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*Helen Bailey and nephews:
(from left) David and Clark*

INTERVIEW WITH HELEN BAILEY

International evaluator and dessert cook

Helen Bailey is a Liberal Arts and international evaluator in the Office of Academic Records. She is pictured here with two of her nephews in an annual Christmas sugar cookie baking ritual, which always involves the consumption of fair amounts of dough.

Moebius: When did your interest in cooking begin?

Who was your inspiration?

HB: When I was four years old, I spent some time in the summer with my grandmother in Selma, Alabama. She had been a home economics teacher. My sister and I learned a great deal from her over the five or six summers we visited her. Desserts were her specialty, and we could choose what to make: peanut brittle, fudge, or even more adventurous projects such as churning our own butter. My sister became the seamstress, and I became the dessert cook. I remember some failures—we made rock-hard brittle that took a very long time to scrape off the white enamel kitchen table, and a great deal of care not to gouge the table.

After my grandmother became older, we didn't visit her by ourselves, and I stopped practicing my dessert skills for a time. Then, in high school, I started making some dinner food, but I quickly came to see myself as a baker more than a cook. I think I decided that was what I loved more, and because of my experience, I was not afraid of baking, as some people understandably are.

Moebius: Why did you choose desserts?

HB: I love the way desserts transform rather tasteless ingredients (eggs, baking powder, flour, salt) into something completely different and magical. Also, I love the precision that desserts require: everything is measured carefully, and the recipe needs to be followed exactly. If you do so, you will get a good result; that is gratifying. It's a fairly easy way to satisfy a perfectionist streak.

Moebius: What are some secrets to perfect desserts?

HB: Again, I think the secret is that the recipe tells me everything precisely as I should do it. It is not an experiment. One shouldn't make substitutions. The author has perfected her creation.

Also, I am very detail-oriented, and I love the time it takes to make desserts, to be

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creative in that way. It's a gift to others.

Moebius: Do you make up your own recipes that are reproducible?

HB: Oh, no. Now, I might add a different type of dried fruit to scones or use lemon rind instead of orange rind, but I wouldn't make an entire recipe up. I'm not that creative.

Moebius: Why do you think some people have trouble with desserts? And what is your experience with sharing recipes with others for some of your desserts?

HB: I think people want to be too creative. They don't want to follow directions. Authors of dessert cookbooks like to tell stories of readers who complain to them that their recipes didn't work. When pressed, they reveal all kinds of ways in which they did not follow the recipe as printed. The authors find this frustrating, but also oddly satisfying, I think. Having said that, though, I recently shared my favorite scone recipe with a friend at work. She has made some modifications, and hers are delicious, though you would never guess that our versions are from the same recipe! I'm glad she made it her own, and I'm glad she tried, for my experience is usually that people react with "That's too much trouble" when I share a recipe.

Moebius: How do you decide that a recipe would be good?

HB: I can tell if a recipe will work or not because I know about ingredients. If the recipe doesn't call for salt or adds too much, for example, I'm skeptical that the recipe will work.

I also pay attention to the author of the recipe, or who wrote the cookbook from where the recipe came.

I know something about proportions and balance between ingredients. Also, I understand technique, so if a recipe requires beating of ingredients when it makes more sense to gently fold them in, I'm not inclined to try it.

Of course, I make recipes based on whether it's a dessert that I might like.

Moebius: What are some of your favorite dessert cookbooks?

HB: I like *The Cake Bible* and *The Pie and Pastry Bible* by Rose Levy Beranbaum, which are extremely detailed. Another is anything by Alice Medrich. *Cocolat* is her first cookbook. She, too, has taken the time to really test her recipes, and they are not too sweet. Ann Hodgman, who used to write for *Spy* magazine, has two extremely smart cookbooks: *Beat This!* and *Beat That!* She has written what my dream cookbook would have been to write: the definitive recipes, according to her own tastes, of foods she loves. Besides, she is quite funny, and hers may be the only cookbook that refers to the novelist Nicholson Baker, one of my favorite authors.

Cooks Illustrated is another interesting publication (bi-monthly) that gives you more

than you ever wanted to know about a cooking problem: what usually happens, what happens if you tweak it a little, what finally happens if you do it a certain way. It's quite neurotic but fun. I once made English trifle from a recipe in *Cooks Illustrated*; it took me days but was fabulous. My husband said it was the longest recipe he'd ever seen; I think he was exhausted just observing me make it.

Moebius: Have you taken classes in cooking?

HB: Oh yes. I've taken a class in cooking Thai food; we even learned to make curry paste with a mortar and pestle. I've also learned bread baking. The class in cake decorating was especially fun. I really loved it and became so entranced that as I was learning to make pulled sugar ribbons and bows over an open flame, I actually burned both my elbows and didn't even feel the pain until I left the class an hour later!

Moebius: What do you say when someone offers to bring food to a dinner party or help you cook once he/she gets to your home?

HB: I am not as fond of either idea as some cooks are. Perhaps because I like to control the menu and make sure the food is cooked to perfection, I want to do it all. Of course, if someone is a very good cook, I might say OK, bring your dish.

Also, I get distracted and find myself having trouble following a recipe and chatting with guests! I would rather have everything finished and then concentrate on making my guests happy.

Moebius: Why do you think you love cooking, especially desserts, so much?

HB: Because cooking for people is such a satisfying way to make them happy. I like the meditative aspect of cooking; I find it quite relaxing. Also, since I was raised in the South, I think I grew up with the notion that a Southern woman bakes cakes: it's expected. When someone dies in the South, friends bring cakes. It is not unusual to see twelve to fifteen cakes on the breakfast room table, including a Southern specialty, caramel cake, which is not really known outside that region.

Moebius: If you wanted to make something special for people you've invited to dinner, what would you choose?

HB: If I didn't have too much time, I would make a fruit cobbler. It's homey and comfortable, and you can use almost any fruit in season.

If I had more time, though, I'd make a Southern pecan pie, with pecans my parents send me from Alabama, or, better yet, a chocolate soufflé. ☺

Interview on behalf of Moebius conducted by Mary Kay Harrington, Winter 2009