

Canning ritual an old family tradition of preserving food

THE LONDON FREE PRESS, Monday, September 5, 1977—19

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for The Free Press

I just finished my yearly canning. I rejoice because I completed the process in one 24-hour period. I have always detested the entire business — the messy peeling, cutting and grinding of fruits and vegetables. I disliked it mainly because it kept me from things I would rather be doing — reading a book, writing a story or batting out flies to the kids.

Why do I feel I am a traitor to my sex if I do not preserve food? No doubt it is a holdover from the Depression days of my youth. A smidgin of the pride which compelled my forbears to put down enough fruit, vegetables and pickles to last until the garden produced again must have rubbed off on me.

Mother stretched "boughten" fruit with rhubarb from the long wide row in the garden. A couple of boxes of strawberries flavored a huge kettle of rhubarb. My favorite was rhubarb and bananas. Once, when fruit was scarce, she canned several jars of rhubarb, adding a few handfuls of large, juicy, seedless

raisins. There was nothing to compare with a dish of tangy rhubarb and a slice of hot, crusty bread, swimming with golden, jersey butter. To spark a jaded appetite, mother would add a tall glass of her black currant juice (unfermented, of course).

Sugar was never more than \$5 per hundredweight. Most households stocked up with several 100-pound bags in the spring, when storekeepers had their reduced specials. I am sure it was as difficult to wangle the \$5 from the cream cheque then as it would be to pay the \$20 a hundredweight would cost now. There were many uses for the cotton bag after the sugar was used, and the bags were prized, despite the amount of elbow grease needed to rub out the lettering. What could one do with a bunch of paper bags now?

I was extremely fond of gooseberry jam. Against mother's advice, I once picked a basket of wild gooseberries, which are covered with spiny thorns. I tried cutting the thorns off with scissors, but tiring of that tedious chore, I convinced myself the thorns would soften with

the stewing. They didn't. So every morning I picked the berries out and put the pink jelly on my toast.

My mother-in-law picked wild strawberries that grew along the railway tracks, walking several miles along the hot cinders, picking as many as six quarts at a time. She stemmed the tiny berries as she picked them. Saturday's picking was later piled on top of a huge shortcake biscuit, which she baked in a large round pan originally used to set milk for skimming. The reward of her labor of love came from watching her three grown sons devour every morsel of the sweet rich dessert at Sunday dinner.

She also picked wild raspberries in Wolsten-croft's bush, walking the three miles there and back. She went armed with two 10-pound syrup pails for the berries, a sandwich for lunch and a bottle of citronella for the mosquitoes.

The summer I became a member of her family she insisted on taking me with her. The heat tired me, the citronella nauseated me and I would have turned tail and run but for

two things: I didn't know the way out of the dense woods and she kept dropping berries into my pail to encourage me. All the weary way home, I dreaded the thought of kindling a fire in my temperamental iron stove to cook supper and preserve those miserable buggy berries. That winter, however, I was thankful for the jars of rich red fruit, and proud of my berry pies.

Now that our household consists of only two regulars, I usually take the easy way of storing food for winter use, by putting fruit in those strong little bags that our milk comes in, and dropping them in the freezer. Guests may sugar theirs. We eat ours as is.

Still that urge to can will not let me rest until I have removed papers, black with last winter's coal dust, from the fruit jar shelves, and lined up a few containers of various-colored fruits on clean-papered shelves.

Recently I was given a basket of beets and two baskets of cucumbers. While at the store getting vinegar, sugar spices and new jar rubbers, I picked up a basket of red haven peach-

es. On the way home I stopped at my daughter's to beg a handful of dill from her garden. I also invited my two grandchildren for a visit, knowing they would insist on manning the grinder.

By midnight I had a bouquet of colors on my counter-top. (The grandchildren had put themselves to bed.) I felt a surge of pride as I

looked at the pint jars of golden peaches and deep red beets, the three jars of dill pickles and the many small jars — compliments of Mr. Gerber and my youngest granddaughter — filled with hot dog relish.

I have not betrayed my heredity. Now I can go back to my typewriter without feeling guilty.

Pick of Punch



PUNCH

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"So this year I said, 'To hell with elegance, I'm dressing for comfort.'"