

Teacher Resource Information:

Food Preservation in 1917

Today we can have fresh fruits and vegetables all year long, but in 1917 it was harder to have vegetables and fruits during the winter months. Preserving these foods took time and many times extensive labor. Food from the gardens and orchards had to be preserved in the summer months to be used during the winter. There were a variety of methods and various buildings that related to the preservation of food.

- **Ice Box**: In the farmhouse, the family would have an ice box. This is roughly the equivalent of a refrigerator today, although it would only last as long as there was ice in the ice box. A large block of ice was placed in the top of the box, and perishable food was placed underneath it because cold air falls. As the ice melted it ran along a tube into a 9x13' pan. There were two main ways in which families would get ice for the ice box. Some farm families belonged to an ice co-op. They would cut their own ice in the winter months and would store it in a warehouse for the summer. Other families would get their ice from the traveling ice man. The ice man traveled from farm to farm by wagon and would deliver ice. If a family needed ice, they would just display a sign in the window that had an arrow pointing to the dollar amount of ice that they needed. At the end of the month the family would pay for all of the ice purchased that month. Either way, the ice was cut from lakes and rivers in the wintertime. It was then stored in a large shed and packed with straw and sawdust. The ice would last all summer long stored like this.
- **Root cellar**: The ice box was good for keeping perishable foods good for a short amount of time, but like modern refrigerators, the food would eventually go bad. The root cellar was more like a modern freezer because it could keep food for extended periods of time. Food stored in the root cellar must be bottled, such as bottled fruits and vegetables from the garden. Families would also store root vegetables such as potatoes, turnips, and carrots in layers of dirt in wooden bins and crates of apples in the cellar. The cellar would be kept at a constant temperature of about 60 degrees. This is achieved because it is underground and has thick walls, lined with rock.
- **Smokehouse**: The method for preserving meat on the farm was to cure the meat in a brine solution (salt solution). The meat was then smoked to give it flavor. The fire smoldered in the firebox for up to three weeks, depending on the size of the meat. The fire sent smoke up through the floor to the smokehouse. The family would cure meats such as ham, sausage, bacon, and corned beef. During WWI, families were asked to raise more pork than ever, but it was not for consumption at home. This meat could then be sent overseas. Families found other sources of protein.

- **Bottling**: Canning and bottling of fruits, vegetables and meats was one of the ways the farm family remained self-sufficient. Because of WWI, 1917 was a year that families were especially encouraged to bottle food. If a family could be self-sufficient and live off of their own food, the commercially prepared foods could be sent overseas to the troops. In 1917, pressure canners were available, but bottling was largely done with a water bath.

Source: American West Heritage Center Volunteer Manual