

That “Can Do” Spirit

By Trail End State Historic Site Superintendent Cynde Georgen;
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During the summer and autumn, when our modern Miracle-Grown gardens produce an excess of tomatoes and zucchini, our thoughts sometimes drift back to the days before refrigerators, freezers, microwaves and supermarkets. What was it like then for the average housewife? In addition to all her other chores – child rearing, cleaning, gardening and the like – she had to put together meals from whatever fresh or preserved foods might be available. There were no frozen pizzas, no pasta-in-a-box, no microwave entrees; none of the “convenience foods” we are used to today. And during World War One, when food rationing was in effect, fresh food was especially hard to come by.



Canning Jars, undated (Private Collection)

According to Susan Strasser in *Never Done* (Pantheon Books, 1982), few manufactured products were available to make the housewife's task any easier, with or without wartime rationing:

All year round, food arrived in the kitchen unprepared. Shoppers returned from the market with live chickens that had to be killed, or dead ones that had to be plucked ... Even purchased fish had scales; even purchased hams had to be soaked or blanched. Roasting and grinding green coffee, grinding and sifting whole spices, cutting and pounding lump or loaf sugar, sifting heavy flour that might be full of impurities, soaking oatmeal overnight, shelling nuts, grinding cocoa shells, seeding raisins, making and nurturing yeast, drying herbs; tasks like these accompanied nearly every ingredient of every recipe, whether it came from the garden or the market.

It was especially in the winter that the average diet could become, shall we say, dreadful. Though she could hope for fresh garden vegetables and fruits in the spring, summer and fall, the average housewife had to rely on easily-stored root vegetables such as carrots and beets,

plus squash, cabbage and celery, in the winter. Starches were popular: macaroni, potatoes and rice were winter fare in even the finest homes.

And yet, when the snows lay deep upon the garden and the roads to market were blocked with insurmountable drifts of snow, the prudent housewife did not have to resort to a diet of beans and hardtack. Canning, pickling, salting, sugaring, drying, smoking and jerking allowed her to offer her family a bounty of tasty and wholesome meats, fruits and vegetables. Cecilia Hennel, a modern housewife living near Powell, Wyoming, in the 1910s, was one such prudent woman. In *Letters from Honeyhill: A Woman's View of Homesteading, 1914-1922* (Pruett Publishing, 1990), Hennel lists the contents of her winter pantry:

We have canned peas, beans, corn, carrots, asparagus, greens and tomatoes, besides meat and soup. There are fresh salsify, parsnips, turnips, cabbage, potatoes, onions, squash and sauerkraut, and dried navy and pinto beans, and corn. We have plenty of pickles, pickled beets, chili sauce, and chow chow, and preserves and jelly of various sorts, besides a quantity of grape and black currant juice. In fruits we have a lot of fresh apples, and canned pears, peaches, apples, prunes, green gages, and three kinds of plums, and black currants. I will can a lot more of the beef they are killing today, so we surely won't get hungry for a while at least!

Fresh meat could be plentiful in the winter – major butchering was done in the middle of the season when the cold weather made up for the lack of refrigeration. Beef, pork and other meats were canned for summer use by using many of the same processes used for canning vegetables.

The canning process we are most familiar with today is a tricky one involving lots of heat, water and sterilization. One 1886 product, the “Mudge Patent Processor,” gave strict instructions on how to successfully can all manner of foods, from apples to zucchini:

Have water boiling to generate steam before using. Keep well boiling vigorously while using the canner as you must have sufficient steam to do good work. Put fruit or vegetables in the jar raw. Place jar on a dry folded towel while pouring in the hot syrup or water to prevent breakage. Pour in slowly. In cooking or canning dry, be careful to temper glass jars before subjecting to the action of the steam. Place wooden blocks on the canner under the jars to prevent breaking. Do not put the lids on the jars while processing. Be careful to sterilize lids and rubbers before sealing. Never allow water to boil away.



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