

COLORADO MINERS – FOOD, CLOTHING, SHELTER

Shelter

What kind of shelters did they live in?

Miners Log Cabin

This is a one-room, miner's cabin somewhere in the mountains of Colorado. The cabin was built of logs.



Miners Log Cabin

Photo: Denver Public Library, Western History Collection

More About This Topic

The first houses in the mining regions of Colorado were log cabins like the one in this photo. These small cabins usually had only one room. They were made from the pine trees that grew on the mountain side. Many had flat roofs made of logs or boards. These cabins were easy and cheap to build.

Their Own Words

"Bonanza is ten thousand feet above sea level, lying in a narrow gulch, the mountains rising high on each side. A street and creek run down the middle. . . . Most of the houses have the back end or kitchen built in the hillside. A good many are of logs; some frame; the lumber for these frame buildings being packed in on mules or burros. In these days there were many tents large and small."

Source: Anne Ellis, The Life of an Ordinary Woman (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1929, 1980): 23, 24.

Miners Tent Camp

The miners in this photo are living in tents. This photograph was probably taken in the 1880s.



Miners Tent Camp

Photo: Colorado Historical Society

More About This Topic

Many of the first gold seekers spent their first summer living in tents. These were temporary shelters. The miners built log or frame cabins to live in during the winter.

Their Own Words

"As yet, the entire population of the valley--which cannot number less than four thousand, including five white women and seven squaws living with men--sleep in tents, or under booths of pine boughs, cooking and eating in the open air. I doubt that there is, as yet, a table or chair in these diggings, eating being done around a cloth spread on the ground."

Source: Horace Greeley, quoted in Duane A. Smith, Colorado Mining: A Photographic History (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1977): 8.

Mine Manger's Log Cabin

The log house in this photo had a pitched roof covered with wood shakes. It probably had two or three rooms.



Mine Manager's Family in front of Log Cabin

Photo: Denver Public Library, Western History Collection

More About This Topic

The family in this photo lived in a log house. It was larger and nicer than a simple log cabin. Some mining engineers and mine owners built log houses that were two-stories high. Some had four or more rooms. Such houses were quite comfortable to live in.

Their Own Words

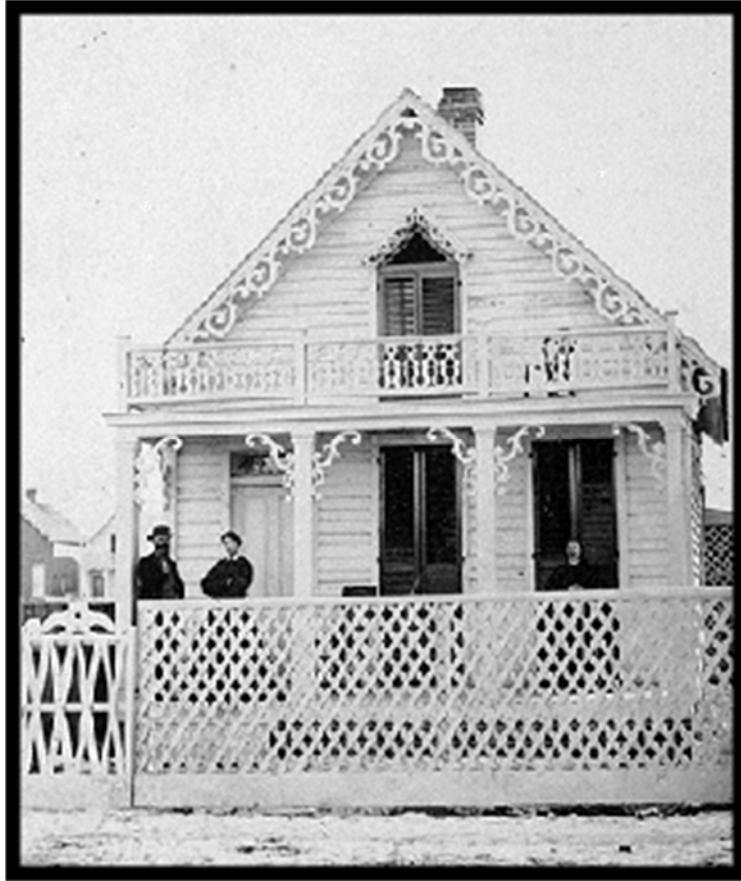
"Empire City, Colorado Territory, March 18, 1865

"Our house is built of logs and has four rooms--a living room and mother's bedroom below and two sleeping rooms above--there is a tiny shed kitchen where everything freezes, but father promises in the spring to build a new kitchen and dig a well. The living room is large and has two windows. The ceiling is made of unhewn logs with the boards of the floor above showing between, all clean with white wash, and on the sides of the room cotton cloth is tacked to the logs and papered over with cheap wallpaper--the only kind you can build out here being made of logs, our house is warm and comfortable, but the front door is thin, only one thickness of boards with batten to cover the cracks, and it does not fit closely at the top. There is a large wooden button to help keep it fastened, but the wind was so strong that snow blew in all the way across the room and hissed on the stove. Before we went to bed quite a little drift extended all along the floor. . . ."

