then - tucked into that old house on those warm summer evenings,
sharing a delicious tender moment with Dad.