

# **Bessie Crocker: The Baking Barrister**

By Kate Nichols

Bess Nichols Fisher was embarking on her first year as a full-time student at the University of Mississippi School of Law when the world went into lockdown due to the COVID-19 pandemic. She remained a full-time student through online classes via Zoom. On top of that, she launched Bessie Crocker.

With the world in crisis amid the pandemic, everybody picked up a new hobby. Some people chose gardening, some chose jigsaw puzzles and others chose a daily walk around the neighborhood. While these are all great hobbies, none of them match up to Bess' lockdown entertainment.

Bessie Crocker truly does it all: easy recipes, life hacks, style tips and everything in between. Most importantly, she's my big sister. As she declared on her blog, "In the south, we call that a 'hodgepodge.'"

I've had countless people say to me, "Wow! It must be so hard being her younger sister!" I always laugh at this statement because most of them don't even know the half of it. I spent 12 years at the same school where teachers addressed me as, "Bess – I mean, Kate." Don't get me wrong, it was frustrating at times and I often wanted to scream at them. As I've gotten older, I have realized how much of an honor it is to be mistaken as Bess.

Some may try to say that she's too big for her britches, but anyone who knows Bess will tell you that she's got gumption.

Baking has always come naturally to Bess, and began when she was 4 years old making cupcakes, with the aid of Granny, to welcome home her baby sister (hint: that's me).

She was given the nickname "Bessie Crocker" during her high school years. If it was someone's birthday, a random holiday or just a random Thursday, chances are you would see Bess Nichols walking around the campus of St. Paul's Episcopal School with a Tupperware full of intricately decorated cupcakes, cookies or petit fours.

2019 was a big year for Bess: she quit her job in the Ole Miss Office of Admissions, got married to William Fisher of Greenwood, Mississippi and began her law education at the University of Mississippi School of Law. She was one of three students in her law school class of 650 to receive a 4.0 GPA for her first semester.

With Bess and William living in Oxford and me attending school in Auburn, getting together in person is about as easy as finding a needle in a haystack. The few times a year we are together are normally spent sitting around the black granite-topped island in the kitchen of our childhood home, and that's exactly where I interviewed her.

Though we, the Nichols sisters, claim Mobile, Alabama as home, our family moved all over growing up. “I think that’s what made me embrace Southern hospitality,” Bess said while perfecting the layout of the evening’s charcuterie board. “Being the new kid in school is scary, but it taught me how to talk to a brick wall.”

After receiving her bachelor’s degree in Political Science from Ole Miss, Bess couldn’t bring herself to leave the beautiful city that the university calls home. Oxford, Mississippi is one of the prettiest cities in the whole state, with the ever-blooming magnolias and change of seasons that neither Bess nor myself got to experience growing up on the Gulf Coast.

Oxford is located in central Lafayette County in northern Mississippi, and about 75 miles south of Memphis, Tennessee. With Oxford being a small community, Bess and William often make day trips to Memphis on the weekend to go to large stores, such as Target, Pottery Barn, William-Sanoma, and Bess’ favorite, Trader Joe’s.

Bess got lucky at the start of her quarantine hobby and had two of the best taste testers in the South: her husband William and their English black lab, Kate.

It should be noted that Kate was named before Bess and William adopted her. In anticipation of the confusion of having both a sister and a dog with the same name, the canine was nicknamed “Dog Kate,” and I was given the nickname of “Human Kate.”

There is one thing you should know about Bess: she hates to lose an argument. This determination will make her an incredible lawyer; however, it makes being her sister difficult at times.

As the younger sister, I was never going to try to argue with her. I would rather bite my tongue than risk being on the receiving end of her left hook. William Fisher, to everyone’s surprise, has no fears when it comes to Bess.

In March 2020, the beginning of the pandemic lockdown, Bessie Crocker was just beginning with a batch of cookies that required room-temperature butter. She left the four sticks of butter to soften on the kitchen counter of her two-story Oxford townhouse and made a trip to her local Kroger for the second time that day.

“It’s not out of the ordinary for me to make more than one trip to the grocery store in a day,” Bess admitted, laughing a little too hard at herself. “William takes my keys and hides them from me after my third or fourth trip.”

While unpacking and putting away her newest crop of groceries, Bess noticed that the butter was no longer waiting for her on the counter. Her immediate reaction, like most women, was to yell at her husband.

“William!” She stormed into the living room and blocked her husband’s view of an Ole Miss football game rerun. “I told you I was letting the butter soften! Don’t put it back in the

fridge if I'm letting it soften!" Her voice got more high-pitched and her words came out faster the more angry she got.

A fearless William rebutted. "I actually have no idea what you're talking about."

This, of course, made Bess even angrier – "madder than a wet hen" as we say in the South. "William, yes you do!" She grit her teeth and narrowed her eyes, a trait that she and I both inherited from our dad and paternal grandmother. "I'm going to leave another four sticks out to soften while I'm in class so DO NOT TOUCH THEM."

