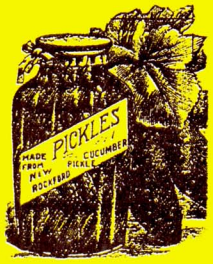
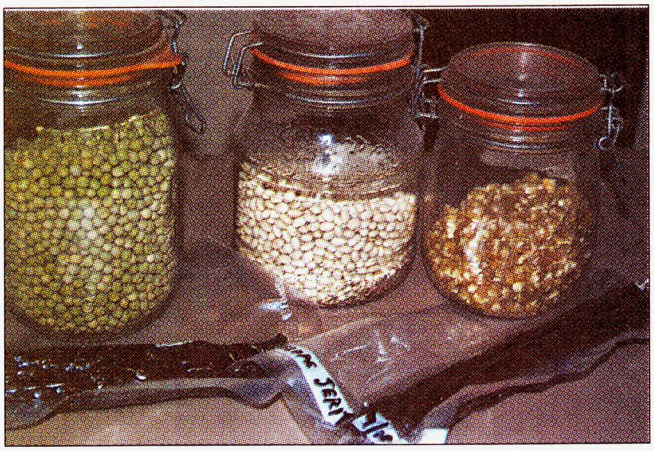
FOOD KEEPING OFF THE GRID



by David Langerman

There are a few of you that have escaped the rat race and established yourselves in the backcountry and off the grid. The rest of us still live in the modern world, pay our utilities and reap the benefits and curses of modern life while keeping our hand into the old ways. Every so often, though, I get a reminder of how life was a hundred years ago when a storm or a drunk driver knocks out the power lines. Then I trim wicks and light oil lamps and enjoy a card game instead of television. But, if the power outage lasts more than a day or so I start to worry about my two freezers and two refrigerators full of food. One freezer is full of elk, antelope, trout, etc. and the other is full of store bought food. Before Freon and glycol compressors made refrigeration possible, our ancestors had other ways of putting by their game and harvest.



dry goods: jerky, legumes and grains

DRYING

Most of us that have ever killed any big game have dried some portion of it into jerky. Anyone that has shot an antelope off the sagebrush prairie understands that they are what they eat. Therefore my antelope are turned into sausage and jerky and as such are delicious. I vacuum pack a few sticks of jerky into each single serving and put them on the shelf in the cellar where it lasts until eaten. Ancient warriors had their own version of MRE's or combat rations known as pemmican. Pemmican comes from a Crow word meaning hard fat, which is pretty much what it is. Jerky is pounded into a meal and added to dried berries then saturated with melted fat and dried until hard. Backwoodsman has done articles and recipes for pemmican before so I won't belabor the details here. But, meat is just the tip of the iceberg when it comes to foods that can be dried. All your legumes; peas, beans, lentils, etc. will last a long time once dried and only need to be boiled to become a meal. Most fruit and pumpkin flesh can be dried. A raisin is a dried grape and a prune is a dried plum. My grandparents would make schnitz by cutting apples and pumpkins into coils, seasoning them with nutmeg and cinnamon after a little lemon juice to prevent browning

a large pickling crock

canning kettles, hot bath and pressure

and then drying them. Once dry they just hung from the rafters of the screen porch through winter. They would dry them in the sun or in laundry racks above the woodstove and so can you. Or, use a dehydrator or set your oven to 150 and prop it open so the moisture can escape.

SMOKING

Chances are if you are an avid fisherman you may have tried smoking some of your catch. Other meats besides fish can and should be smoked. Ham and bacon are common smoked meats, but don't stop there. Brine the flesh in your favorite recipe. Simple brine is salt, brown sugar or molasses, and water, but you can get creative with spices and whatever. I like soy sauce in my brine for salmon and trout. A smoker with an indirect fire where the smoke travels and cools some before hitting the meat is preferred. You do not want a hot fire right under the meat or you wind up roasting the meat over a smoky fire instead of preserving it in smoke. A smoking temperature of 140 to 160 degrees is about right. The wood chips should smolder with lots of smoke, not burn with flames. If fire is your heat source, put the chips in a pan over the flames rather than in the flames. Some burning soft woods like pine and fir give off resin in the smoke that can taste bitter on the meat. If you cut hardwoods for firewood or lumber smell the scent of the wood. If it smells like it might make your meat taste good save the chips and shavings for the smoker. Matching a smoke to a meat can be a little like pairing a wine to a meal. I favor mesquite for turkey and red meats. Pork goes well with hickory of course, but also with apple. Cedar is good on salmon and trout. Cherry has a nice flavor. Fish flesh is like a blank canvas to the artist. Be creative. I know of a local guy who smokes everything in just cottonwood. To each their own.

