

A BAYSIDE PRESS COMPANION

The Depression-Era Home & Pantry Companion

*The frugal home arts of the 1930s — keeping food, mending
what you had, and running a house on almost nothing.*

Hazel Calloway

Your free companion to The Depression Era Cookbook

BEFORE YOU BEGIN

About This Little Book

The cookbook this comes with is about the *table* — what a hard-times family put on it, what it cost then, and what it costs to make now. But the kitchen was never the whole of it. A dollar that had to feed a family also had to keep them clothed, keep them clean, keep the summer garden on the shelf through January, and stretch from one thin pay envelope to the next. That whole quiet craft — the *running* of a frugal house — is what this companion is about.

None of what follows is cooking. You will find no recipes here. Instead you will find the five household arts that stood beside the stove in the 1930s: **putting food by** so a summer garden lasted the winter; **the home-remedies shelf** a mother reached for before she could afford a doctor; **making do and mending**, the craft of getting a second and third life out of everything; **soap, suds, and a clean house** on pennies; and **the household ledger**, the plain arithmetic that made a small income go the distance.

A word on honesty, the same as in the cookbook. What is printed here is a good-faith account of how ordinary American households actually worked in the 1930s, drawn from the era's own home-economics bulletins, farm-magazine columns, and government pamphlets. Where a practice was widespread, it is described as such. Where it has been left behind for good reason — and some of it has — you will find a plain note saying so, rather than a rosy pretense that the old way was always the better one. This is a keepsake and a history, meant to be read and enjoyed. It is not a manual of professional instruction, and the one chapter that touches on health carries its own clear notice.

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Putting Food By

How a summer garden and a good week at the market were made to last until spring.

There is an old phrase for it, older than the Depression and used all through it: to *put food by*. Not to store it, exactly, and not to hoard it — to *put it by*, set it aside in good time against the lean months everyone knew were coming. A family that put food by in August was a family that ate in February. The garden gave everything at once, in a glut nobody could eat before it spoiled, and the whole art was in catching that glut and holding it. Four methods did the holding: the jar, the crock, the cellar, and the string.

The Jar: Canning at Home

Home canning was the backbone of it. A jar of tomatoes sealed in September was, quite literally, September saved — opened in the dead of winter it tasted of a warmth the snow outside had forgotten. The equipment was simple and, once bought, lasted a lifetime: glass jars with a fresh rubber ring and a lid each season, a big kettle deep enough to cover them, and a rack to keep them off the direct heat of the bottom.

The principle was the same as it is now. Food was packed hot into clean jars, the lids set on, and the jars boiled long enough to drive the air out and seal them tight as they cooled. That satisfying *ping* of a lid pulling down was the sound of a winter's meal made safe. What mattered — then and now — was matching the method to the food.

The One Rule That Mattered: Acid

High-acid foods — tomatoes, most fruit, pickles, jams, and anything in a good vinegar or sugar syrup — could be safely put up in a *boiling-water bath*: jars fully covered by an inch of water, kept at a rolling boil for the time the food required.

Low-acid foods — green beans, corn, peas, plain vegetables, and any meat — needed far more heat than a pot of boiling water can reach, and were meant for a *pressure canner*. The kitchens that had one prized it; the kitchens that didn't left the beans for the root cellar, the crock, or the drying string instead.

Honest modern note: this is history, not a how-to. If you ever put food up yourself, follow current tested guidance — today the U.S.D.A. and your county extension office publish free, up-to-date directions, and the safe rules for low-acid foods are stricter than a 1930s farm wife was ever told.

The Crock: Pickling and Fermenting

Before there was a jar for everything there was the crock — a fat stoneware jar that sat in a cool corner and turned the plainest vegetable into something that kept for months and woke up a dull winter plate. Two kinds of pickling filled it. The quick kind was simply vegetables in a hot vinegar brine, sharp and ready in a day or two. The slow kind was *fermenting*: cabbage shredded fine, salted, weighted under its own juices, and left to the good sour work of time.

That slow crock gave the era its most famous keeper, sauerkraut, and its cousins — the salted cucumber that became a proper dill pickle after weeks under a plate and a clean stone, the pickled beans, the pickled beets. A cabbage bought whole for pennies at its autumn cheapest, salted into a crock, fed a family in bright, sour forkfuls long past the point any fresh cabbage would have rotted. It was frugality and flavor doing the same job at once.

The Cellar: Cool, Dark, and Damp

Not everything needed a jar or a crock. A great deal of the harvest simply needed to be kept *still* — cool enough not to sprout, damp enough not to

shrivel, dark enough not to green. That was the root cellar: a dugout under the house, a corner of a cool basement, sometimes just a straw-lined pit in the yard. The best of them held near the temperature of a cool spring and did the work for free, all winter, with no fuel at all.

