



The Fastnacht Brigade

by Matilda Gregory, editor-in-chief

In the early morning hours of Monday, February 27th, the women's group of St. John's United Church of Christ marched into the church basement prepared to do battle, just as they have every year for the past ten years. Their weapons of choice? Eggs, milk, flour, sugar, lard, yeast, and oil for frying. Their objective? Fastnachts.

If you are new to the Hardy Falls area or have been living under a rock, you might not know that fastnachts are fried doughnuts and a delicious part of the Pennsylvania Dutch celebration of Lent.

The Tuesday before Ash Wednesday is traditionally a day to eat well and prepare for the Lenten fast, so generations of frugal Pennsylvania Dutch housekeepers took it as an opportunity to use up rich ingredients in the pantry. Specifically, they tried to use up fats and sugar before the more austere diet of Lent began. Thus, Fastnacht Day (Doughnut Day) was born and is now celebrated throughout the region on Shrove (Fat) Tuesday.

There are actually several traditional fastnacht recipes, most of which include potatoes and lard. One such recipe is printed at the bottom of this article in case you want to try making your own. The fastnacht can be a little heavier than other doughnuts, and it's not as sweet, but it is definitely a satisfying treat! Plus, rumor has it that eating a fastnacht on Fastnacht Day brings good luck for the rest of the year, as well as a full stomach.

Thanks to the women's group at St. John's UCC, this charming Pennsylvania Dutch tradition has morphed into a delicious annual event here in Hardy Falls. The ladies don't just bake in the basement of their church – they get out into the town and sell their fastnachts at many businesses on Main Street, as well as taking orders in the weeks leading up to the main event. Forget Girl Scout Cookies! Fasnacht Day belongs to the fastnacht, and you never know where the St. John's women will show up hawking their wares.

“You have to eat a fastnacht on Fasnacht Day,” insisted Milly Pierce, 75, one of the regular participants. “But it has to be a real fastnacht, not just any old doughnut from a chain store.

When asked why, she shrugged. “It's good luck, and you want to eat the best thing you can find to get the best luck, right?”

The fastnachts from St. John's are the best, at least as far as their loyal customers are concerned.

“Oh, God, I live for Fastnacht Day,” exclaimed Hannah Frederickson, owner of the Country Time Bar and Grill. “And then, a few weeks later, the Lutheran Church makes peanut butter eggs for Easter. This time of year is wonderful.

“I didn’t have a clue what the heck everyone was talking about,” said Mateo Guerrero, a new resident of Hardy Falls. “But I tried one of the doughnuts because the little lady selling them in the bookstore was pretty insistent.” He grinned. “She strong-armed me like a vet. Then I tasted one of the things.” He shrugged. “So maybe I bought another four of them. Never heard of Fastnacht Day before, but I think the rest of the country needs to jump on the bandwagon.

“I remember my mama making fastnachts when I was a girl,” said Vera Brady, 92, who made the trip into town to sit at a table in the diner and sell doughnuts. She laughed. “My brothers and I always wanted to be the first out of bed to eat one on Tuesday. If you overslept and were the last one up that day, you’d get teased for weeks!

The St John’s “Fastnacht Brigade” as the ladies like to call themselves, worked in three shifts on Monday to make over 2,000 doughnuts, to be sold either by pre-order or at the various businesses in town. Their hard work paid off again this year, as they were out of stock by noon. The ladies raised enough money to cover their church’s heating bill and made a healthy donation to the fund for a new elevator as well.

“People can get fastnachts at some of the supermarkets now,” said Mrs. Brady. “But I guess they still like ours the best.

Margaret Holz, 80, who was sitting with Mrs. Brady, shook her head. “I don’t know what’s going to happen when we can’t make them anymore. It’s getting harder to stand and my fingers hurt from rolling out the dough. It has to rise twice, you know.” She sighed. “I hope young people will learn how to make them too. I’d hate it if there were no real fastnachts in Hardy Falls.

So would we all. Still, since eating a fastnacht on Fastnacht Day is lucky, it might be enough to keep the tradition going.

“I ate a doughnut, and then I found a ten-dollar bill in the street,” said Markie Barton, age 8. “It was awesome! Every day should be Doughnut Day!

Who can argue with that?

Are you interested in making your own fastnachts? You don’t have to wait until next year – here’s a recipe. Although there are several kinds of fastnachts, this recipe seems complete with potatoes, lard, AND sugar.

Fastnachts with Yeast

2 cups scalded milk, ½ cup lard, 1 cup mashed potatoes, 2 teaspoons salt, ¾ cup sugar, 2 well-beaten eggs, 1 package yeast, 7 cups flour, approximately.

Scald milk and add mashed potatoes, sugar, salt, and lard. Cool until lukewarm. Add eggs. Add yeast and enough flour to make a soft dough. Knead well and place in a greased bowl. Cover with a cloth and let rise about 1½ hours. Roll ¼ inch thick on a floured board. Place on a cloth and let rise until doubled in size and fry in hot fat.

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