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Interview with Kate Brown

Kate Brown

Lisa M. Groesz

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Researcher's name: Lisa M. Groesz

Event: Interview with Kate Brown

Place: Her Home/Maple Syrup Farm, 7185 Quaker Road, Fredericktown, 9:30am

Co-workers present: None

LG: This is Lisa Groesz interviewing Kate Brown, January 24, 2001. Ummm, how long have you been preserving food?

KB: We've been married 53 years and I've been preserving food here that long and I've probably prepared with my mother at home before that so I've been doing it a long time.

LG: So, did your mom teach you how to preserve?

KB: I think so and then, but we didn't use pressure canners back 53 years ago. It was more using boiling water, hot, the boiling water method. So then, uh, for years and years I've used a pressure canner.

LG: Do you prefer canning, freezing, drying?

KB: I have not done much drying but I think that would be an interesting process. When I was teaching fourth grade, I had borrowed a dehydrator and we did some apples and bananas and some things like so I kind of know that process and I even think you can do it in the microwave with drying, I just don't know. And between freezing and canning, it depends on what I am doing because I freeze, uh, corn rather than can it for two reasons. Processing, canning corn is more difficult. It's lots of time, it spoils and so freezing is better anyways. Frozen corn is better anyways. With my green beans, our particular family likes canned green beans better so I can all of the green beans and they really do taste different than out of a store. They really do. Tomatoes I can. Although, it is kind of nice if I just have a few tomatoes I just can those or freeze those and just place them in a plastic bag skin and all, just wash them, and put them in the bag, and freeze them and then when you want to use them for soups or stews, the skins just pop off so, so, that works. Well, then, what else. One thing that I do can that a lot of people don't is beef. Because we have our own beef process. We take our own beef to the butcher so at least once a year they will cube up some of the beef. They use the round chuck roast and I always have them trim it really well and I can beef. There is three families that work here on the farm so I usually do a canner for each of us which means 24 jars. 3 each for 24. It is just wonderful to have for, oh, beef and noodles, or just browned in the skillet. It's very good.

LG: And when you can, do you just do the vegetables straight or do you add salt or?

KB: Yes you do, or I do. I add a teaspoon of salt. I try not to use iodized, I use kosher salt.

LG: Okay.

KB: Iodized sometimes darkens things a little. But I believe that that is strictly for flavor. I think that if your family were on a low sodium diet or something that you can can food without salt.

LG: Right.

KB: And, uh, but um, I can remember when I was at home before people had home freezers we canned all our beef. And I remember getting very tired of eating canned beef but now it is a real treat and my daughter-in-laws love it too. They are both teachers and to have that for a quick meal when you come home at night is wonderful.

LG: And do you find with refrigerators, people preserve less?

KB: Oh, I think our society just preserves less. I think fewer people garden. It's hard work. Canning is hard and you have to gather it in, you have to clean it. It's just a lot of time and especially. When I think of, for example, green beans, I may, I may work all day and have 21 quarts of green beans but, good land, I could probably go the store and buy the same amount for five dollars.

LG: Right.

KB: So you have to do that thing: well, what's better. And I do know where they came from and so....

LG: Right. And I am sure supermarkets have changed it a lot.

KB: That's right.

LG: You can have things out of season just by going to....

KB: Oh, that's right.

LG: Big Bear.

KB: That's right. It's not difficult at all. But there is a real, there's a lot of satisfaction in having it handy. Just, for example, I can go to the basement. I can get a pound of hamburger out of the freezer, I can get a jar of, of, whole tomatoes, a jar of tomato juice, I canned kidney beans last year so I can get a pint of kidney beans.

LG: Yeah.

KB: I can make chili just out of the basement. That's kind of fun to do. Maybe that's my pioneering spirit.

LG: He he he.

MR. B: And then we eat it for a week.

LG: And at the end of the week is it still good.

Bill B: Well, it's gone by then I guess.

LG: Uh huh.

MB: He is saying he doesn't like left-overs. Did you get that? Actually, chili and vegetable soup are better warmed up.

LG: I know. It's fun adding things to them.

MB: And there is no doubt, when you preserve or freeze, and I would guess dry too, you use quality products. It never gets any better. If you put something in a jar that isn't real good, it's not going to be any better when it's canned. And so you always want to use quality kind of products. And I think we've cut down on our garden. It isn't as big as it used to be and yet we still try to do a variety. Like I like to can beats. And, uh, I pickle those before I even can them because we particularly, our family likes the pickled beats and sometimes puts hardboiled eggs with them.