Knowing what belonged there, and what didn't, was its own small science — and the rules have not changed:

KEEPS WELL IN THE CELLAR	KEEPS ELSEWHERE
Potatoes	Cool, dark, never near onions — each spoils the other faster.
Carrots, beets, turnips	Packed in damp sand or sawdust, tops off; they last for months.
Cabbages	Hung by the root or shelved whole; a strong keeper.
Apples	Kept apart from vegetables — their ripening breath sprouts potatoes early.
Onions & garlic	Want the opposite: cool but dry and airy, never the damp cellar.
Winter squash & pumpkins	A cool, dry room — a shelf in the pantry or a spare bedroom did fine.

The String: Drying

The oldest method of all, and the one that cost nothing but sun and patience. Apples were peeled, cored, sliced in rings, and hung on a string across a warm kitchen until they were leathery and sweet — a jar of dried apple rings was pie and sauce waiting all winter. Green beans, threaded on a long thread and dried whole, became the Appalachian keeper known as *leather-britches* or shuck beans, soaked and simmered soft again months later. Herbs were tied in small bundles and hung upside down from a rafter until they crumbled between the fingers. Corn was dried on the cob and shelled; hot peppers were strung into long red ropes.

Dried food took up almost no room, needed no jar, and asked only to be kept somewhere truly dry and out of the light. Damp was its only enemy — a string of apples that went soft in a humid corner was a string of apples lost. Kept dry, it waited without complaint until a pot of water called it back to life.

A Year of Putting Food By

None of this happened all at once. Putting food by was a rhythm that followed the turning of the year, and a good housewife carried its calendar in her head — because the whole trick was to catch each thing at the exact week it was cheapest and most plentiful, and not a week later.

The Preserving Year

SEASON	WHAT CAME IN, AND WHAT WAS DONE WITH IT
Spring	The lean corner of the year, living on what was left. First greens, rhubarb, and eggs at their cheapest — eggs even “put down” in waterglass to hold for later.
Summer	The great glut. Berries and stone fruit into jam; the first tomatoes, beans, and cucumbers canned, pickled, and set into the crock as fast as they ripened.
Fall	The harvest home. Apples dried and sauced, the last tomatoes put up, cabbage into sauerkraut, and the root crop dug and carried down to the cellar for the winter.
Winter	Living on the year’s work — the full cellar, the shelf of jars, the strings of dried apples and beans — and quietly planning next year’s garden by the stove.

A full cellar and a shelf of jars in November was a whole winter’s eating already bought and paid for — at summer’s prices.

*A garden gives everything in one crowded month.
Putting food by was the art of spreading that month across
a year.*

The Home-Remedies Shelf

What a hard-times family kept on hand — and reached for — when a doctor was a luxury few could pay.

PLEASE READ FIRST — HISTORY, NOT MEDICAL ADVICE

This chapter is a piece of social history. It describes what ordinary families *believed and did* in the 1930s, when a doctor's visit could cost more than a week's wages and many households simply went without one. It is offered for interest and remembrance only.

Nothing here is a recommendation, a treatment, or a cure, and none of it should be used in place of modern medical care. Some old home practices were harmless comforts; a few were useless, and a very few were dangerous. If you or anyone in your family is unwell, **see a doctor or pharmacist**. Read the pages that follow the way you would read an old letter — with fondness, and with the good sense of your own century firmly in hand.

In a decade when the price of a house call could equal the grocery money for a week, the medicine chest of the average family was really the kitchen shelf. A mother judged what was worth a doctor and what she could nurse at home, and for the second kind she reached, without a second thought, for the plain things already in the cupboard. Much of it was comfort more than cure — but comfort, freely given at a bedside, was worth a great deal in a house that could afford little else.

The Things on the Shelf

The whole pharmacy was ordinary kitchen stock, valued as much for what it cost — almost nothing — as for what it was thought to do.

- **Honey** stirred into warm water or tea, to soothe a raw, coughing throat.
- **Vinegar**, splashed in a bowl of water as a cooling wipe for a hot forehead, or warmed for an aching ear.
- **Onions**, sliced and simmered, whose steam and syrup were an old standby for a stubborn chest cold.
- **Mustard**, mixed to a paste and spread between two cloths as the famous mustard plaster, laid on the chest for its deep warmth.
- **Baking soda**, a pinch in water for a sour stomach, or dabbed as a paste on a bee sting or a patch of nettle-burn.
- **Salt**, dissolved warm as a gargle for a sore throat, or in a basin to soak a tired, aching foot.
- **Ginger and peppermint**, steeped into a plain tea to settle an uneasy stomach.
- **Camphor and goose grease**, rubbed warm on the chest — the homemade cousin of the salves sold in little blue jars.

