

**Working in the Garden When I Was a Little Girl, or
How We Managed To Live So Well During the Depression**

By Missy Cox Jones

Our family worked hard to put food on the table. We always had a good garden space, and also, my Daddy would plant sweet corn in the field, along with pinto beans and black-eyed peas. The field rows were pretty long. Also, he would have sweet potatoes in long rows, and watermelons and cantaloupes.

When Daddy plowed the garden, he would hitch up a horse, and hitch it to a walking garden plow. He would pass the lines (from the horse's harness) around his neck. Then, he would hold the two handles of the plow in his hands, and have the lines around his neck and shoulders. When he moved the plow up and down the rows, he could turn loose of the plow and use his hands on the lines to handle the plow.

Our garden rows were shorter, and it was my job to help with the weeding in the garden and whatever else that needed to be done. I would take a hoe and hoe the weeds from around the garden plot, and we would have potatoes, onions, radishes, and tomato plants set out, and sometimes lettuce planted. Now the lettuce would come up pretty fast, and it might be just two or three inches high. This was very tender lettuce, and so good. Daddy would go to town and buy onion plants sets, and we would set those out in the garden. And, also, Mama always planted English Peas. This was done about in February, I remember that it was during cold weather when she planted these seeds. If you have never eaten fresh English peas, well, the ones that you get in the can are nothing like the fresh. Mama would shell them, cook with maybe some baby onions, and make a cream sauce, using butter, flour and milk, along with a little salt, pepper and always sugar. They were so good. And then, we might have pepper plants set out. Also, we always raised lots of okra, we all loved fried okra. And, we would raise sweet potatoes, watermelons and cantaloupe. Daddy saved the seeds from the tomatoes, okra, and the watermelons and cantaloupe. He dried these and sealed them in fruit jars, with the lids on tight, to plant the next year.

Daddy loved to raise sweet potatoes. He would go to town and buy sweet potato slips, they would be about 8 or 10 inches tall. He would plow the garden space for them, and have a raised bed. He would walk along with a broom handle, punch a hole where he wanted this potato vine to be on the top of the bed. Maxine and I would walk along behind, drop a potato slip in the hole, root end down, and with our foot, step on the bed to get the soil around the root of the potato. They would be so good, and make a big plant.

Daddy would spread chicken manure (from our chicken houses and pens) out on the garden and when the potatoes came up, those potato plants would be so dark green, they looked almost black. We always had good garden crops, and field crops, also. I don't remember one time that we had gardens fail because of rain fall. We would use a bucket and water new tomato plants that we had set out, but we didn't water the whole garden and certainly not the field crops.

I thought that every little girl worked in the garden, and helped her family to gather garden produce, to can tomatoes, potatoes and other items in jars. And, I thought that every little girl helped her mother and family make jellies, jams and preserves.

Later, I learned that many families didn't have gardens. They might have lived in town, or been lazy. Anyway, they had no way of canning and preserving so that they just bought every day what they would need to eat the next day. I learned that if people lived in town, and their daddy worked at a job, he would have brought in money for that day's work, and that was the money that was spent on their food for the next day.

It was nothing for us to have 300 to 400 to 500 jars canned in the cellar, I remember going down and looking at the jars of canned fruits and vegetables in the cellar. This was all food for the next winter. I forgot all about hoeing in the garden, working hard to pick peas, beans, tomatoes and the fruit that we made the jellies from. I forgot all about watching the pressure cooker gauge, to see that it went down to zero, before we could open the pressure cooker and take out the jars. I forgot how much that Maxine and I hated to wash the dirty fruit jars for Mama to use in canning.

Mama wasn't an educated woman by any means, but she knew to have her fruit jars sterilized, and also her lids and rings that were used for sealing up the jars. She knew to never let her fingers touch the rim of the jars and the rings and lids. She would have a big stew pot sitting on the stove burner with boiling water in it. Maxine and I would take the fruit jars to her that we had washed and rinsed, and she would put them in to the boiling water, and sterilized them good, and using a jar lifter, take them out and set them on a clean cup towel on the kitchen cabinet. When she had filled the jar with vegetables, added the seasonings, then she used some tongs to pick up a flat lid and put it on the filled fruit jar. Using the same tongs, she would pick up a ring and place it on the lid and the fruit jar, and tighten up the lid. Then the jars would go into the canner, and be processed according to the canner book. The book told how many minutes and at what pound of pressure (and the gauge on top of the cooker showed the pounds of pressure). We cooked them exactly that time.

And, remember, we were using a wood burning kitchen stove for all of this canning. No gauges to turn down the heat, women learned to move the pressure cooker over to a cooler part of the stove, and how to build up the fire to get it hotter. Think how hot the kitchen was during all of this. We thought nothing of this, and we didn't know any better. We might take fat hens, Mama would kill and dress them, we would cook the chicken meat, take off the skin and the fat and the bones and there would be left just good meat and good chicken broth. We would use this to can chicken stew, and we used our potatoes, onions and tomatoes from our garden. This was a good meal for cold weather. Good hot chicken stew and a pan of cornbread. My sister, Geneva Cox Mercer, talked about making stew and one time she had 67 quarts of chicken stew canned. Hey, this is 67 good healthy meals.

We lived well, and didn't think about working so hard. This is what families did, we shared the work and we shared the good times.