LG: Uh huh.

MB: So we do, I have those already pickled. If I decide to make Harvard beats, the pickling are okay in those too.

LG: Okay. That's just wonderful though. Like, the whole process beginning with dirt in your own yard.

MB: We have a son in North Dakota and I just can't believe the difference in soil.

LG: Uh huh.

MB: There's soil out there that they grow things in.

LG: Right.

MB: Our soil is so wonderfully rich and malleable and it just breaks up. It's just beautiful. And their soil is so hard. It's like they really have to work to make something grow and, uh, so that part we are lucky in.

LG: Uh huh.

MB: We grow a lot of sweet corn because what we do with the sweet corn, uh, we have a family freezing day and, this is kind of pioneerish but it's kind of fun.

LG: Yeah.

MB: We do it all outside. We have a pickup truck, we gather the corn in, and then we husk it and we have an open fire with a big kettle, well actually, it's a tub, and my husband Bill, he does all the cooking. We made a wire basket to go inside of it. I think he can probably blanch maybe three dozen ears at a time so he will blanch it and then we cool it down with the cold running water and then we cut it off out on the picnic table so it's not unusual for us to do 2, 250 packages of corn in an afternoon.

LG: Oh, wow. And how often do you do this?

MB: Once a year.

LG: Oh, okay.

MB: When the corn is ready, we do it once. And that's, that's the fun part of it. You've got the mess out on the road because you can make as big a mess with corn if you do a dozen ears and if you do 12 dozen ears.

LG: Right. And so do you have a lot of family in the area then.

MB: As I said, the two sons farm with us. So the three families are right here and then I have a daughter who lives in, just south of, Fredericktown.

LG: Okay.

MB: And she always comes up and helps too. And then we have grandkids and everyone. It's just kind of a fun day. And of course, usually, the swimming pool is open so the little ones swim as much as can corn but it is a fun day. Hard and we are tired when it's over.

LG: But it's a good tired.

MB: It is. A lot of satisfaction.

LG: Oh. And, uh, and so, with the modern pressure canners it must have been really nice because it does save time and it's not as

MB: It does save time. And you feel like it's, and it's a much safer way to do it. In terms of you don't have any spoilage. It really does seal. I think it's both the sterilization process and just the high pressure of canning at the end.

LG: And have you passed this down with, to, your family?

MB: Yeah.

LG: Your two sons and your daughter(s).

MB: Yes, um. They all can. Um, not all of them but most of them can. My, they do can, so. Then, also, things like I can buy a bushel of peaches, we don't grow those, and so the fruits you can buy. We like processed peaches. So I can them and sometimes I freeze a few because they are wonderful for pie. Now cherries on the other hand, when I buy those I freeze all of those. Because I like, we like the frozen cherries for pies. *Awesome drawl here*

LG: Uh huh.

MB: But there's a lot of satisfaction in having a freezer full of food and a basement with some shelves of canned goods.

LG: Mhmm.

MB: It's kind of like, oh, if the electricity goes off, you will still have things to go to.

LG: Right. With the coming of the new millenium you were set. He he he.

MB: Well yes but we weren't hoarding or anything.

LG: He he he.

MB: We really didn't think much about that.

LG: But it is nice to have a lot of leeway to decide what to cook. Just because....

MB: Yes it is.

LG: Because I know when I cook dinner I often have to go the grocery store that afternoon.

MB: I do too. He he he. Sometimes I think you wouldn't know I was a farmer because of course you want fresh foods and fresh things and it is a treat to be able to have all kinds of greens and lettuce and all of the kinds of things that are really good for you. I think of apples so much because I can remember when there was a season for apples. You can have good apples now 12 months out of the year. And they are still crisp and a good apple and.

LG: Oh.

MB: cough. And even things like bananas and oranges, they used to be kind of a seasonal thing and...

LG: Right.

MB: But now we can have them year round and...

LG: Even artichokes.

MB: Yes, and you know that's just another thing. The variety of vegetables that today are commonplace...

LG: Uh huh.

MB: That when I was growing up, I'm not sure I would have known what an artichoke was.

LG: Yeah.

MB: And to eat an eggplant would have been kind of really weird. And I can remember I was an adult I think before I knew a mango was a fruit because we always called green peppers mangoes.

LG: Oh.

MB: And the green, I think it was the red and the yellow ones, peppers. But they were always called mangoes rather than green and red peppers. And I don't know, if that was a colloquialism just around this area or not. But I know I was an adult before I realized what a mango was. I was in Florida and tasted one and it was like silk, it was wonderful.