The Mustard Plaster — the era's best-remembered remedy

No home-remedy shelf is remembered more vividly than the mustard plaster. Dry mustard was mixed with flour and a little warm water into a paste, spread thin between two pieces of cloth — never straight on the skin — and laid on the chest for a warming, tingling heat that was believed to loosen a hard cough. It is a perfect picture of the whole shelf: cheap, close at hand, more comfort than cure, and remembered by a whole generation with a mixture of gratitude and a wrinkled nose.

Told here as remembrance. A true mustard plaster can burn the skin, and this is not a suggestion to make one.

Why It Mattered, and Where It Ended

It would be easy to read a shelf like this as quaint, and easier still to romanticize it. Neither is quite fair. Some of it genuinely comforted — a warm salt gargle still soothes a sore throat, and honey in warm water is a gentle thing to this day. Some of it did nothing at all but give worried hands something to do at a bedside, which is not the smallest kindness a poor house could offer. And some of it, we now know, did harm, which is exactly why the shelf gave way to the pharmacy and the clinic as soon as families could reach them.

What's worth keeping from it is not the mustard or the goose grease. It is the picture of a household that met trouble with what it had, calmly and close to home — and the quiet good fortune, which we should not take for granted, of living in a time when the doctor no longer has to be weighed against the grocery money.

Making Do & Mending

The craft of getting a second, third, and fourth life out of everything a household owned.

There was a proverb that hung, sampler-stitched, in kitchens all across the decade, and it worked as well as any household rule ever written: *Use it up, wear it out, make it do, or do without.* Four small commands, in that exact order — and the third one, *make it do*, was where the real skill lived. Anyone can wear a thing out. It takes craft to make a worn thing carry on, and that craft was practiced in every household in the country, not as a hobby but as plain economy.

Keeping Clothes Alive

Clothing was expensive relative to a thin income, so it was mended long past the point we would keep it today — and mended *well*, because a clumsy repair advertised the poverty a family was working hard to keep private. A woman's workbasket was a small toolkit of survival.

Darning

A hole in the heel of a sock was not thrown out; it was *darned* — woven shut. A wooden darning egg (or, famously, a burnt-out light bulb) was slipped inside to hold the shape, and the hole was rebuilt thread by thread: rows laid one way, then woven over and under the other way, until a small square of new fabric had grown where the hole had been. A well-darned sock gave months more wear, and a girl was taught the stitch about as early as she was taught to read.

Turning Collars and Cuffs

A man's shirt wore out at the collar and cuffs first, at the fold, while the rest of it was still perfectly good. So the collar was *turned*: carefully unpicked from the shirt, flipped so the frayed edge tucked underneath out of sight and the good under-side faced up, and sewn back on. One afternoon's quiet work bought a "new" shirt for a man to wear to church or to look for a job in — and looking respectable while looking for work was no small thing in those years.

Patching, Letting Out, Handing Down

Trousers were patched at the knee, aprons cut down from worn dresses, a coat's good cloth turned inside out and resewn so the faded side went in. Children's clothes were made with deep hems and generous seams precisely so they could be *let out* as the child grew, then handed down to the next child, and the next, until the cloth finally gave out and went — even then — into the rag bag.

The Flour-Sack Dress

The most inventive economy of the era belonged to the humble cotton sack that flour, sugar, and animal feed came in. Thrifty women had long been sewing these into dish towels, aprons, underclothes, and children's dresses — and by the 1930s the mills had noticed. Feed and flour companies began printing their sacks in cheerful florals and prints, knowing full well a farm wife would choose her feed by the pattern she wanted for a dress. A few sacks of the matching print, unpicked and washed to fade the brand name, became a frock, a shirt, or a set of curtains. It is one of the finest examples anywhere of thrift and dignity refusing to be separated.

What the Workbasket Held

All of this mending lived in one place: the workbasket, which sat within reach of the chair where a woman rested in the evening — because rest and mendi-

ng were, in a frugal house, very often the same hour. It held a plain and unchanging kit, and every item in it earned its keep.

- A **darning egg** — or a dead light bulb — to hold a sock's shape while the hole was woven shut.
- A **pincushion** and a paper of pins, and needles of several sizes stuck in a scrap of felt.
- Cards of **darning wool** and spools of thread, matched as near as could be to every color the family wore.
- A **button tin** — that beloved rattling tin every household kept, holding the buttons cut from every worn-out garment before it went to the rag bag, so a lost button always had a near-enough replacement.
- Sharp **scissors**, a thimble worn smooth, and a bit of beeswax to run a thread through so it would not knot.

