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Turn off the Pressure Cooker & Get a Life

Theresa Boedeker Nelson

During my twelfth summer, my primitive food preserving instinct was grossly overloaded, primarily because my siblings, Mom, and I canned 1,243 jars of fruits and vegetables.

It started out harmless enough with Mom declaring, "I think I'll use some of the old jars from the garage for canning." Her idea soon grew into an obsession. Before long all the jars from the garage were filled with produce of various colors and shapes. And summer hadn't even reached its stride. When she ran out of jars, the hunt began. Maybe others had tuned into Mom's wavelength, for it was the summer where stores ran out of canning jars. Not to be discouraged, Mom searched for jars at garage sales, thrift stores, hardware, grocery, and drug stores. She'd harangue grocery store owners. "What do you mean you don't have any canning jars? You said you were ordering some just last week. Do you want my business or not?"

As long as Mom could find jars, we canned. We prayed the glass manufacturers of Mason jars would go on strike, but no such luck entered our lives. Every time it looked like we might emerge from the kitchen where the pressure cooker boiled non-stop, Mom would return all triumphant. "Children, you'll never guess what I found! Five cases of quart jars and five boxes of peaches. What a steal. Now stop your groaning and help me unload the trunk. We have work to do."

We'd set up an assembly line. One of us would wash and sort, the other two would slice, dice, pit, or peel. Mom filled the jars, heated the lids for sealing, and operated the pressure cooker. "That's fifty jars of peaches," she'd exclaim, writing the number down on a chart that hung from the side of our refrigerator. "Imagine how good these peaches will taste this winter."

We'd groan and wish peaches hadn't been propagated in North America.

"If you add up the peaches we canned today and the peaches we canned last week," Mom muttered, "that's one hundred and six jars of peaches."

My legs, back, and fingers didn't ache from having a relaxing summer at the beach; I experienced canner's fatigue.

After the jars were sealed, we'd wash and return them to their original boxes. Then we labeled the box and shipped it off to its pre-assigned space. Green beans under my brother's bed, beets and cherries in his closet. Peaches and carrots under the garage stairs. Apricots, plums and tomatoes in the den closet. On it went, until every bed, closet, and chubby hole

was filled. Mom had the master chart designating the location of the delectables.

"If she loses that list," I told my bother, "she'll go crazy trying to remember if the beans are in the garage, the pantry, under her bed or under some one else's bed."

Personally, we thought Mom had already gone loco. We searched the phone book for a local chapter of Canners Anonymous, but couldn't find one. We spent hours trying to devise ways to keep her home so she wouldn't pass anymore stores or produce stands and bring home more slave work.

"We could suggest going to the beach and having some fun."

"Mom hates fun."

"We could suggest a camping trip."

"Mom hates camping."

"We could puncture the tires of the car."

"That might be good for a day or two."

"We could tie her up."

"Dad would untie her when he came home."

The days Mom didn't cruise the streets for a bargain to good to pass up, Dad came



home with zucchini or some other prolific offering from a co-worker's garden.

"Oh great. Another twenty pounds of zucchini," we'd sigh.

When Mom discovered that watermelon pickles were made from the peeled rinds of watermelon soaked for several days in a pickling solution, we knew she really had gone crazy. Soon there were pots of varying sizes filled with 1 inch square watermelon rinds scattered around our kitchen, aging in a pungent sweet mixture. Our cannery now smelled like an exotic spice market. To obtain rinds, Mom brought home watermelon after watermelon for us to eat.

Once in awhile when we were released from our cannery positions and allowed to visit someone, Mom would whisper her departing instructions, "If she serves watermelon, save your rinds and bring them home. Heck, bring them all home."

Mom wasn't shy about asking for rinds. "I'm making watermelon pickles," she'd announce, requesting the rinds the lady was about to toss into the garage. At a buffet, Mom asked for a doggie-bag in which to

carry home our rinds. She whispered to me, "Look at those people over there. They have enough rinds for a jar of pickles."

"I have to go to the bathroom," I told her. I couldn't understand why we needed any more rinds. We already had enough jars of watermelon pickles to last a lifetime. Even if we all ate two jars a year for the next fifteen years.

When summer was nearing its end, and my cuticles had been permanently stained with food juice for months, Mom proclaimed that we had reached the 1,000 jar mark. An awe fell over us. I knew we had accomplished something that few sane people achieve in the short span of a summer. I wouldn't have been surprised if the Guinness Book of World Records or the local newspaper had paid us a visit. But they didn't.

Another hundred or so jars later, Mom started showing signs that her canning fever was waning. She quit cruising the countryside for food. Hunting jars became a thing of the past. Then one day she announced that we had sealed the last jar; a feeble cheer went up through the production line.

"There has to be an easier way than canning," Mom said. "I think next year we'll try freezing."

"I can hardly wait," I moaned.

Last week when I was visiting Mom, my now adult baby brother asked me if I wanted any watermelon pickles.

"After sixteen years you still have some of those pickles around?" I asked Mom, shocked. Most of the canned food had been given away to needy families.

Though, periodically someone would stumble upon a box hiding in some closet or corner. We never did eat much of it, except the pickles. It was too much trouble to crawl under beds and up in closets and the attic to retrieve the food. Especially when after the following summer the same food groups were bagged and waiting in the freezer.

"Sure," she said. "Take a couple jars home with you."

My baby brother wasn't born until after the summer of canning, the following summer of freezing, and the next summer of drying. He opened the bottom cupboard door. I noticed at least twenty pint jars of light brown pickled rinds still remained, hiding behind the newly hung cupboard door. "They're pretty good," he said with a silly grin.

Just looking at them made my back ache, my fingers cramp, and my feet flatten. "No thanks," I smiled, and quickly closed the door. ♦