LG: Uh huh. Oh that's really interesting.

MB: Uh huh.

LG: Ummm. I was going to say something but then I completely forgot.

MB: We have lots of little tricks of the trade anymore that's kind of fun.

LG: Yeah.

MB: Like we have a Victorio Strainer to do tomatoes with, and now once again, it's kind of like freezing corn. I don't want to get out that Victorio Strainer unless I have a bushel of tomatoes...

LG: Uh huh.

MB: Because there is so much mess involved in it that I want it to be for a lot of tomatoes, not just a few. But that process, with that, it takes out the seeds and the skins and you just stand there and crank it and usually there's someone around who loves to do

that. Grandkids or someone. My husband likes to help with that and, so that's different than when I was growing up and doing tomatoes. That part is easier.

LG: So, so, it's like a regular strainer but there is a crank?

MB: Yeah, there is. It's called a Victorio and it looks kind of like a meat grinder but it has a bigger hopper and you just turn the crank and there is a auger in there that does pressing and there is a screen that strains it and...

LG: Okay. And um, do you have any tips that make it better quality when you eventually open it?

MB: Another thing. Dishwashers are wonderful because they sterilize the jars so easily.

LG: Uh huh.

MB: You know, you can just bring up the jars and run them through the dishwasher and you feel like they are good and hot. Then also, umm, I'm sure you wouldn't remember but we haven't always had the two piece lids. Now, do you know what I mean by the?

LG: Um hmm.

MB: Where there's the flat part with the rubber seal and then you have a screw on part, you screw them down. Well, it used to be, they were a galvanized lid and you used rubber bands.

LG: Oh.

MB: And so you had to put the rubber band on the jar then tighten the lid. Then after you process, it had to be retightened. And, so, that seal was always iffy and that would have made more spoilage. Or less sure of a quality product.

LG: Right.

MB: I process almost everything I do except sometimes pickles.

LG: Okay.

MB: Because pickles have vinegar in and if they are canned really hot, processing is not necessary.

LG: Okay.

MB: I have a Ball Blue Book (*aged, browned, heavily used, quaint*) it's called. B-A-L-L, the trade name of Ball cans and canning jar lids and oh, it must be nearly as old as, it

must be 50 years old or something, but I still refer back to that for tips on how you do things.

LG: May I see it? Do you have it?

<phone>

LG: How often do you can? Do you have enough time to? Especially during maple season?

MB: You can in the summer time.

LG: Okay.

MB: You can in the summer time and so, uh, you know, it's kind of like anything else, you prioritize. If the beans are ready and you want them canned you do them then. And so if you want to do it, you do it. I know many of my friends as they get older they say I am not going to do it anymore. And maybe I will come to that place.

LG: Right.

MB: Maybe I will. So. But right now I am not there yet.

LG: That's wonderful. Um, I actually that might be about it unless you have anything else you want to add?

MB: Well, let's see. I don't know. We probably didn't much the difference in time of canning versus pressure canning. Oh, if I could see that book for just a moment because I don't use this very often. Like when I can green beans in my pressure canner...

LG: Uh huh.

MB: In my pressure canner, I think it's fifteen minutes. If you did it in the boiling water bath, you would do them 180 minutes.

LG: Oh wow. I was just reading over that and it said it was because the pressure canner reaches a higher temperature.

MB: Sure. Faster. But you know that vegetables aren't as mushy and lots of things. When we used to do canned beef you would have to boil it in boiling water for three hours. Now it is still quite a while in the pressure canner. I think it may be an hour and 15 minutes but much much less. And that was the problem. I am sure corn would be easier to can in the pressure canner. Look here, boiling water bath for canner was 210 minutes. That's a long time. I think it's because it has no acid in. And so they're harder to. Tomatoes you can, either in boiling water or actually it isn't too bad to can tomatoes in boiling water because they have acid in them so they will can. They keep much better.

But I still stick them in the pressure canner and do them for, I don't know, six or eight minutes.

LG: Uh huh. And is it something too when they are sitting in the boiling water should you stay around just to make sure it didn't go over?

MB: Oh sure. I would never leave the pressure canner. If I am canning, I am in the kitchen. Yeah, I don't leave the pressure canner alone, unattended, and I wouldn't leave the boiling water. I might leave it longer because it's boiling, that's all there is to it, but you want to be sure it doesn't go dry or something.

