

It Still Lives: Season 3, Episode 9 Bleaching Apples

Intro music plays

Host (Kami Ahrens):

Hello and welcome everybody, you're listening to "It Still Lives," the Foxfire podcast, where we take you on a journey through Southern Appalachian history one story at a time. I'm your host, Kami Ahrens, curator at the Foxfire Museum. I hope you enjoyed our short break and allowing our Foxfire students to take over for the summer. We certainly enjoyed watching their projects come to fruition. If you're interested in seeing and learning more about what they did this summer, definitely head over to our social media pages—on Facebook and Instagram, it's both @foxfireorg. You'll see posts from the students and pictures of their work. We had students who completed all kinds of different projects as you heard over the summer. If you have not yet listened to that special series—the SEED series—from our Foxfire students, I definitely recommend that you check it out. Again, these are the students that come and work with us every summer to produce the Foxfire magazine and we're really excited to continue working with these students throughout the school year.

The latest issue of the Foxfire magazine is now available. It's a little bit delayed; we had to account for some changes in the program. The students absolutely knocked it out of the park this summer. We are so excited about the magazine they put together. It's a little bit different this year in that it features work from all three county high schools by students who are part of the summer program but also by students who are not part of the summer program. So it allowed us to really diversify the offerings and the perspectives that are in the magazine. You can get your copy at www.foxfire.org/shop and just follow the link down to the Foxfire magazines.

So for those of you who are lucky enough to live in and around Rabun County, you will know that the beginning of September is the season of apples. I'm always reminded by our museum director that Georgia does not actually produce as many peaches as South Carolina. It was a marketing ploy—I don't know the history of it, I'm not going to get in on this debate, but this area of Georgia is more known for its apple production than its peach production. So Rabun County and our neighboring counties in the Carolinas have the most wonderful apple orchards. There are still all kinds of heirloom varieties that you can get here and every weekend, a different apple ripens. So you can pretty much go to an orchard every single weekend and try something different. It's just wonderful. And I'm hoping the heavy rains this year haven't harmed our apple crops. So, needless to say, apples have been on my mind. We have all kinds of wonderful recipes in the Foxfire archives and the Foxfire cookbook on what to do with those apples, but if you're not ready to cook with them, there are ways to preserve apples.

Obviously, the easiest way to do that is to simply dry them. Here, nowadays, you probably need a dehydrator with how wet it's been but you can also just do it in your oven. People used to do it over open fires or in the sun, cut them into slices and dry them out.

Another really unusual technique for preserving apples that really isn't found many other places—and please, if you're way out west and you know of a history of doing this, please send me an email, I'd love to hear about it. But a really unique method of preserving apples here in the mountains was using sulfur.

Now when I first hear this—why would you put sulfur in food? Obviously the smell is a little off-putting. But after doing a little bit of research, sulfur is apparently a very common preservative, especially in winemaking. And with apples, this process was known as bleaching apples. So, the reason it was called bleaching was because, when the apples were done being cooked over the sulfur, they turned, like, white-white. But it was a method of preserving apples that kept them for a year and people who bleached their apples claimed that the apples tasted better than any other type of dried apple when you used them in pies or crisps or whatever baking and cooking you might use them for.

So needless to say, for today's podcast, I've got a few clips for you that talk about this unique process. The first clip actually is from Lucy York, though, and she is just going to talk about her simple method for drying apples on her woodstove. And this interview was done in the early '80s in preparation for the Foxfire cookbook. So this was part of a larger interview about recipes and woodstove cooking in general.

Lucy York

Foxfire: Today is the 26th of June, 1980, and we're interviewing Lucy York on recipes about wood heaters—woodstoves.

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Foxfire: Plus you used to dry apples and stuff. Did you? Would you put them like on top?

LY: I put the apples in the oven on, well it was a tray with a screen bottom, you know. You couldn't have it very hot. I more or less put it in there whenever I was finished cooking a meal. And I'd slip the trays in there and leave the door open, you see. And that would dry—

FF: How long would it take for 'em to dry?