PICKLING

Pickling is another ancient method where acidity and salt preserve foods while at the same time enhancing the flavor. If your only experience with pickles is those green things on your burger, you've been missing out. Cucumbers are by far the most popular food to pickle, but so many other things can be pickled. Besides dill pickles, sweet pickles, bread and butter pickles, and pickle relish, all made from cucumbers, you can pickle many fruits, beets, green beans, melons, cauliflower, carrots, onions, chili peppers, cabbage and zucchini squash. Then there are pickled pigs feet, pickled herring, pickled eggs, and who can forget chow chow and kim chi. And, what would St. Paddy's Day be without corned beef, which is actually pickled beef? Chutneys and relishes use pickling in their creation. Sauerkraut is a cross between pickling and fermentation that uses a natural substance on the cabbage leaf and salt to draw moisture out of the cabbage to form its brine. The basic pickling brine is made of one quart vinegar for the acidity, one cup of salt and three quarts water. From that basic brine flavorings are added usually with herbs and spices specific to the food being pickled. For instance, cloves of garlic and sprigs of dill weed would be added to make dill pickles out of cucumbers. There are too many great recipe books out there for me to give an example of a brine for everything that can be pickled. I don't know if "Stocking Up" from Rodale Press is still in print, but "Jams, Pickles, and Preserves" is available from Backwoods Mercantile. I keep a tub of dill pickles in the beer and pop fridge, but I also can a few jars.

CANNING

The advent of the Mason jar made home canning a fairly easy process. Our growing season is short so we grow as much as we can as quickly as we can and put up the surplus. In a nutshell, the food is put in a jar, the remaining space is filled with simple syrup, water, oil, or brine to within a half or quarter inch of the top, a lid with a rubber gasket is held in place with a screw down ring, and the whole thing goes into a bath of boiling water. After a prescribed time the jar is taken out and as it cools the contracting contents pull the gasketed lid down to form a vacuum and airtight seal. You will know that it is sealed because as they cool each jar goes "pop" and the lid that was slightly convex (up) is now concave (down). Now for the details, the simple method described above is only for acidic foods like fruit, tomatoes, jams, jellies, and pickles. These foods have enough natural occurring acids to prevent spoilage in an airtight vacuum container. Foods low in acidity such as most vegetables and meat require higher heat than can be produced by mere boiling water. Therefore there are two types of home canning; the above hot water bath, and pressure canning. The pressure canning method uses a large and therefore often costly pressure cooker that because of it's sealed and pressurized internal atmosphere can achieve temperatures above the 212 degree boiling point of water. Those high temperatures kill any organisms and steril-

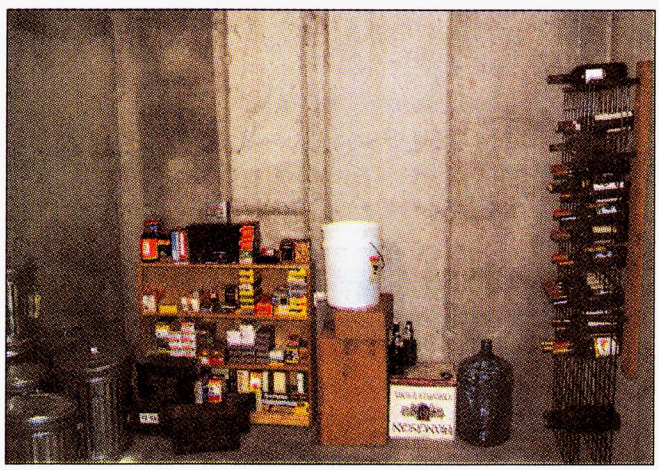
canned food the old way

ize the contents of the jars. Pressure canning kettles almost become family heirlooms passed on to subsequent generations of home canners. With good care and an occasional replacement gasket they will serve several generations. The jars and screw rings are reusable. Just the gasketed lids need replacement each time and are fairly inexpensive. Again there are too many fine books on the subject, "Stocking Up" being my favorite, to start swapping recipes here. Home canned food will store for a couple of years in a cool dry place. As long as the contents look good in the jar and you hear an audible breaking of the seal when you pry off the lid it is good to eat. A good seal will require you to pry the lid off, not just lift. As with any stored food, if in doubt throw it out.

ROOT CELLAR

Not many homes nowadays come with a root cellar, which is a shame because they are the perfect cool dry place called for in the long term storage of just about everything. I heat my crawl space to keep the pipes from freezing in winter. My basement is finished and heated as well. But, when I was finishing my basement I turned an odd 10' by 12' alcove into a root cellar. It has concrete walls on three sides so I walled it off from the rest of the basement with an 8" thick insulated wall and insulated the ceiling well. While the finished basement stays about 70 degrees my cellar stays between 50 and 55 degrees. I have shelves of cans of food from the store and jars of food that we canned. I have racks of wine and shelves stocked with ammunition, primers and powder. All these necessary commodities require a cool dry place for long-term storage. I have bins for apples, onions, potatoes, and hard squash. Now when storing apples and potatoes and onions together be advised that the apples give off a gas called ethylene that will cause the potatoes to form "eyes" or roots and the onions to sprout. I was all for turning the surplus apples into hard cider but the wife loves to eat apples. So in winter the garage is cold enough to store the potatoes and onions there. I store rice, beans, and flour in galvanized pails with tight fitting lids. I bake all our bread so we go through a lot of flour. Our "Big Box" store shopping is 25 miles away so we only go once a month or so and stock up. There have been storms that closed the mountain passes for a few days causing our local store shelves to get a little sparse. So, I like to keep my own shelves well stocked.

a cellar full of food



root cellar: a cool, dry place

So, if like me, you are still tied to the grid and all that comes with it, you can still enjoy foods preserved the old low-tech way and really know what is in your food. I think they taste better and the sense of accomplishment is as rewarding as the good vittles.