

Aunt Iola and Brenda Help Out at the Food Bank

Last year I introduced you to my Aunt Iola and her best friend, Brenda, who lived in Ishpeming, Michigan. I told about their big Thanksgiving dinner and how they stuffed the immense turkey they'd bought with unpopped popping corn, which turned that bird into a rather effective oven-destroying WMD and Iola's kitchen into a greasy disaster area. It would be prudent at this point to explain that Aunt Iola is a bit... unique...in how she does things. And Brenda? Well, have you heard the expression "Doesn't have both oars in the water?" If Iola was "unique" Brenda was downright odd. Iola's cheese may have slipped off her cracker, but Brenda's cheese was stolen by a neon-pink mouse from outer space.

It was the year after the exploding turkey incident that this story takes place. By then Aunt Iola had replaced her old, destroyed, oven with a new one and she and Brenda had finally dug the very last burnt kernel of stuffing out from behind the 'fridge. The neighbors had mostly stopped being afraid that the two ladies might take it into their heads to cook something more dangerous than oatmeal and had gone back to their habit of saying that Iola 'does things her own way' while they tapped their heads with a fingertip. The federal agents had packed up their investigative gear and gone home, having decided that there wasn't anything to be gained by getting Iola and Brenda to divulge their secret recipe for exploding fowl. And life in Ishpeming returned to some kind of normal.

For the edification of folks who've never been in Northern Michigan in late November I should explain that it gets more than a bit nippy. The winds blow down from Itsocolduphere, Alaska, and across Muhtozarfroz, Canada, pick up frigid moisture from Lake Michigan and turn Ishpeming into a deep-freeze that would have the Bumble Snowmonster cowering under his electric blanket. The temperature gets so low that even the snow turns blue. You laugh, but every year the local police have to file half-a-dozen or so reports for traffic accidents where motorists couldn't tell where the blue snow ended and the blue sky began and so drove their cars straight up into the air, then realizing they weren't on the ground any longer stopped to look where the road went and crashed to Earth.

This year, as every year, the First Lutheran Church of Ishpeming organized a food drive to help out anyone who was having trouble making ends meet during the holiday season. Iola and Brenda wanted to help this noble effort so they volunteered and were soon schlepping boxes of contributed food around town, packing care packages, and so on in the fellowship hall at the Lutheran church. If that was the extent of their involvement it would all have ended very nicely. But remember how I said Aunt Iola is a bit unique? Uh-huh. The story doesn't end there.

Another thing about Iola: she likes root beer. A lot. She can tell different brands by their scent and what plant bottled it by the flavor. But she's not a fan of all the chemical additives they use. Since homemade root beer doesn't have all that stuff in it Aunt Iola has, for many years, made her own root beer. More of it than she can drink, actually. So when this story started my dear aunt had upwards of 400 two-liter bottles of delicious homemade all-natural sassafras root beer stored in her cellar.

I'm not sure whether it was Iola or Brenda who got the bright idea to contribute a few hundred bottles of root beer to the food drive. I have no doubt that their offer was made with the best of intentions and having drunk the super-fizzy stuff on many occasions I know that the people who received her root beer would have loved it. I just wish that the two friends had gotten a bit more help when putting their plan into operation. It would have also been good not to drive all that soda around town in a bouncy pickup truck with one bad shock absorber while the temperature was significantly below freezing, causing the soda to start to freeze up and expand in the bottles.

See, all the contributed food was stored in the church basement and the church had no elevator, so it was necessary for Brenda and Iola, neither of whom would ever see their 50's again, to carry boxes of canned goods down the steep stairs to the cellar. Lugging heavy boxes full of root beer down those steps didn't sound like any fun so the two women put on their thinking caps and worked out a way to do it easier.

The solution wasn't hard to find. On their way to take the root beer to the church they stopped at the neighborhood grocery store and explained to the manager what they were doing. He, being an understanding kind of fellow, was glad to loan them the metal conveyor his workers used to transport heavy boxes of stuff from delivery trucks into the back of the store. The conveyor was built sort of like a long metal ladder with wheels on each rung. You could lay it down on its short legs and put a box on it, give the box a shove, and the wheels would carry the freight along just as slick as anything. It sounded like just the thing to move all that root beer out of Brenda's pickup and into the church. But maybe not a good thing to use on a steep staircase. I bet that someone who has both oars in the water would have figured that out.

Getting all the boxes of soda out of the truck and into the church's kitchen worked out great. Iola would grab a box off the truck and put it on the ramp, yell "BOX" and give it a push, and the box would roll to the other end where Brenda waited to take it off and stack it. When that phase was done they brought the conveyor in and laid it down on the staircase. The idea was to roll the boxes downhill where Brenda would stack them, and then they'd carry the boxes across the room to where incoming goods were stored for the next day.

