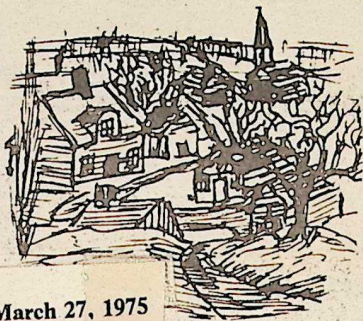


Village View by Andrea Leonard



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Something we seldom see, these days, is a parrot as a household pet. When I was a little girl keeping a pet parrot was fairly common.

I've known people whose parrots weren't even caged, at least part of the time, and were allowed to wander around freely. There was one who used to follow its master all about the house, climbing up and down stairs after him, using his strong beak to negotiate the risers.

Parrots learn to make sounds recognizable as words; it's said they talk, though I believe they only imitate noises and don't actually participate in conversation.

The term "bird brain", meaning a lack of much intelligence, wasn't coined by accident. Birds may be clever enough to survive in their natural environment, but none are smart enough to communicate on a very high level.

Why the parrot as a pet has fallen from its perch of favor, I've no idea. Some people keep canaries. Some maintain a cage with a couple of love birds or parakeets, relatives of the parrot; but unless you visit Busch Gardens in Tampa, Florida, or some other such place, you seldom see these large colorful birds.

Parakeets, like their giant cousins, are also capable of a kind of imitative speech, but they, too, are only apeing noises they hear people make.

In some parts of the world parrots are wild and as common as robins are here. The flash of their brilliant plumage is seen through tree leaves over the roads, and they can be observed sitting on telephone wires preening themselves, drinking from clear pools, or eating seeds in grain fields.

In the not-too-distant past, the parrot was brought, a captive, to New England homes by sailors who had voyaged to tropic isles. These birds were incapable of surviving our cold winters. Any who escaped captivity died of cold.

They are long-lived creatures if protected from extremes of temperature and predators, so perhaps those I knew as a child were birds which had survived their sea-faring owners and had been sold, along with other personal effects, once the mariner had gone to his eternal reward.

More recently parrots have been identified as carriers of a disease called psitacosis, a virus producing in man high fever and complications similar to pneumonia. Perhaps this possibility has discouraged parrot-keeping.

Parakeets, too, can carry this virus, also known as Parrot Fever, and only those free of the disease may be imported into our country. If disease-free parakeets can be raised, why not the larger species?

This isn't what concerns me, however; what does concern me is the parrot's traditional cry, "Polly wants a cracker!"

(That's another thing I don't know -- why parrots were all called Polly. Researching that could take months, so I won't stop in the middle to find the answer to that riddle.)

The truth of the matter is Polly the Parrot did like crackers -- and, as a matter of fact, so do I. I like crackers and cheese, crackers and dip, crackers and devilled ham. I like crackers all by themselves, especially if they're flavored with a bit of salt, and onion, garlic or bacon.

What troubles me is the price of crackers!

Almost everyone, if they stop to think about it, knows crackers can't be much more than flour and water. There's nothing to them but flour, air, and a sprinkle of salt, you'd think.

Yet the price of a box of crackers on your grocery shelf is astronomical.

I'm appalled at the prospect of paying .90 for a package of crackers I can -- quite easily -- consume in one sitting. Granted, I make a pig of myself when I do it, but I do enjoy nibbling the crunchy tidbits, and I can see not a single reason for them to be so costly.

For the same reason I've become an aficionado of home-made bread, and added mixing up a batch every weekend, I've now set my sights on learning to make edible crackers.

The first step: finding a recipe. That's not easy. Every cookbook I searched through has a plethora of recipes for everything imaginable -- from asparagus hollandaise to zucchini casserole -- but is silent on crackers.

Crackers, it seems, are something no one can make at home. You can make bread, cake, pie, pudding; you can cook every kind of meat, fowl and fish; you can boil, fry, bake or broil thirty-seven kinds of vegetables and fruits. But you can't bake a cracker.

Only the industrialists can produce a cracker.

Ridiculous! Yet -- where to begin?

Well, I've begun. I know crackers must contain flour, for it says so on cracker packages. It also says something about a lot of chemicals I don't intend to include in my mixture. Then there's something about shortening, salt and leavening.

The proportions are what's important; also the temperatures at which to bake them; and -- well, there are lot's of possible variables.

Last weekend I experimented. I made some crackers. They're not the greatest, but then, they didn't cost a dollar a box nor take much time.

And with some practice, and maybe some help from you people who are daring enough to experiment, we can come up with a decent recipe for a cracker we can enjoy at somewhere near the more reasonable cost we used to pay, and thereby take another swat at inflation.

To two cups of regular flour, mix in about two tablespoons of margarine or other shortening. Toss in a teaspoon of salt. Then pour in a little milk. I added a gulp, mixed with a fork, and then another gulp and mixed again. Four times, maybe five, but it wasn't half a cup before the dough cleaned the bowl.

The dough was stiff; very stiff; maybe too stiff. I rolled it some more. Thin, very thin. Then with a small cookycutter, cut the dough and placed the circles on a flat pan. Prick with a fork.

Sprinkle some with onion salt. Use Crazy salt on others. Bake at 375° for about 15 minutes or until they look toasty. Cool on a rack before putting in a tin.

They're not Nabisco. But they're not bad. They're crackers.

Given time to experiment, we could improve on this and might even do better than what's available at the supermarket.

Some of those I made were crisp and crunchy. Others are sort of gummy. Because I neglected to salt some, those don't have much flavor.

Let's get together and see what we can do. Two cups of flour, two tablespoons of shortening and less than half a cup of milk doesn't yet add up to 90 cents:

Polly want a cracker? Maybe people don't keep parrots anymore, because they can't afford the crackers for the birds!

If you have any luck baking your own crackers, I do wish you'd share your experience with me!