Dad Couldn’t Say No to Kitchen Gadgets

IT WAS the glass knife that finally did my father in.

For years, my dad would bring home to my mom, and later my stepmother, every new kitchen gad-get that could grind, mash, grate, shred, whip, crush, mince, chop, slice or dice.

The glass knife, however, was unique, not only because it was made of glass, but also because it had to be kept in the freezer until it was used. I guess the theory was that cold glass cut better than warm glass.

My father couldn’t wait to show everyone and explained that the man who sold him this knife cut everything with it from overripe tomatoes to carbon-steel nails.

It could even be used to cut glass windows. But most importantly, it never needed to be resharpened.

When the knife reached the right temperature, my father took it out of the freezer and proceeded to slice a potato. The entire family watched with amazement as the glass knife thinly cut slice after slice.

“That’s all well and good,” my stepmother said, “but I want to see the nail demonstration.”

I ran downstairs to the basement workshop and brought up a shiny, new 16-penny nail.

Confidently, my father proceeded to cut the nail in half.

All of a sudden, the temperature of the glass knife must have fallen drastically as a large half-inch chip broke from the blade.

“Carl,” my stepmother said sternly, “that’s the last kitchen gadget you’re bringing home. From now on, stick to your workshop and I’ll take care of the kitchen.”

Looking back, I’m surprised that my stepmother didn’t lay down the law long before the glass-knife incident, especially when my father brought home a magic contraption called a Veg-O-Matic that would slice and dice just about anything.

It was made of white plastic and had an opening where differently sized and shaped blades were inserted. After the proper blade was inserted, you lifted the handle and put the object to be cut under it.

Then it was a simple matter of pushing down on the handle, which drove the object through the cutting blade and, like magic, everything would be neatly sliced or diced…at least in theory.

For this demonstration, my father selected—as had the demonstrator who sold him the magic gadget—a very ripe tomato.

Upon inserting the tomato and pushing squarely and quickly down on the handle, the tomato burst and pieces hit the ceiling, walls, floor and all the not-too-enthralled spectators of this demonstration.

All my poor father could mumble was, “Must have inserted the wrong cutting blade.”

One time, Dad did bring home a gadget that worked beautifully, but we never could figure out when or where to use it.

This device was about 4 inches long with a screw at one end, a cutting-surface shaft and a little handle at the other end. You inserted the screw into the top of an upright potato, then turned the blade in a circle.

As the blade cut through the item, layer by layer, you ended up with a potato that looked just like an accordion. It could be pulled apart or pushed together.

The cut potato was a great toy for us children, but my stepmother never learned how to serve it.

There used to be an annual show in Chicago in the 1940s called the Vacation and Sportsmen Show. The coliseum was filled with booths of fishing gear, hunting rifles, various Midwestern resorts and demonstrations of fly casting, logrolling and retrievers jumping into the water after imitation ducks.

Since Dad didn't hunt or fish much, I can only assume he attended this show annually because of the wonderful array of demonstrations. He could never pass one without stopping and pushing forward to see what was going on.

As a child, I endured demonstrations of cutlery, pots and pans, cake-decorating devices that looked like giant hypodermic needles, vibrating chairs, encyclopedias and even multifunctional spatulas.

I think my father liked demonstrators because he was always trying to come up with a unique product, or an easier way of doing something.

He once told me one of his inventions grew out of his frustrations as a child trying to keep soda pop in a vacuum bottle without the cork popping out all the time. To fix this, he drilled a hole through the cork and inserted a threaded bolt with a washer on the end inside the bottle and a wing nut on the outside.

Eureka!

When he tightened the wing nut, it compressed the cork and—voila!—the soda pop didn't blow the cork.

Another invention happened when paint rollers first appeared on

the market. Every time he went to paint a ceiling, the paint would drop on his upturned face and his glasses. To solve this problem, he went to a tinsmith who constructed—at great expense and to my father's plans—a form of gutter that hung under the roller, preventing the spattering of paint.

Excitedly, my father brought his invention to the local paint store owner, who calmly pointed my dad to an entire floor display of, yes, his invention that had just arrived.

Always too early or too late.

In retrospect, things probably would have been duller around our house if Dad hadn't brought home all those wonderful gadgets. I just wish he were still alive so I could hear about his latest buy or invention.

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