It should've worked. It really should have worked. It WOULD have worked, I think, if the boxes hadn't been so heavy. Oh, the first thirty cases slid down perfectly, with Brenda grabbing them and moving them out of the way and stacking them up at the foot of the staircase. But when she'd lifted case number 33 and turned around to stack it her back kinda went WHANG and she hesitated long enough for case number 34 to rocket down and hit her in the back of the legs, knocking her feet out from under her.

Six 2-liter bottles of soda weigh about 24 pounds, but you'd never think it from the way the case Brenda was holding became airborne. As she toppled over backwards onto case number 34 case number 33 did a beautiful swan dive high into the air and came down like a sextet of missiles. Fortunately it didn't land on poor Brenda. Unfortunately the forces of gravity and the hardness of the concrete floor conspired to overcome the integrity of the plastic soda bottles. Yes, you've got it – all six. And they didn't just pop or spring leaks or even burst – these were homemade bottles of sassafras root beer and they'd been fermenting and percolating in Iola's cool cellar long enough to really build up a good head of steam. So when they hit the cement floor they

more-like...detonated. I wasn't there to hear it, mind you, but it's my understanding that the fire department a mile away went on alert because they thought that fusillade of BANGS in the distance was the town sewage plant burning off excess methane gas again. Plastic bottle fragments, chunks of cardboard box, and dark red soda flew in every direction. In the enclosed space of the church basement that concussive force was pretty impressive. So much so that the other 33 cases of soda just had to join in the fun and show what THEY could do.

Thirty-four cases of six partly-frozen, two-liter bottles each, all getting really shook up and excited at one time, is something that you really can't visualize if you've never experienced it. The stuttering chop-chop-pop-pop of all those bottles splitting open, the soothing FWOOSSSSH sound of fizzing, foaming soda being set free of its plastic fetters, and the spattering sploosh of all that liquid gushing against walls, ceiling, and floor – it must've really be something to behold. Probably had a really pretty fountain effect too. Unless you're poor, befuddled, bedraggled Brenda and are caught in the middle of that exploding chaos. I don't think she enjoyed it too much, frankly.

Brenda screamed as the atmosphere around her turned into sweet-smelling foaming beverage but there was no one to help. With the first BOOM my dear Aunt Iola, who'd lived with her Korean War vet husband long enough to hear all his battle stories until she could recite them from memory, had screamed INCOMING! and hit the dirt upstairs in the kitchen, hugging the tile floor for all she was worth while her mind painted pictures of whistling mortar fire going on downstairs.

According to the official police report the actual hullabaloo really only lasted about ten minutes before peace returned to the First Lutheran church of Ishpeming, Michigan. The beautiful stained glass windows might have vibrated an additional minute or so but there's no truth to the legend that the pipes of the sanctuary's organ continued to wheeze and rattle for the rest of the afternoon. We know that because Walt DeMint, the church sexton, who lived a block away and had taken cover when the rumbling began, eventually crawled out from behind his couch and hustled down the street to be sure the church was still standing and he testified that the organ's pipes had settled down by then.

What Walt did find, though, will forever be etched in his memory. He found Aunt Iola sitting on the tailgate of her truck, holding her sides and laughing like a hyena as tears ran down her face, and poor Brenda, drenched in drying root beer, looking like a drowned orangutan and madder than a boiled owl, stamping around in the parking lot and using language that nobody before or since has heard uttered within a mile of any church in Ishpeming. The ambient temperature that day was about ten degrees below Omigosh-its-cold but the soda was steaming off Brenda's skin in her fury.

Well, the root beer explosion in the church basement was a nine days wonder in that little town. Nobody could remember anything like it happening before. The neighborhood grocery contributed about a hundred gallons of Mr. Clean and a stack of rags, the local Boy Scouts turned out to put the muscle into the project, the church's Ladies Prayer and Study Group whipped up a lot of chicken corn soup and biscuits and hot chocolate to keep the workers going while they mopped and scrubbed and swabbed the cellar clean, and even the Mayor stopped by

to make a speech that nobody listened to. The mess was cleared up, the neighbors were reassured that they were in no danger of further missile attack, Brenda and Iola were cleared of any hostile intentions and only got a stern talking-to by the Chief of Police and Father Daniels and Walt DeMint, and some strangers in dark suits and carrying badges arrived to confiscate the remaining crates of Aunt Iola's sassafras root beer. They didn't say much – just something about helping Uncle Sam's peacekeeping efforts in a place called Kuwait...

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November 21, 2013