With his tee time quickly approaching, William took his wife's outburst with a grain of salt, collected his Callaway golf clubs and made his way to the green.

"I was gone, Human Kate," William interjected during Bess' version of the story, his Mississippi Delta accent as thick as molasses. "I was out of the house, you need to make that very clear in your story."

After a three hour Zoom lecture on tort law, Bess reentered her brightly colored and perfectly organized kitchen to begin baking with all four of her freshly softened sticks of butter. Only there weren't four sticks of butter waiting for her; there were two and half sticks of butter on counter and a very guilty Dog Kate in the corner of the kitchen.

Dog Kate had consumed six and a half sticks of butter that day, wrappers and all.

Like everyone who becomes a master of their craft, Bess had her failures.

I asked Bess what was her favorite story of baking or cooking. With one look into the hazel brown eyes that we share, we both started hysterically laughing; I knew we were thinking of the exact same story.

The year is 2011. It's summer vacation and, like the dedicated student that I am, I used my summer reading book as a coaster for my Coca-Cola as I sat on the couch and watched cartoons. Sixth grade was tough and I vowed to spend the whole summer doing absolutely nothing.

Bess turned 16 in May, and was babysitting for Mrs. Collins, one of the teachers at St. Paul's.

My Motorola Razor started to frantically vibrate and I saw that it was Bess calling me. With my usual spunk and attitude, I answered the phone. "Can't talk right now – I'm really busy at the moment." The *SpongeBob SquarePants* theme song played in the background.

"These children are evil. I'm bringing them to the house. I'll be there in five minutes." The line went dead.

Bess has told many little white lies to me over the years, but nothing was worse than the five minute lie. About 30 seconds after she hung up, the front door opened and in came the screams of children.

Mrs. Collins had three children: Catherine was 7, Robert was 4 and Rebecca was 18 months old.

I reluctantly pulled my body off of the red and brown plaid couch in the living room and saw Bess in the hallway. We made eye contact, then my eyes narrowed and I grit my teeth. "What..." a pause for 12 year old dramatic effect. "...have you done." It was not a question; it was more of a code for "*I'm totally stealing your allowance for this.*"

With the demon children running about our home, Bess decided to make them lunch. She found a recipe for chicken spaghetti which was one of our favorite meals at summer camp. I offered to help her cook it, but my sous chef proposal was immediately declined.

I went back to the living room to resume my lazy summer, but I walked into a WWE fight. Catherine had Robert in a head lock, the TV was going berserk because Catherine was sitting on the remote and my freshly opened Coca-Cola was on the ground and streaming onto the carpet.

In hindsight, *The Outsiders* did not make a very good coaster.

Overwhelmed and annoyed, I went to my room, which my family calls, "Kate's Cave." I'm an introvert; always have been. I prefer to be alone, and can spend hours in my room by myself and be perfectly content.

*BAM!*

Glass shattered somewhere in the house. Bess brought them here, so Bess could clean it up and Bess could explain it to Mom and Dad when they got home from work.

Really and truly, the only thing keeping me sane during the invasion was knowing I would be rewarded with chicken spaghetti. The chime of the oven timer was like a symphony to my ears. The time has come. It's chicken spaghetti time.

I could not have been more wrong.

I reluctantly left my cave with an empty stomach and high expectations. Whoever said camp food was bad clearly never went to Camp Windhover. Miss Tina, the camp cook, made the best food in the South (if my mother asks, I said she does).

Miss Tina's chicken spaghetti looked like a dish you would see on a Stouffer's commercial for microwave meals. The way they present food on commercials is never what you actually get.

Bess' chicken spaghetti looked like what you pull out of the microwave and your smile slowly begins to fade.

Instead of the golden color and cheesy smell and cloud of steam I was anticipating, the green plate in front of me had the most color. The casserole was light gray – almost white – and there was no steam in sight.

Neither Catherine nor Robert went near their plates. “You have to take at least three bites,” I told them. “Three bites and then you can be done!”

The three-bite rule was from camp. You had to take three bites of something you did not like or did not want to eat before a counselor would make you a peanut butter and jelly sandwich. As a very picky eater, I was quite familiar with this rule.

“You haven't even taken one bite!” Robert smug face made the hair on my arms stand up. Who knew a four year old could out-smart an almost-teenager?

I looked back down at the plate. To my disappointment, the color has not changed and no steam had appeared. I dug my fork into the casserole and put it in my mouth in one quick movement; I've learned that's the easiest way to eat something you don't want to. Up until that moment, the worst thing I had ever eaten was flounder.

I tried so hard to look like was enjoying it, but my favorite meal became my worst nightmare in one bite. It was cold, the spaghetti was undercooked and the shredded cheese on top was anything but melted.

Not another bite of chicken spaghetti was taken; not even by the 18 month old.

Neither Bess nor myself has eaten chicken spaghetti since that dreadful day.