LG: Right.

MB: Hmhm. I can't think of anything else unless you can. We have kind of covered the kinds of things I can.

LG: Uh huh.

MB: Uh.

LG: Is there any way you can think of to encourage people to can again.

MB: Oh, I don't know. The initial start up would be kind of expensive.

LG: Right.

MB: But once again, you know, it's what you want to do. And you get a sense of accomplishment and I think you know, with the, there is kind of a movement of having a quality food source.

LG: Right.

MB: And with that kind of a movement, one's mindset might be more to preserve one's own thing. Freezing is definitely easier. Less time consuming and so to freeze anything certainly has its plusses. Like I don't can lima beans. In the first place I don't put out very many and you wouldn't have very many. I always blanch those and freeze those. I freeze peas so there's, so many of the vegetables I would do those, I would freeze them because it's just quicker but to buy. The initial start-up. If you didn't have the canning jars and buy a pressure canner. Well, you know all that would be an expense so you have to decide: do I really want to do this or not. Now, the dehydrator I am really kind of interested in. I think it would be fun to maybe I'll, they're usually electric now.

LG: Uh huh.

MB: But I can remember when my mother would dry corn and I'm telling you, it tastes so different. And when I was a child I thought it was awful. Now I think as an adult I

would probably, I might think it was okay. And it was in a huge pan: 3 feet by maybe 2 feet and it would sit on the back of the old cook stove and it had little, uh oh, the bottom was kind of, had holes in it, perforated, and then you would layer corn and it would just sit there and you keep stirring it every now and then and, actually, that could just be stored in a muslim bag. It wouldn't do anything with it. But I am sure now, even we dried corn we would stick it in the freezer just to make sure. Like I have a neighbor who makes corn meal out of their own corn. They bought an old stone mill that grinds the corn and he always, he always brings me corn meal so that I can make homemade mush. Mush even more than corn bread. And, uh, I know I just put that in the freezer so I am sure it stays fresh and doesn't get any weevils or anything in it. My pioneer forefathers would have to take a chance on it.

LG: Right. Okay. So corn mush, is that kind of like Cream of Wheat or....

MB: Kind of. It is kind of that same thing. But made with corn meal. Let's see, I think Cream of Wheat is, no I am not positive, but I think it is corn with the shell taken off so it's white.

LG: Right.

MB: That's what I believe Cream of Wheat. Although it says Cream of Wheat. Maybe it's made from wheat. I wouldn't quote me on what Cream of Wheat is. I don't know for sure.

LG: He he he.

MB: But corn meal mush yes it's made with yellow corn meal and I make it quite thick and cook it and fry it.

<phone>

LG: So the corn mush you...

MB: Oh, well we fry. But actually because we are quite conscious of fat content. What I really do now is on the griddle I just spray it with PAM or SPAM. I just do it a little lower heat and it probably takes longer to get it nice and brown but it's wonderful and there's not fat in the corn meal itself so it makes a good, nutritious breakfast.

LG: Yeah.

MB: Or supper or whenever you want to have it.

LG: Now especially in the winter.

MB: Oh, yes, it's a winter time kind of thing.

LG: The warmth.

MB: It's a winter time kind of food. And one of those comfort foods. My son loves it so sometimes I will fix it at lunch, uh, for him. He eats lunch here and so it isn't just a breakfast meal. I am trying to think if there is anything else. I touched on pickling. That's kind of a long process. I sure do less of that than I used to. I used to do a lot of pickling. And when the kids were home. But now I make a pickled relish that we like oh, and salsa. Now with your own tomatoes you can make wonderful salsa. I cheat a little bit because you buy the Mrs. Wadges salsa mix and it has all the flavorings

LG: He he he.

MB: and that makes it easier but you can put your own tomatoes with it and then can it up and oh it's just really nice to have when grandkids run and they want salsa, just go to the basement and get it.

LG: Oh.

MB: This last batch I made, my son said the other day, 'Boy mom, you could sell this.' So, I guess that's a compliment.

LG: Uh huh.

MB: So, I was trying to think what else we've done or what else has changed. I have a neighbor lady, I don't actually do this, but I have a neighbor lady who actually makes vegetable soup. Puts all her vegetables in and her meat and broth and gets a big container made and then cans that.

LG: Oh wow. So you can just take it right out

MB: She takes it right out and she's ready. She may freeze part of it which is more my style on that one. And, so, many of the people around here still can. We belong to a farm bureau council and I would think that out of the six couples, my guess is at least four out of the six can quite a bit. So I don't think it is a lost art but I think as working mothers, it is difficult to find the time and that might not be their top priority.