It was nothing but a basket of small, cheap things — and it kept a whole family clothed and respectable on a fraction of what new clothes would have cost.

Nothing Wasted, Even the Scraps

When a garment truly could go no further as a garment, it still was not finished. The rag bag caught every worn-out scrap, and out of that bag came a second economy: quilts pieced from the still-good parts of dead clothes, each patch a scrap of a remembered dress or shirt; braided and hooked rag rugs for cold floors; cleaning rags for the whole house; strips wound into balls to be woven or knitted. An old wool sweater, past mending, was carefully *unraveled* — its yarn wound off, washed to take the kinks out, and knitted up fresh into mittens or a smaller sweater for a child.

It is the quiet lesson underneath the whole chapter: in a frugal house, almost nothing had a single life. A thing was a shirt, then a patch, then a quilt

square, then a dusting rag — and only when it had given every last bit of use did it finally leave the house.

Anyone can wear a thing out.

It took a craftsman to make a worn thing carry on.

Soap, Suds & a Clean House

Making your own soap, and cleaning a whole house with the cheapest things on the shelf.

A clean house cost money — unless you made the cleaning yourself, which is exactly what a frugal household did. Store soap and bottled cleansers were an expense to be avoided where a home-mixed substitute would do, and for most jobs one would. The cupboard of a thrifty 1930s house held a short list of cheap, plain materials that between them could scour a pot, brighten a window, sweeten a drain, and wash a week's worth of clothes.

Homemade Soap

Soap itself was often made at home, and had been for generations. The chemistry is old and simple: fat plus a strong alkali, worked together, becomes soap. On the farm the fat came free — every trimming, every rind, every drop of grease from the cooking was saved in a can against soap-making day — and the alkali came from lye, either bought in a can or, in the old way, leached from a barrel of hardwood ashes with water. The two were cooked and stirred together, poured into a wooden mould, and cut into bars once hard.

The result was a plain, honest, pale-brown soap — not perfumed, not gentle, but strong enough to cut the grease off a farmer's hands and a floor both. It turned the household's own waste fat, which cost nothing, into one of the few things every house needed every day.

A PLAIN SAFETY NOTE

Soap-making uses **lye**, a caustic chemical that severely burns skin and eyes and gives off dangerous fumes. It was treated with great care and respect in every kitchen that used it, and more than one careless moment ended badly. This is described here as history; it is **not** a set of instructions to make soap at home. If the craft interests you, learn it from a modern source that teaches the safety properly.

The Four Cheap Cleaners That Did Everything

Even a house that bought its soap did most of its cleaning with four humble things that cost pennies and are still on kitchen shelves today. This is the part of the chapter you can genuinely still use.

WHAT THEY REACHED FOR	WHAT IT DID AROUND THE HOUSE
Baking soda	A gentle scouring powder for pots, sinks, and the stovetop; sprinkled dry to sweeten a musty drain, a refrigerator, or a carpet before sweeping.
White vinegar	Cut with water, it cleaned windows and mirrors to a streak-free shine, cut grease, softened hard-water spots, and went in the wash to brighten and soften.
Salt	A coarse scrubber for a stained cup or a cast-iron pan, a lift for a fresh spill on cloth, and a scour for a wooden board.
Washing soda & borax	The heavy lifters of laundry day — cutting grease and softening water so a little soap went a long way in the wash tub.

Laundry Day — the hardest day of the week

Wash day was a whole day's heavy labor, and usually a fixed one — Monday, by long custom. Water was hauled and heated, clothes scrubbed by hand on a ribbed washboard with a bar of that homemade soap, boiled to loosen the deep dirt, wrung out by hand or through a hand-cranked mangle, and hung to dry on the line in the sun, which bleached and freshened them for free. A little **bluing** — a few drops of blue in the rinse — was the old trick that made yellowed whites read as bright white to the eye. It was exhausting work, and no one who did it that way ever mourned the coming of the washing machine.

The Housekeeper's Week

Housework in the 1930s ran on a fixed weekly rhythm, learned by heart from an old rhyme that hung in many a kitchen. Each heavy job had its own day, so no single day carried two of them:

*Wash on Monday, iron on Tuesday,
mend on Wednesday, churn on Thursday,
clean on Friday, bake on Saturday,
and rest on Sunday.*

It reads as quaint now, but the wisdom in it is real: give the hardest work a set day, and it gets done without ever swallowing the whole week.

