

Berry Picking
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Nowadays, if we get an urge for strawberry jam on our pancakes and toast, or for some nice blueberries or raspberries, we go to our local supermarket and choose in the produce section or a Smucker's jar off the shelf. There was a time when it wasn't done that way, and believe it or not, the product was better and more flavorful. We did it the hard way, by going out on roadside, rock pile, or into the woods to pick them ourselves. Berry picking wasn't just a hobby, it was a way of life for those who preceded us on our little patches of land on Lake Superior's border.

The summer was divided into three seasons – first came those gem-like strawberries, tiny and sweet, in June. Generally, it was Mom and the kids that went out into certain favorite spots, generally along roadsides and in open areas where the strawberries had put out their white blossoms, and by June, those sweet little red berries that we remember so well, and which put the California jumbo berries to shame, with their exquisite flavor, were available. The kids weren't always trustworthy – they put as many in their mouths as they did in their bowl. The product was taken home and made into sauce or jam, then canned, and brightened our lives all during the long Minnesota winters.

Next came raspberry picking season, and again, it was mainly the women and kids who went out to explore those hidden spots where wild raspberries grew in abundance. Our fields generally had a few rock piles that were favorite spots for raspberries. They were picked by the gallon and quart, taken back to the kitchen, and rendered into jam and jellies, then put away for the long cold season to come. Many, of course, were eaten fresh on the day they were picked .

During World War II, sugar was rationed, so a good deal of scheming went on to get hold of enough for canning up our summer delights. There was borrowing to and fro, but somehow we always seemed to find enough to preserve our harvest. No one had refrigerators or freezers then, so everything was canned with a pressure cooker.

The pinnacle of the summer came in August, when blueberries came ripe. They too were sweet and delectable, much better than the big ones we buy at the supermarket now. Every family had their own secret spots where they knew blueberries grew, generally in cutover or areas burned by forest fires in recent years. The families went out in strength with their buckets and containers, to forage with the black bears in the best patches. It was a favorite time of year – usually sunny and warm weather, but hints of the cold to come. The harvest on good years could be huge if a late spring frost didn't kill the blossoms. The pies, jams, and blueberry sauce that were made from the fruit of our labors tasted great during those snowbound winters.

It was a great time to be alive and out in the woods. We fondly remember those days, and wonder whether people still go out searching for those elusive berries. We couldn't afford store-bought sweets, so the summer harvest brightened our lives like nothing else could.