

# Lighter Side

## Operation Peach

One morning in mid-summer, I was deeply engrossed in reading the local newspaper while watching the national political news on TV. I was trying to decide if I should move into a cave on a Montana mountain top or sneak back across our southern border, claiming I was an illegal and signing up for a new driver's license, free medical benefits, food stamps and cash. Through my mental haze, I heard my wife, Sandra, ask me something to which I vaguely remembering answering, "Whatever you decide is okay with me." I have no excuse; I have been married long enough to know better. I later learned that my wife had asked if I would like to put up some peaches. By not understanding the question and giving a normal "husband answer," I unknowingly put myself on the steep slippery road to the most expensive peaches known to man.

I love fresh fruit and as a kid, I picked my share, mainly from the neighbors' trees, where I also learned the valuable skill of running while dodging flying sticks. Today, I normally pick up fruit from the local roadside garden stand. In regards to "putting up fruit," I see no reason to go through all the work when I could simply buy a few cans of peaches at the grocery store.

By the next day, "Operation Peach" was in full swing. My wife had made calls to various outlets and after a long discussion of bushels and pecks and half pecks and half bushels, which I never really understood, our order was confirmed and a pickup date scheduled. I learned that the timing of a peach pickup and the processing of the peaches is extremely critical. It reminded me of my Army days, when I was taught if I pulled the pin on a hand grenade and tossed it too quickly, the enemy had time to toss it back. But if I pulled the pin and waited too long, I might be known as "Lefty" for the rest of my life. There were no do-overs when tossing a grenade; it was like putting up peaches. Process them too quickly and they are hard and tart. Wait too long and they turn to mush and are impossible to peel.

Finally, the day arrived to pick up the peaches and we were advised by the person loading them into our truck that processing should occur in exactly 48 hours: not 46 hours and certainly not 50 hours. In 47 and 3/4 hours, our basement had been scrubbed, tables sanitized, knives sharpened and pots and bowls of every size and description at the ready, plus enough new freezer containers to hold a full sized elk and two small antelope. With just seconds to spare, my sister-in-law and her husband appeared at the door with bags, newspapers and rolls of paper towels. (I later learned

they were behind the idea of "Operation Peach.") They set about spreading plastic cloths covered with newspapers to absorb what they claimed would be excessive juice when peeling the peaches. They also brought with them several more knives, all with gleaming edges. They all donned aprons as my wife and her sister pulled back their hair, tucked it under shower caps and pulled on full-length blue surgical gloves; we were ready to start. As I glanced around the room, I was sure we could murder someone, wrap them up and dispose of the body without having even CSI find a trace of evidence.

Within minutes, we were attacking the pile of peaches that I swear came up to my armpits in an assembly-line procedure. Peach peels fell all around me and within minutes, I had peach juice dripping off my elbows. New layers of plastic and newspapers were laid on top of the table to keep the juice confined. With my brother-in-law and me peeling at record speeds, the women moved sliced peaches from bowls filled with Fruit Fresh preservative into bowls of sugar and finally into freezer containers. Slowly, the pile of peaches shrank and finally, I held the last peach. As I sent the peach to its final resting place, I felt a slight dampness in my lap. Glancing down, I could clearly see where the last layer of newspapers and plastic was soaked and a large reservoir of thick peach juice had been dripping on my pants for some time. As I tried to scoop the soaked newspapers from the edge of the table, the "dam" broke and what appeared to be a Johnstown Flood of peach juice completely soaked me from the waist down. If my neighbors knew what was happening in my basement at that moment, they surely would have collectively been building an ark and gathering animals two by two. Standing there in all my glory with peach juice dripping from every part of my body, I mentally ran a quick check of the cost of "Operation Peach" and figured each container of peaches was worth approximately \$22.75 if I didn't include the labor or the additional cost the garbage man would charge for all the extra plastic and paper that week. I felt sure I would have to sell off some of my retirement funds to cover the bill.

My sister-in-law assured me that even although it seemed like a lot of trouble, I would forget all the work and cost when I opened a container of sweet, fresh peaches on a cold night this winter. She just might be right. However, as I stood there soaked in peach juice with my feet stuck to the floor, I was quietly considering selling the house instead of attempting to clean up the mess. In the future, I will confine my associations with peaches to peach brandy and with each glass, I will repeat, "Never again."



by John Kasun

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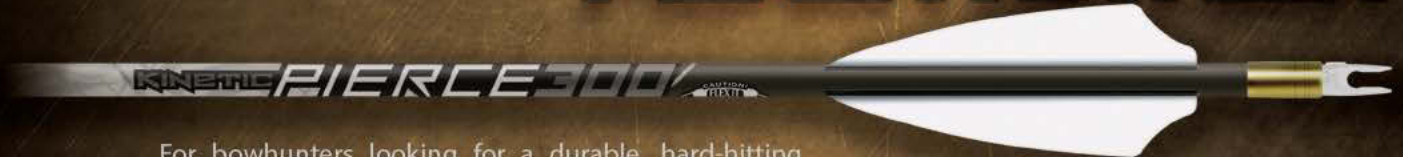
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