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Interview with Marcia Brown

Marcia Brown

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Researcher's name: Lisa M. Groesz
Event: Interview with Marcia Brown
Place: Fredericktown Elementary School, Fredericktown, 4:00pm
Co-workers present: None

We perched on tiny chairs, my legs stretching under the table and beyond. Her classroom was full of the second-grade clutter of construction paper, markers, and Berenstain Bear books, that made me long for that period of my life. The timing worked perfectly because her daughter, Maggie (9) was at a Brownie's meeting and would be coming by at 5:30pm. Her son Neil (10) was playing in the next classroom over and bounded in once with his basketball. He stopped abruptly when he saw me and said "Hi" shyly only when encouraged by his mom.

Much of Marcia's conversation would return to either the classroom or her children. She has two older boys, Ross (16) and Carl (18).

Marcia did not begin to can until she was married. The kitchen was not the place she wanted to be when she was growing up. In fact, her parents would laugh before Kelly and Marcia's wedding and say, "Are you sure Marcia is going to make it as a farm wife? Are you sure? This woman doesn't do anything." Once married, although she had to constantly ask her mother-in-law Kate Brown many questions, she enjoys preserving. Even when she makes mistakes: "One time the pickles were like sponges. You could bend them and they still wouldn't crack."

She began by making baby food and then has gradually expanded into tomatoes and green beans and jam. Kelly and her two older boys dry beef and will "eat it right off the drying rack usually."

Festival competitions have encouraged her. She won blue ribbons at the Fredericktown Tomato Show, surprised because she was competing against "people who had been raised on the farm and who should have been smarter and known better than me ... that's what everyone's ego needs: a little bit of stroking."

She does work full time and still preserve. This means that a lot of the preserving has become family fun time and also provides an avenue to expand peoples' minds about preserving. Her family grind up and puree the tomatoes together. Brown said, "I made it into family fun so that we could spend time together even though it was drudgery for me to do by myself." In fact, her oldest son Carl, anxious to experience the city and his first semester at Cornell, found that he missed family tomato day.

During Thanksgiving, Marcia conducts a feast in her classroom. She has found that most of the children every year are only vaguely aware of home cooking. They tend to eat out a lot and "they think home cooking is to go to Home Town Buffet, you know, because they've got the word home in it. They don't realize how it is to have quality food." So she began a drying feast in which she brings the dehydrator to class and they dry apples. The other second grade classes have begun the same project and some make apple sauce and some make pop corn. When her husband has made jerky, she brings in jerky made from her own cattle. The kids end up loving both the process and the food even though they scorn the project beforehand. Marcia, scrunching up her face like a little kid with a little kids' intonation, said that they usually "bark about 'Ew, I don't want to

taste that,' but once they are part of the process and they see, 'wow, this is good', I never have any dried fruit left to take home."

Marcia cooks to eat while for her mother-in-law, "eating is an art form." Even so, she has found that she cannot purchase corn or green beans in the market. Her family is not satisfied with either generic or cream of the crop brands. "You know, it made me, both my husband and I feel like, we had a basic goal to give our kids healthy food, and along the way, they've learned too, not everybody gets it. They've learned to respect what we eat and learn that, wow, it does make a difference." Her son Carl, although he complained about working on the farm when in middle school, appreciates that he had to work hard while his friends just played Nintendo and watched TV.

She also finds it relaxing. She snaps beans on the patio as an excuse to do nothing during the day. "If mom goes to the garden, the kids scatter." And she has realized, in marrying Kelly, she married his entire family. She purchased peaches for canning right before her mother got sick. She went down to Dayton for a week. When she returned, "my shelves were full with peaches. My mother-in-law. My kids had helped her peel and she had put them up for me." So she has realized that, "'Marcia, you have a life style that most people don't have. You are an ethnic group here: middle american farmer type of thing.'" We do things differently. We have our own rituals, our own customs. And that's helped me."

Talking with Marcia Brown excited me because she was so energized and so wholesome. Even raising four children, working full time as a second grade teacher, and helping out on the farm, she has been able to preserve tomatoes, green beans, everything, for the past twenty years. I want to can once I am in a location long enough to plant a garden. I know now, when looking for a house, that I will be looking at where the light hits the yard at different times of day.