



GRANDMA'S BREAKFAST and..... MAKING GRANDMA'S BLACKPOWDER

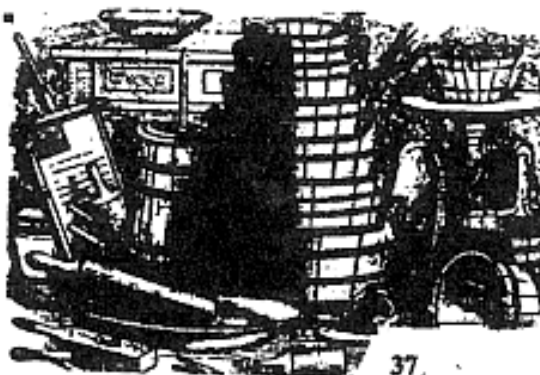
by Rev. Dr. J.D. Hooker

Editors Note: Neither the author or this magazine take any responsibility for the making of blackpowder. It is presented for informational purposes. My suggestion.....buy your black powder.

Though she passed away just at the time I was entering my teens, my childhood recollections of my grandmother still remain just as clear as a high-mountain brook in my memory today. Spirited, irritable, tough as old boot leather, yet still lady like; to this day, that elderly West Virginia hill woman stands alone, as the single most independent and self-reliant human-being I've come across in my entire lifetime.

Not only does one of my favorite memories of her perfectly illustrate the stubborn independence of her nature, this same recollection can readily serve as a pretty terrific inspiration for those of us striving to live our own lives in a more self-sufficient manner today. For as long as I knew her, Grandma ate exactly

the same breakfast, every single day: squirrel gravy, on top of corn muffins. In itself, that's really pretty unremarkable, as most older folks seem to get mighty settled in to certain ways of doing things, and particular dietary preferences. The only thing that made her breakfasts especially noteworthy, was the amount and variety of effort which she'd put into such a simple meal.



For starters, it's often hard for many folks today to begin to understand the amount of care grandma lavished on her ancient flintlock squirrel gun. Though with it's deeply browned, 38" long, 34 caliber barrel, dark full length native walnut stock, and plentiful brass ornamentation, her rifle was a thing of beauty. To her the gun was much more than that. For grandma, this rifle represented a permanent guarantee of there being food on her table; as well as being the single thing passed down to her by her own grandfather.

Unlike any more modern firearm; with her rifle she had no need at all to purchase factory made cartridges, or even percussion caps. Because with nothing more than a piece of chert, or even quartz, broken off "just so", her rifle would strike sparks, and fire. She even claimed never to have purchased gun powder in her life, and I haven't yet found any reason to doubt that statement!

Two, or sometimes three times each year, grandma would shovel up a batch of the soil from inside of her chicken run. From this dirt, she'd leach out the whitish "niter", which she then used in fashioning her own orange tinged gunpowder. According to her, she used exactly the same gun powder producing methods her family had been using since before the Revolution; which were also the methods employed by all of the eastern mountain folks during her childhood.

After placing a clean, heavy cloth over the perforated bottom of a metal bucket, half a cupful of clean, sifted, white wood ashes were evenly spread atop the cloth. With a second piece of clean cloth lain atop the ashes, then she'd fill the bucket to within 2" of its top with the dirt she had dug up earlier. After resting this

bucket over top of a second somewhat smaller bucket, she would use a galvanized metal watering can to gently sprinkle 1-1/2 gallons of boiling water over the soil. All of which was then left to drain for a few hours.

Later, when this liquid was brought to a boil, and kept simmering, tiny grains of salt would form as the liquid simmered. These she dipped out with a small wooden spoon and discarded. Once about 2/3rds of the liquid had been simmered away, it was set aside to cool for an hour or two (during which time us kids would sometimes sit and watch the nitre crystals forming), after which the crystals were strained out and set aside to dry.

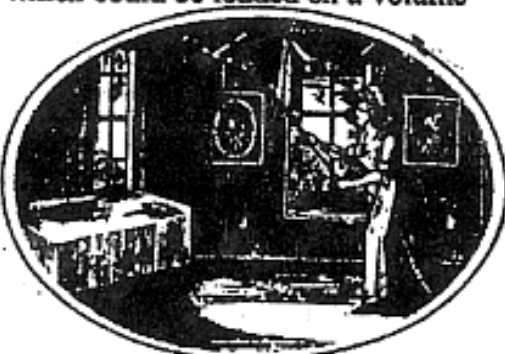
When she was ready to make up a small batch of rifle powder, grandma would put 2 cups of water into a pot, and bring it to a low boil. Into this boiling water went 1 cup + 2 tbs. of this home leached saltpeter, 1 cup of sugar (which she'd boiled down from sorghum, or from maple sap), and 2 tbs. of fine red rust (scraped with a knife blade from any available rusted iron or steel).