LY: Oh, it'd take several days for 'em to dry. I wouldn't leave 'em in there, only 'til the oven kind of cooled down. 'Cause you dry 'em in—I dry 'em in there over my hot water heater because it's a low heat and yet it dries the apple out. I stack about three trays of apples over that heater, you know, put pieces of wood across and separate the trays. And that's where I dry my apples now is over the hot water heater.

FF: Yeah my grandma always does it in her backyard. She sets them kind of so the dogs can't get to it. She does it in the sun.

LY: Yeah, or you could put it out on the hood of the car if you had one and you didn't have a garage.

FF: Now how long would it take 'em to dry?

LY: Oh it would take several days for them to dry.

Host

KA: This second interview clip is from an interview with Edith Parker, specifically on bleaching apples. So Foxfire students went in the '70s to work with Edith as she was bleaching her apples. And you'll hear the interviewer comment on why she would rather be there doing the activity than just talking about it. and of course, it gives us some great audio—that noise that you hear is them peeling apples. You'll hear them banging pots around. But I hope you enjoy this clip, because it really immerses you in the interview experience.

Edith Parker

Foxfire: This is Aline Richards and I'm on an interview for bleaching apples.

EP: Now my apples, if I done 'em last week, they'd have been better but I was sick and they've gotten spotted.

Foxfire: Your apples, do you grow 'em?

EP: No, I picked 'em up over at Long Creek.

Foxfire: What do you do after you quarter 'em and get 'em into the box and everything?

EP: I, you have some fire coals, I have to build a fire and make my own coals 'cause I don't have wood, for heat. And I put a container of coals in the middle of my box of apples and pour some sulfur on that and cover the box tightly and let 'em smoke with that sulfur.

Foxfire: And you use just a regular old cardboard box?

EP: Yes, well you see I put my coals in a container—a cup or a bowl or something. And the time it takes to bleach 'em depends on the amount of apples you have. I couldn't tell you how long 'cause I just look at my apples and determine when I think they're finished.

Foxfire: What do they look like when they're finished?

EP: They're white. These apples will be just as white as they can be when they're finished bleaching.

Foxfire: Well that I've got to see 'cause they look white to me right now.

EP: You'll see the difference though.

Foxfire: How long does it take?

EP: Well, it determines on the amount of apples you have and how well your sulfur smokes. Sometimes your sulfur doesn't stay afire as long as it does other times. I can't give a definite time how long it takes; I just look at my apples and determine whether or not they're finished. You do not at any time wash the apples before you bleach 'em, 'cause you don't want any moisture on 'em.

Foxfire: What would the moisture do to 'em?

EP: It'll make 'em soft and they won't bleach as good. They wouldn't be preserved for as long as they will. Now apples bleached this time of year will keep until late summer next year.

Foxfire: Do they taste the same or does it change the taste any?

EP: Well, not too much. I have eaten them raw and the sulfur doesn't—I don't mind the taste of sulfur. But when you cook 'em, if you use as little water as possible, the sulfur doesn't taste as much. I usually make pies out of 'em or bake 'em or melt butter or put sugar in my pan or steam 'em.

Foxfire: What's the—why is this better than like just canning 'em?

EP: Well this year, with the scarcity of cans, you don't have—

Foxfire: That was a dumb question.

EP: You don't have the cans. They make better pies to me than applesauce because they're more like fresh apples.

Foxfire: I think you're doing five to every one of mine, it seems like.

EP: I'm used to it. I've bleached apples for years.

Foxfire: Who taught you?

EP: Well, my grandmother used to bleach apples. Momma has in the past. And I can remember my grandmother—she's been dead, oh, 35 or 40 years—I can remember her having a churn of bleached apples and us little children just going and sticking our hand in the churn and getting apples and even in the middle of winter, it seemed just like raw apples, fresh apples. Well it was just somethin' that I never have forgotten.

Foxfire: Sounds a lot better than sticking your hand in a candy jar. After you finish bleaching them, what do you do with them?

EP: I put 'em in a crock churn. You just put them in the churn, you don't have to seal 'em any way, I just put 'em in the churn and put a clean cover over them and there they stay all winter until they're used up.