Source: Emma S. Hill, A Dangerous Crossing and What Happened on the Other Side (Denver, 1924): 54-57.

Frame House in Leadville

This frame house was built of boards sawed at a saw mill. It is decorated with "gingerbread" trim, which are the curved wooden pieces on the gable and on the porch posts.



Frame House in Leadville

Photo: Colorado Historical Society

More About This Topic

Most of the gold seekers who came to Colorado had lived in frame or brick houses back east. They thought of log cabins as temporary houses. They replaced them with frame houses as soon as possible. Frame houses had to wait until someone built a sawmill nearby to saw logs into boards. The exterior boards (called clapboards or weatherboards) ran horizontally on most houses, like the one in this photo. A few frame houses had board and batten siding, in which the boards ran vertically.

Their Own Words

"The dwelling houses were mostly made of pine lumber--the boards running straight up and down, the crack battened by melted down and fluted out tin cans on the outside. On the inside, boards were put on in the same way, covered with cheesecloth and the cheesecloth covered with wallpaper. They were two and three room affairs but kept very neat and clean."

Source: Joseph M. Powers, "Early Days in Silver Cliff" Colorado Magazine (July 1949): 221.

The Healy House in Leadville

This is a photo of the Healy house in Leadville. This house is now a museum owned by the Colorado Historical Society. You can visit it when you go to Leadville.



Healy House

Photo: Colorado Historical Society

More About This Topic

The wealthy people in mining towns built large frame houses like the one in this photo. The Healy family's house in Leadville had three stories and a dozen rooms. It was built in 1878 for August R. Meyer, a Leadville smelter owner. He later sold it to Daniel Healy.

Their Own Words

"My childhood and girlhood were tied very closely with the Healy House. . . . The House was rented to a Mr. and Mrs. Harper, by Dan Healy. They operated it as a rooming and boarding house. My sister Saidee lived there, as it wasn't feasible for her to live 'up the Gulch' with us, stormy winters. So again I became a regular visitor at the House. . . . My memories are vivid; I can see the furnishings in my mind's eye—the sideboard in the dining room that fascinated me; Miss Healy's dresser; the same old piano. . . . Some

of my most delightful memories of that house are connected with the evenings after dinner, when the ones who lived there gathered in the parlor for music.”

Source: Mattie Edwards Stuthman, “High Altitude Memories,” Colorado Magazine, 24 (January 1952): 36-37.

Interiors

What do these photos tell you about the interior of the houses these miners lived in?

Miners in a Frame Cabin

This is the interior of a miner’s cabin. This room is used as the bedroom, dining room, and kitchen. The cabin also had an upstairs loft that was probably used for sleeping. One can see the ladder to the loft on the wall next to the bed. Much of the furniture is homemade.



Miners in a Cabin

Photo: Denver Public Library, Western History Collection

More About This Topic

Most miners' cabins were very simply furnished. The cabin in this photo had a bed, dining table, wooden stools, a box used as a washstand, and a shelf nailed to the wall. All of the furniture except the stove probably was homemade.

Their Own Words

"Dore's was just the usual miner's cabin--a bunk built in one corner, a mattress of straw or pine boughs and over this blankets, with a top cover of canvas, and a pillow with a dark calico slip (quite shiny in the middle). At the head of the bed is a shelf, either nailed or on pegs set in the logs; on this shelf are matches a candle, pipes and tobacco, shaving mug and razor, and a small box holding thread, needles, and buttons. Against the wall is a home-made table, on which are cans containing sugar and salt; also a can of condensed milk, a few tin plates and cups, these being turned upside down when not in use, to keep mice and dirt out. Over the dishes knives and forks, the dishpan was turned; on top and covering all this was spread the not very white dish-towel, made from an old flour sack. The chairs were of blocks of wood, or two pieces of board nailed on a slant, with a seat fastened on; the stove was a tiny sheet-iron affair with a coffee-pot on the back. Under a curtain the corner hung their 'other clothes'. . . ."

Source: Anne Ellis, The Life of an Ordinary Woman, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1929, 1980): 31-32.

Two Miners Sitting in a Cabin

The two miners in this photo are sitting beside the iron stove used for cooking and for heat during the winter.



Two Miners Sitting in a Cabin

Photo: Denver Public Library, Western History Collection

More About This Topic

Everyday life in a miners' cabin centered around the dining table and the stove. In many cabins the stove was the only store-bought piece of furniture. It was used for cooking, heating, and companionship. In cold weather, miners gathered around the stove to talk or read.

Their Own Words

"Some time along here we moved a mile up the road from town to what we called the Rawley Gulch house. This was a three-room affair built in the hillside, the rooms all in a row; the kitchen quite low and dark; the canvas bulging off the walls.... The middle room was quite small, and had in it a trunk and a single bed; also a home-made desk kept under lock and key.... In the front room were two beds and a stove. It was around this stove we gathered to hear Henry read Rider Haggard's *She* and Allan Quatermain to us. And the thrill of those stories! I believed every word of them."