LG: Do you ever do berries.

MB: If I did, I would freeze them. Strawberries, yes. Strawberries, I usually make the jam and get that, I make freezer jam because it is so nice and red and stays nice. But, we don't have our own strawberries but, you know, we have lots of people around here. We are surrounded with Amish and many of them have strawberry patches so we have fresh strawberries that you can buy and, umm, I wouldn't. I can remember my mother canning them but I would not can them, I would freeze them. And, uh, for my tastes, uh, you don't, I think they are as good if you thaw them. I think they have to be a little icy...

LG: Okay.

MB: to eat. But they do stay nice and red and, but, jam is better for us to use the strawberries for.

LG: And...

MB: I was just going to say, and blackberries they freeze wonderfully. But I would freeze them to use for pies. Blackberries or raspberries, blueberries. Sometimes when they are in season I will buy a large container and freeze them so have them for cereal or whenever you want them.

LG: And so do you freeze instead of canning because you like the taste more or because it is less time consuming?

MB: Uh, berries would be the taste. But it is less time consuming and that would be a factor too. But I, I think, but see green beans it would be faster to freeze but because our family, my daughter-in-law for example, their family likes the frozen beans but we don't so I would take the extra time and I can those. It's kind of a personal preference kind of thing.

LG: Well, I can't tell you how much I've appreciated this.

MB: Well, it's been fun talking to you. Do you think you're going to preserve when you have your own home?

LG: I, uh, it's hard because it's an investment and I, um, it will be a while before I have a place to be at.

MB: That you will raise a garden.

LG: Right, right. Because I hope to go to Africa and then I hope to do grad school.

MB: Oh sure.

LG: And probably grad school I will be living in an apartment.

MB: Uh huh.

LG: I know I want to be some place for a while. I don't want to purchase all the big investments.

MB: You wouldn't. And thank goodness we live where food can be bought.

LG: Right.

MB: And bought relatively inexpensively.

LG: But it is something I am very interested in.

MB: Uh huh.

LG: Because my mother never did it so I wasn't around it.

MB: And see, and that is a big thing too. It's what you've grown up with.

LG: Right. But I remember doing it with my friend and her mom and it was, we always did wonderful things. Like my friend had a birthday party and we made caramel, like all of us. And it was so much fun because, and taffy, and you're tugging it.

MB: Yes, and I didn't even touch on our maple syrup which is a big part of our farm, our farm operation in that, from the maple syrup I make candies and creams.

LG: Oh right, right.

MB: I try to make maple syrup when I am cooking because it is wonderful in baked beans or to glaze a ham or over some sweet potatoes.

LG: Uh huh.

MB: So it is a good natural. I not only love the taste myself but I like to promote it whenever I can.

LG: Yeah. And at the dinner I spoke. I don't know if you remember.

MB: That's right! That's right. Of course. Now I....

LG: I was so scared.

MB: But you did a wonderful job, it was a wonderful job. That is right.

LG: Yeah.

MB: So you were right there for all of that. Mr. Sack [sic] has a good thing going here with this. You've all learned a lot, haven't you?

LG: I love it. Especially because I have enjoyed Kenyon but it's hard to meet people outside of Kenyon. It's very much....

MB: Of course it is. It's your own little world there.

LG: So it's one thing I have appreciated the most.

MB: And I think it has been good for the community to get to know Kenyon in a little different light and that you are interested in this sort of thing.

LG: Yeah.

MB: This really is a legacy. This whole area here and the way it, while it has changed a great deal there is still some things constant and that don't change. And that's good. Traditions are good.

LG: Yeah.

MB: I hope I don't fight change. I want to be progressive but not just for the sake of being progressive. For example, there is a reason to go from boiling water bath to pressure canning and not just the idea, or from canning that corn which spoils so badly to doing an all day corn freezing. To me that is the kind of change you do because it is progress.

LG: Right, and bonding.

MB: Yeah, that's true.

LG: It's so cool.

MB: I wish, I can remember as a child when we used to make outdoors in the big copper kettle. And our family has never done that and I've always thought, oh that would be so much fun.

LG: Yeah.

MB: And I mentioned that to my older sisters who would be good at it...

<tape stops, forgot to turn over, didn't talk much longer. Big thing was that the time for apple butter is in October and that is the same time the Brown travel to shows for maple syrup advertising.>