The Shine on Cheap Things

The same spirit ran through the small chores. Newspaper, crumpled dry, polished a window better than any cloth once the vinegar-water had done the cleaning. A cut lemon dipped in salt brightened tarnished copper and brass. A little cold tea wiped over dark woodwork gave it back its glow. None of it came from a bottle with a label; all of it came from things the house already had for other purposes. That was the whole philosophy of the frugal clean

house — not to buy a special product for every task, but to know the handful of plain materials well enough to make each one do the work of many.

The Frugal Household Ledger

The account book, the jar system, and the plain arithmetic that made a small income go the distance.

Every craft in this little book — the canning, the mending, the home-made soap — served one purpose above all: to make a small amount of money reach further than it had any right to. And that purpose had its own quiet discipline at the center of the house, kept most often by the woman who ran it. It went by a plain name: the household accounts. A pencil, a ruled notebook, and the steady habit of writing down every penny that came in and every penny that went out. It was not glamorous. It was the difference, in a hard year, between a family that just managed and a family that went under.

The Account Book

The tool was nothing more than a cheap ruled notebook, kept in a kitchen drawer, with the week's spending written down as it happened. Income at the top — the pay envelope, and whatever the eggs or the garden or the sewing brought in on the side. Then every outgoing beneath it, the same week: the rent, the coal, the grocery money, the small unavoidable things. At week's end the two columns were added and compared, and the family knew, to the penny, exactly where it stood. There was no guessing, and there was nowhere for a shortfall to hide until it became a crisis.

The genius of the habit was not the arithmetic — it was the *knowing*. A family that wrote it all down could see a lean month coming while there was still time to do something about it, could see which corner had quietly grown too dear, and could tell the difference between a want and a need when the two came asking at the same time.

A Simple Weekly Ledger, the Way It Was Kept

You can keep the same page today with nothing but a notebook. Rule it into four short blocks each week:

1. **Coming in** — wages, and every small extra, listed and totaled.
2. **Set aside first** — a fixed amount put by *before* anything is spent (more on this below).
3. **Must be paid** — rent, fuel, food, the fixed and unavoidable.
4. **What's left** — the honest remainder, which is all there is for everything else.

The whole method in one sentence: decide where the money goes on paper first, so it can't decide for you later.

The Jars, the Envelopes, and Setting Aside

Many households went a step past the notebook and gave the money a physical home. On payday the cash was divided at once into separate jars, tins, or envelopes, each labeled for its purpose: one for rent, one for the coal or the light bill, one for groceries, one for the doctor-or-emergency that everyone prayed would not come. When the grocery envelope was empty, the week's grocery money was simply *gone* — not borrowed from the rent envelope, which was how families kept a bad week from becoming a lost home. It is the oldest budgeting method there is, and it worked because it was impossible to fool.

Pay Yourself First

The single wisest habit in the whole ledger was the smallest: *setting aside*. Even in the leanest years, the careful household tried to put by a little the

ent the money came in — a few coins into a separate tin before the spending began, not from whatever happened to be left at the end, because at the end there was never anything left. A dime a week is a poor sum and a mighty habit. That tin was the cushion under the family: it was the money that met the surprise doctor's bill, the broken window, the week the work stopped — the small private fund that let a family absorb a blow instead of being knocked down by it.

Decide where the money goes while it is still in your hand.

That was the whole of it — and it still is.

The Thread Through the Whole Book

Read the five chapters together and the same idea runs through every one. The jar of tomatoes, the turned collar, the bar of homemade soap, the coins in the setting-aside tin — they are all the same act, done in different rooms of the house: the deliberate, unhurried refusal to let anything be wasted, and the quiet dignity of a family running its own affairs with care. There was nothing romantic about the hardship that made these arts necessary, and this book has tried not to pretend otherwise. But the arts themselves — the skill, the foresight, the making-do — those were, and are, worth keeping. They are the part of the hard times that was actually good.

A Last Word

Thank you for reading this little companion. It was made as a gift to go alongside *The Depression Era Cookbook* — where the same families you have just read about sit down, at last, to eat.

If these old home arts stayed with you, the recipes will feel like coming home: every one with its story, what it cost then, what it costs now, and measurements that actually work in a modern kitchen.

— *Hazel Calloway*

A companion to The Depression Era Cookbook · Bayside Press. This booklet is a good-faith historical account of 1930s American household practice, drawn from the era's home-economics bulletins, farm-magazine columns, and government pamphlets. It is offered for reading and remembrance. The chapter on home remedies is history, not medical advice; the notes on lye and canning describe past practice and are not instructions. Yours to keep, free of charge.