



The Winter of Their Discomfort: Coping With the Cold

Sue Lisk looks at how our ancestors coped with the cold before the dawn of the thermostat

SHE THOUGHT THEY WERE KIDDING. BUT WHEN SHE WALKED INTO THEIR home in Minneapolis on one February day, she realized they weren't.

She half expected to see icicles dangling from the furniture. But her cousins pointed out that that was impossible. After all, they kept their home at 50 degrees Fahrenheit, or 10 degrees Celsius, all winter long.



Most of our ancestors who lived in cold climates had no choice but to accept winter's embrace. (Photo, Bob Bretzlaff)

Although this might seem a bit extreme in our times, a temperature in this range would have seemed wonderfully toasty to many of our ancestors. It would have been rare to experience such warmth in the dead of winter.

What are some of the ways in which our ancestors survived and even thrived during the cold months, before the age of the thermostat? Let's consider some of the strategies used and practices followed at various times in the past.

Food Preservation and Storage

Thinking, planning and acting ahead to be ready for the winter was essential for our ancestors. They focused much time and effort working to ensure that food would be available, in good condition, and as plentiful as possible throughout the season.

Root cellars, which were typically dug underground, were ideal locations for storing many types of food due to the cooling and insulating characteristics of the earth. Not surprisingly, root cellars were filled with root vegetables such as potatoes, radishes, beets and parsnips. But other

vegetables like garlic, onions, squash, cucumbers, cauliflower, cabbage and some varieties of tomatoes could also be kept in good condition there. Pumpkins, pears and apples could be stored without spoiling for months in root cellars.

Canning would have been the preferred method for preserving food items like berries, nectarines, peaches, and some varieties of tomatoes that couldn't be stored for long periods otherwise. An article titled "A Brief History of Canning Food" provides background on the history of this practice first developed in the late eighteenth century. You can access it at www.thespruceeats.com/brief-history-of-canning-food-1327429. Root cellars provided a cool environment where the preserves could be kept.

Besides pickling cucumbers, our ancestors would have pickled vegetables such as beans, onions, beets, cabbage, and cauliflower. But just about any vegetable could be pickled. Even eggs were sometimes pickled.

Pioneers salted and dried meat ahead of time to last through the long winter. Many early European settlers in North America would have relied on a small smokehouse. Pork was often cured by allowing large pieces of meat to hang over a smoldering fire for a few weeks.

Pork could also be salted down. The meat would be sandwiched between layers of salt, which