

The Ball Jar

Just mention “Hoosier food” and an impressive array of edibles will surely come to mind: corn, beans, tomatoes, pumpkins, mulberries, even dandelions (if you like that sort of thing.) A Hoosier harvest offers a feast of delicious, healthful edibles. Anyone who has ever enjoyed those summer treats in the dead of winter, out of a glass jar, may know they owe a debt of thanks to a family that moved their glass-making business to Indiana in 1887. Five brothers (Lucius, William, Edmund, Frank and George) brought their enterprise, The Ball Brothers Glass Company, from Buffalo, New York, to Muncie Indiana.

Upon their arrival in Muncie, the brothers bought a beautiful stretch of land along the White River where they all built their homes within a stone’s throw of one another. Always a close-knit family, they followed their mother’s sage advice that whatever they did, they should do it together. You can still visit some of their homes and gardens on the land they named “Minnetrista,” now a cultural complex that is open to the public. The main building on the site is a museum that offers up to three different exhibits at any given time. Sometimes there are live elements included in the exhibits, such as demonstrations or theatrical re-enactments. This is how I came to cross paths with the Ball Brothers.

An actor by trade, I was hired to be part of an exhibit about The Ball Jar. I must admit, I was unsure as to how one could devote an entire exhibit to a glass jar but once involved in the process I became fascinated by the history of this humble tool that has literally saved lives throughout the world. I was proud to be able to help share that story. I learned that the Ball jar was only one of myriad items manufactured by the Ball Brothers, but it is certainly the best known and most well loved.

I performed a short one-woman show, played in a Depression-era kitchen on the exhibit floor. I portrayed a Texas housewife whose husband had left town to look for work, “like so many others...” My character prepared beans for canning while she relayed memories from her childhood; memories that centered around the Ball jar: long hot evenings with other women in the kitchen; learning tips and tricks from Grandma; the horror and hilarity of the rare explosion of a jar of peaches; the fact that she hadn’t had to do this since she was a kid and now she had no choice: if she didn’t put food away now, the family would have no food to eat come winter.

After each performance, people would share their own Ball jar memories with me. Many people shared similar stories about generations of women in a hot kitchen. Some said they had taken up canning as a way to connect with their past, or as a way to pass something on to their children. But the one story that has stuck with me was that of a solitary, well-dressed gentleman who approached me after a performance with tears in his eyes. It took him a few moments to regain his composure.

“Forgive me,” he said, “I’m a little overwhelmed. I can’t believe how this jar has followed my life, full circle.” He went on to tell me that, growing up in The Phillipines, his mother had worked with Christian missionaries. One of the things she had learned from them was how to “put food up” for the winter by preserving seasonal foods through canning, in Ball jars.

“We were the only family that had mangos all year ‘round,” he said. “Mango season is what you lived for as a kid. So sweet and juicy, it was like candy. It’s what you looked forward to all year, that first bite into that first ripe mango. Then you’d eat as many as you could, because all too soon the season was over and they were gone.”

Then his face broadened with an ear-to-ear smile, “But not for us. My mother spent those days in a steaming hot kitchen, canning mangoes. It must have been a hundred and twenty degrees in there. The air was thick with pulp: sweet and sticky. I still ate as many mangoes as I could during the season, but thanks to my mother, I didn’t have to wait an entire year before enjoying them again.” I asked how it was that they had Ball jars in The Phillipines and he grinned again.

“She mail-ordered them,” he said “from the Sears catalogue: the most beautiful book I’d ever seen. I’d pore through it daydreaming about all the things I wanted to have. It was my introduction to America, beyond the missionaries. She never ordered anything else out of it, just the jars. But that was enough. More than enough. In the off-season, when life was a struggle, and she would open one of those jars. . . The smell of those mangoes was like heaven to us. Sometimes it was all we had. I never could have imagined then that I would ever leave that little village, become a doctor and a professor and one day be standing here on the very site where those jars were made.” He paused again as emotion welled up once more, “This exhibit, this performance has brought all of those childhood memories flooding back, so clear and tangible, and I am so grateful.” I was also grateful. I was grateful to have seen, first hand, the impact that this source of local pride had had on one small boy, halfway around the world.

Another thing I learned during my time at Minnetrista was that the Ball Brothers’ guiding principle was to seek to change people’s lives for the better. Their legacy is obvious in Muncie, home of Ball State University and Ball Hospital, but I know it has reached far beyond Indiana’s borders, providing a shining example and point of pride for their fellow Hoosiers.