

## Oral History of Illinois Agriculture



### Electrification

## Illinois State Museum



[Http://avbarn.museum.state.il.us](http://avbarn.museum.state.il.us)

## Electrification & Food Preparation

Farmers' wives spent much of their time growing a garden, canning fruit and vegetables, storing root vegetables underground, making and preserving sausage, canning beef, baking weekly, cooking, etc., before electricity and refrigeration came to the farm.

Keeping meat from spoiling, milk products from souring, and fruits and

vegetables from molding was not an easy job.

Cooking on a coal or wood stove was tricky and sometimes dangerous. Large quantities of apple butter, molasses, hominy, and other products were sometimes cooked outdoors in huge pots on open fires.

Find out how farmers' wives food preparation changed

with the coming of rural electricity in the 1930s and 1940s. Listen to or view oral history clips about the REA and food preparation before REA and after.

Research the subject in Web and print resources. Create a spreadsheet format report of comparisons and contrasts in food storage and preparation before and after the coming of electricity.



*Mary Stark speaks about heating and cooking before electricity.*  
<http://avbarn.museum.state.il.us/viewclip/353>

*And about making bread, butter, and cheese*  
<http://avbarn.museum.state.il.us/viewclip/354>

## Early Oral Histories—before Electricity

Special points of interest:

- Introduction
- Early Oral Histories
- Parents & Teachers
- Search the AVBarn



*Anna Williams describes making molasses by stirring by hand* <http://avbarn.museum.state.il.us/viewclip/1942>  
*And applebutter* <http://avbarn.museum.state.il.us/viewclip/1943>



*Marie Williams talks about making applebutter, and how they only had fruit in season (no refrigeration).* <http://avbarn.museum.state.il.us/viewclip/951>



*Marie Burch talks about food storage before electricity* <http://avbarn.museum.state.il.us/viewclip/957>

### Have you ever —

-Made apple butter

-Boiled molasses over an open fire

-Canned beef

-Smoked sausage

-Buried potatoes in a root cellar

-Kept milk cool down the well

**Why not?**

## *With Electrification Comes ...*

After electricity was installed in farm homes and barns, farmers often bought refrigerators and freezers. Later they replaced the wood or coal stove and oven with one run with propane gas or electricity.

Countertop electric appliances arrived next – things such as toasters, electric deep fryers and frying pans.

Some of these allowed homemakers to produce the same foods more quickly and easily.

Cooks began to stop preparing some foods that required a difficult process, such as meat canning, hominy and molasses.

With commercial canning and storage improved, cooks preferred to buy these products instead of make them.



*Evelyn Lanam in her electric kitchen on her farm in DeKalb County in the 1980s*

## *Parents & Teachers*

**This activity requires the use of the Audio-Video Barn indexed searchable oral history database.**

**Technology:**  
Computers with Internet access,

headphones, audio and video players, spreadsheet software, word-processing software.

**Search Terms** (non-inclusive): canning, butchering, dairy,

milk, gardening, food storage, food & meals, names of individual crops or food, orchards, vegetables, fruit, women's work, electricity, electrification, REA.



*Wood stove in the Sadorus Farm home around 1900*

## *Search the AVBarn*

Search the ISM oral histories for food processing, gardening, and electrification clips.

Listen to the resulting clips, taking notes. (Students can form small groups to split up the results or search different topics and later compare their findings.)

Verify their information with outside sources such as history books, federal websites on REA, etc.

List some of the tasks no longer performed (cooling dairy products in the well in the cool water); list new tasks performed (baking in controlled heat electric ovens).

Discuss if there was any time-saving or labor-saving after electrification.

Think about the foods we eat today and how they are

prepared. Include commercially produced foods that we store in freezers, products we cook and freeze, foods we make with electric appliances, such as coffee, ice cream, baked goods, waffles, stir fry, etc.

# *Make a Spreadsheet to Compare*

An electronic spreadsheet could be the format of the combined lists of tasks, with columns for dates.

Columns:  
wood stove/electric oven and stove;

basement, cellar, well/electric refrigerator and freezer;

pots and pans over fire/electric countertop appliances. Include a column for each category labeled

“time involved” for the cook (most of the day to chop wood, haul it, start a fire, heat oven, and bake bread vs. a couple of hours to turn on the electric stove, let it heat up and bake bread).

Compare the content of your spreadsheet by asking your parents and grandparents how long meal preparation took in their youth and how food was stored to keep from spoiling.

Were there any stories of food poisoning in the family?

What new appliances were people excited about—in the 1950s, 1970s, 1990s?

**Rubrics for Spreadsheets:**  
[http://www.udel.edu/sine/milford/ss\\_rubrics.html](http://www.udel.edu/sine/milford/ss_rubrics.html) Milford School district example.

# *Illinois Learning Standards*

**ISBE Standards and Goals Addressed: Middle School**

**Economics: 15.D.3c**  
Explain how workers can affect their productivity through training and by using tools, machinery and technology. (The farm is a business; family members are workers; electricity is a technology that increased productivity.)

**Language Arts: Research:**

**5.B.3b** Identify, evaluate and cite primary sources.

**5.C.3a** Plan, compose, edit and revise documents that synthesize new meaning gleaned from multiple sources.

**5.C.3b** Prepare and orally present original work (e.g., poems, monologues, reports, plays, stories) supported by research

After you have compared the information about electrification and food preparation from the audio and video oral histories in the AVBarn

Interview older members of your family for their stories about electricity. They will have stories about wiring, batteries, and power outages during storms from many decades in the 20th century. They may also remember the coming of new products like the TV Dinners of the 1950s — that took advantage of freezers as time-saving devices.

Look into your refrigerator and freezer. Imagine what people could eat if they could not have frozen and chilled foods over long periods of time. How often would they have to shop?

**Rubric for Research using oral histories:** (can be broken down for each step)

- 0 points- Not Assessable: Student does not find appropriate AV clips for research topic; does not take intelligible notes or organize and interpret them in a chart.
- 1 point- Beginning: Student finds clips for topic, takes some notes, and attempts to interpret them in summary from the organized chart.
- 2 points- Developing: Student finds adequate clips for topic, takes adequate notes, summarizes them intelligibly, but only partially integrates them with other research to make the chart.
- 3 points- Accomplished: Student finds clips for topic, takes notes, summarizes them intelligibly, creates a coherent spreadsheet of food-prep tasks, showing the implications of REA to food preparation.

## *National Technology Standards*

### **National Technology Standards:**

Students use digital media and environments to communicate and work collaboratively, including at a distance, to support individual learning and contribute to the learning of others.

Students:

a. Interact, collaborate, and publish with peers, experts, or others employing a variety of digital environments and media.

b. Communicate information and ideas effectively to multiple audiences using a variety of media and formats.