Waste Not, Want…NOT!

Frugality was the altar at which my mother worshipped as I grew up in Torrington, Connecticut, in the late 1950s.

A daughter of Italian immigrants and a child of the Depression, Mama knew the meaning of a dollar and the meaning of having none.

“You never know when you are going to need it,” Mama would say as she squirreled away anything she deemed reusable.

Not a sock or sheet or towel, already darned more than once, was ever discarded, but instead ripped into even lengths to tie the next year’s tomato plants to their stakes.

Wear It Out

Buttons and thread were removed from garments destined to be used for washing windows, shining brass, polishing chrome and waxing floors. Ribbons and bows were tucked in gently with the carefully removed and folded wrapping paper to decorate future gifts.

Only when company came for dinner did Mama set out an entire paper napkin fresh from the box. Usually, she carefully cut on the fold of the fine “linen” and made one napkin do the work of two.

Ketchup bottles had nine lives in our house. When the last ounce of ketchup threatened to stay in the container, she inverted the bottle in a small Pyrex cup overnight. The next day, there was enough ketchup in that cup to slather on a hamburger or accompany a side of fries.

Undaunted by that last bit of ketchup still adhering to the insides of the bottle, Mama filled the bottle with milk, shook it vigorously and added the liquid to her next meat loaf mix.

That bottle was then washed and cleaned and reused to hold oil or vinegar. Later on, bits and pieces of bar soap found their way into the bottle, water was added and liquid soap was born in Mama's kitchen.

Waxed paper and aluminum foil were wiped clean, folded and reused. Paper towels laid out on the drainer to dry were put to work again on the next spill or spatter.

Credit cards were the enemy of all that was thrifty. Mama saved and paid cash for books and building loans alike. A plethora of Christmas clubs at the hometown bank was paid weekly and envelopes of cash were duly filled each payday. "Pay yourself first," Mama always said.

Mama's favorite cake was a hit with the "girls" who came to knit, sew and play Po-Ke-No for nickels, and of course, it was made from scratch. Box mixes were too expensive. "You're paying for the convenience," Mama sneered, as if the devil himself had deliberately put temptation in her path to test her fortitude.

That angel food cake, the surface cracked and crusted to perfection and tinted a Barbie kind of pink, had a fresh-from-the-oven aroma that made me yearn for a taste. But there was a price to be paid for this cake, exactingly made from scratch.

In order to make an angel food cake, 13 egg whites were needed. The shells were quickly crushed, then added to that day's coffee grounds and vegetable peelings and buried in the compost heap.

However, 13 yolks still had to be accounted for, and they surfaced the next 13 days like eager suitors. Each morning, Mama blended a yolk for me into a milk-shake-type concoction (mixed less than thoroughly; picture the slimy strands of jellyfish).

Mama tried her best to camouflage this breakfast "beverage" by serving it in an opaque tumbler while making encouraging remarks about its health benefits. But both of us knew it looked unappealing and tasted worse.

Finally, on the 14th day, the madness ended. Mama and I would sit together and share a slice of pink angel food cake. Was it worth it? You bet!

—Toni G., New Hartford, Connecticut