Foxfire: Do you have any trouble with bugs or anything?

EP: No, no, the sulfur keeps anything away from 'em.

Foxfire: Do you know around how many apples you put up each year?

EP: Well the churn I fill, is supposed to be a ten-gallon churn. And it takes about a bushel and a half of apples to fill, but after they're bleached. And then they settle a little bit overnight. As soon as they're bleached, I put 'em in my churn and then overnight they'll settle a little bit. An apple that is not fully ripe is better to bleach than one that is fully ripe or soft because they bleach better. They don't have as much moisture in them.

Foxfire: is there any danger of the fire getting too hot or something? Or scorchin' the apples or anything?

EP: No, you don't, you just have the coals and when you pour the sulfur on the coals, the flame, there's just the smoke from the sulfur, there's no flame. When you pour it on, there's a blue flame but then it just makes smoke. She didn't know she was goin' to have to work when she came up here.

Foxfire: No, if you work at it with the people, then you learn it a lot better. You know what you're doing. Where do you get all this stuff, do you grow everything?

EP: Yes. Sure do. That's the nice part about living on a farm. You don't have too much money, but you have plenty to eat.

Foxfire: Sometimes that worth a lot more than money.

EP: Well, I tell you, the way that food prices are now, it is.

Foxfire: It gets to where everybody's wishin' they lived on a farm.

EP: More people are moving to farms so that they can get out of the cities. My daughter lives in Atlanta and she said everybody down there this summer that had a back yard had all they could plant. You got it a'goin' hon?

?P: Yeah, it's burnin'. How much do you want at a time? A cupful or something?

EP: Yeah. That'd be enough, a cupful. And when I get enough for a cupful, I'll go ahead and start 'em. I imagine that this practice has been handed down through the generations because they didn't have any other way to preserve their apples.

Host

KA: Our final interview clip comes from Ada Kelly. And this one was done way back in 1969, so this is a very old interview clip. This is the earliest I could find in our archives of someone talking about bleaching apples. And as you can hear, she seems to be reading off her recipe card, so this is a much more succinct version of the process for bleaching apples.

Ada Kelly

AK: How to preserve food. This is a recipe for how to bleach apples. Peel and core apples, cut into quarters—or fourths—fill a ten-gallon wooden tub with sliced apples. Then put two tablespoons of sulfur in a saucer. Strike a match and set sulfur on fire. Cover tub with clean cloth. Let stay all day. At night, take the sulfur saucer out and repeat process for three days. Then transfer apples to large jars and tie clean cloths over them. And you could eat that any time in the year or winter without any other preservation.

Foxfire: Was this used much—did people around here?

AK: Oh everybody nearly bleached fruit. It was, the sulfur whitened the apples and they had a little sulfur flavor, but most people had a big tub of that made every year.

Host

KA: That's all I have for you guys today. I hope you found this interesting, certainly, again it's a new, unique process to me. But if you're familiar with bleaching apples or your family has a history of bleaching apples, send me an email at itstilllives@foxfire.org and tell me about your experience. Love seeing how these processes are kept alive in other families and other traditions and histories.

And if you have not already done so, definitely order a copy of the *Foxfire Book of Appalachian Cookery*. Not only are there cool unique stories and traditions, like the one featured today in it, but there's also phenomenal recipes. The recipes in it definitely skew towards fall, so we are coming up on all kinds of vegetables and fruits—all kinds of great stuff you want to incorporate into your baking. So if you have extra apples, let me know what you plan to do with them, whether you're a canner or a drier or again, if you're used to bleaching your apples, we definitely want to hear about it and how you cook with them. We'll be back with you guys next month with a brand new podcast. And, as always, check out our website: www.foxfire.org or our social media pages, both on Facebook and Instagram. That's @foxfireorg, to keep up with everything that's happening at the museum, both in-person and virtual programming that we'll be offering this fall and winter.

Thanks so much guys, make sure you like and subscribe to this podcast to help other people find it. leave us a review, let us know what you think. And we'll catch you next month. Take care.

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