Stirring constantly, she'd keep this mixture simmering until it became just a little thicker than regular breakfast oatmeal. Then this rusty orange colored mixture was spread out, about 1/4" thick, on a metal cookie sheet. Using a kitchen knife, she'd then cut this into 1" squares, and set the cookie sheet on a sunny window ledge to dry somewhat. About every 15 minutes or so, she would cut the pieces even smaller.

Once the stuff had finally dried out enough that it would no longer stick to her fingers, she would take about a teaspoon full at a time, and carefully rub it through a piece of wire window screen. Catching these small granules on a second cookie

sheet, which was then resituated on the window ledge, and allowed to dry for a week or more, until it was "dead bone dust dry". After which, about a third of the resultant gun powder, would be very finely crushed with a mortar and pestle; for use as the priming powder in the rifles flash pan.

All of which left grandma with only just about 1 pound of good quality home made gun powder, which could be loaded on a volume



for volume basis exactly like commercially produced black powder. That doesn't sound like much for most of a day's worth of effort. Yet, as she never missed, and used no more than "half a thimble full" of powder, for "so small a creature as a mountain bushy tail", this limited quality would normally be sufficient for her uses for several months.

The rifle balls were patched with pieces cut from worn out cotton dresses, and lubed only with beef or mutton tallow ("nothin' else, ever!"). While grandma always made a



definite point of waiting until each squirrel came down on the trunk, for a good look at her squirrel dog, before firing. Which insured that she'd be able to use her knife to dig the spent hunks of metal out of the bark, for future recasting.

Grandma was able to feed her small children while grandpa was "across the pond" fighting the Kaiser. When grandpa became terminally sick right at the very start of the 'Great Depression' with her flintlock rifle, and homemade gunpowder, she was also able to feed eleven kids through some of the leanest years America has ever seen. Not only fat mountain squirrels, but wild turkey, venison, and other game, even black bear roasts (which grandma said cost 2 thimbles full of powder), regularly found their way to her table.

Today, I've got a couple of good flintlock replica rifles in my own hunting battery. The first being a .32 caliber Tennessee Mountain Rifle, from Dixie Gun Works, which has proven decidedly deadly on small game. With the second being a .50 caliber Frontier Rifle, made by CVA, which is just about as sweet shooting a rifle as anyone could ask for, and perfectly suited for our Indiana white tailed deer. While, unlike my grandmother, I do miss on the rare occasion. With the aid of these two flintlock rifles, our family still eats just as well today, and should be able to continue doing so.

Yet again, thanks entirely to grandma's patient and thorough instruction, I've been able to pass down to my own children and grandchildren the skills needed to shape quartz or chert for striking the fire, as well as the know-how for producing and using their own reliable propellant powder.

It's interesting too, that though it hasn't become a steady,

every single day thing, one of our family's very favorite breakfasts has always been the same squirrel gravy over corn meal muffins that grandma so steadily enjoyed. Even our very youngest grandchildren have already learned to look forward to the mid-August start of squirrel season. When our two grown and married daughters will start fixing them their great-great grandmother's special breakfast, on special mornings.

Maybe trying this tasty morning treat yourself might not fire up your desire to spend your day traipsing the hills with a flintlock rifle and a batch of home made orange gunpowder, but, likelier than not, you're going to find a breakfast dish your family will really enjoy, while you can just sort of stash away the powder making information for a rainy day (or maybe a snowy one!).

Squirrel Gravy

Carefully skin and clean 1 or 2 squirrels, rinse well. Then soak in salt water for 4-10 hours. Rinse really well with cold water, then place in a pot with 1-1/2 quarts of boiling water. Reduce heat, and simmer until very tender. Remove from heat, and set aside to cool, reserving 1-1/3 cups of the cooking liquid.

Once cooled, pick all of the meat off the bones, and return it to the pot, along with the reserved cooking liquid. Refrigerate over night, if desired. Add 1 cup of milk, and 1 tbs. of butter to the pot, and heat to simmering. Separately, blend 4 tbs. flour with 1 cup of milk & 1/4 tsp. black pepper. Add this mixture to the pot, stirring constantly continue to simmer, until thickened. Add salt to taste, and spoon over corn muffins.

Corn Meal Muffins

Mix together 1 cup cornmeal, 3/4 cup white or rye flour, 2 tsp. baking powder, 1 egg, 1/4 cup milk, 1/2 cup water, 1/4 cup melted shortening, and 1/3 cup brown sugar (or other dark sugar). Stir well, and pour into lightly greased muffin tins. Bake in preheated oven at 400 deg. For about 20 minutes, or until golden brown.

This is one breakfast that will keep you going strong until lunch time; especially on those big days when the planting, haying, or harvesting just has to be done. Try it and enjoy! jdh

Always use a wooden mortar and pestle when crushing blackpowder of any type. Never use metal utensils of any type.

