Canning, Keywords, & Collectivities

• tracing ideology in concrete utterances

Ideographs: “One-term sums of an orientation”

Like many folklorists, analysis of work, disciplinary, and other activities of home food preservation have focused on the performance of personal and cultural values, as well as the reoccurrence of discursive practices. In such situations (1), they must be examined in relation to other co-occurring ideographs: that is, attitudes toward the process of canning (e.g., Bakhtin 1986; Jakobson and Pomorska 1983).

The mechanics of home canning have changed little over the past century, but the meanings associated with “putting food by” are varied and shifting. By surveying visual representations of canning, here I argue that abstract ideographs find concrete expression in everyday artifacts and processes. Names of significance become clearer when distinct clusters of ideographs are examined in relation to each other; each “one-term sum” has the potential to reshape the ideologies and collections associated with them.

Skill: Industry • Thrift • Quality

New Deal photographers seeking to illustrate the success of Rural Rehabilitation efforts often chose to highlight the contents of cellars and pantries. The preserved labors of anonymous women attest to the industry and pride of everyday Americans doing their best in strained circumstances. In 1980, the Ball Corporation reprised these themes as the nation struggled again with economic recession; here, however, skill becomes less about work ethic and more about aesthetics and production value.

Agency: Locality • Freedom • Self-sufficiency

Canning workshops and publications have prompted books, and back-to-the-land manuals, but the turn of the millenium—In English, can is both a transitive verb, and homemade preserves and other (“I canned X”) and a modal auxiliary verb, one that signifies possibility, ability, and (in recent use) permission. In...