Source: Anne Ellis, The Life of an Ordinary Woman (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1929): 53-54.

Interior Of a Log Cabin

Two miners are sitting at their dining table in this photo. The table, chairs, and stool are homemade.



Two Miners in a Log Cabin

Photo: Colorado Historical Society

More About This Topic

Miners traveled light. They arrived in Colorado on horseback, driving a farm wagon or in a stagecoach. They brought some food with them, extra clothing, but little else. Few could afford the cost of hauling or shipping furniture. That is why the miners' tables, chairs, and much of their other furniture was homemade. Still, a simply furnished log cabin was more comfortable than living in a small room in a hotel or boarding house.

Their Own Words

"I remember that when I first took a room in Victor I was rather disturbed because, although it had a door lock of sorts, there was no key.... Nothing of mine was ever stolen. The room in the lodging house...was a cubicle rather than a room. It contained a bed, an affair on legs which had two small drawers and which supported a wash bowl and pitcher, and a stove.... It was the smallest stove I have ever seen outside of a toy shop. A tiny sheet-iron cylinder with a stove pipe about as thick as my wrist....

There were six rooms like that on the upper floor of this lodging house, each renting for \$10.00 a month."

Source: Leo J. Keena, "Cripple Creek in 1900," Colorado Magazine, 30 (1953): 271.

Interior Of the Peyer's House

This is the sitting room of a well-to-do family in Leadville. The Furniture included a piano and a couch. The room also had carpet on the floor.



Peyer's House

Photo: Colorado Historical Society

More About This Topic

The furniture that people own is a good indication of their wealth and social standing. At the top of mining town society were the mine owners, mine superintendents, and successful merchants. They could afford to have fine furniture and ship it across the plains. Wealthy families who settled in mining towns brought their best furniture with them.

Their Own Words

"The [living] room is very attractive, for you know father bought all our good furniture: the upholstered chairs, the easy chair, the couch and bookcase full of books, besides our piano; although this is small, it

is nice mahogany, but I fear the dry climate will injure it, for already there are little cracks in the veneer and the sounding board has split in one place. My mother brought lace curtains and has plants in bloom in the windows, and against the now outside they look bright and cheery."

Source: Emma Shepard Hill, A Dangerous Crossing and What Happened on the Other Side (Denver, 1924): 55.

Interior Of The Healy House

This is a room in the Healy house in Leadville. It was furnished with drapes, carpets on the floor, and fine furniture.



Inside the Healy House

Photo: Colorado Historical Society

More About This Topic

The wall covering, curtains, and carpets in people's houses also indicated what they did in mining camps. The cabins of ordinary miners had bare walls and floors. The men who owned mines and smelters could afford wallpaper and carpets. This house was built in 1878 by August R. Meyer, who owned a smelter in Leadville. He later sold it to Daniel Healy.

Interior Of An Expensive House

This is the library or reading room in a house in Leadville. It is furnished with bookcases, chairs and a table. The fireplace is decorated with vases and a sculpture.



Inside an Expensive House

Photo: Colorado Historical Society

More About This Topic

Wealthy mine owners lived in mansions. The house shown in this photo had a nicely furnished sitting room. It also had a library or reading room. This wealthy family could afford to decorate the house with pictures in frames, vases and sculptures.

Clothing

What do these photos tell you about the type of clothes they wore?

Miners Near Altman

This photo shows three people standing in front of a mining cabin in the mountains of Colorado. It was taken near the mining town of Altman, Colorado in 1889.



Miners Near Altman

Photo: Denver Public Library, Western History Collection

More About This Topic

The people in the photo are wearing everyday clothes of the period. The woman is wearing a print dress with sleeves puffed at the shoulders and a long white apron. Puffed sleeves were in style in the late 1800s. The men are wearing dark work shirts, pants, and leather boots. Men and women in the mining

camps of Colorado mostly wore the kind of clothes they had worn back home. Women wore print dresses, aprons, and bonnets. Men wore work shirts and pants.

Two Miners In Their Cabin

The two men in this photo are sitting at a table in a mining cabin. They are dressed in ordinary work clothes with jackets.



Two Miners in a Cabin

Photo: Colorado Historical Society

More About This Topic

Photographs of miners usually show them wearing jackets or coats, even photos taken inside. In poorly-heated cabins high in the mountains, men wore jackets to keep warm. It was the custom in the late 1800s for men to wear hats in the summer and winter.

Their Own Words

"Tuesday, July 17th, 1860. Was up early after good sleep to find our blankets wet with frost and the air cold. The stones covered with ice and soon had breakfast and ready to start. . . . Our road was still

ascending. . . . Leaving the team, I attempted to climb one of the mountains. The stones covered with ice and along the sides lay deposits of snow. . . .”

Source: Webster D. Anthony, “Journal of a Trip from Denver to Oro City in 1860,” Colorado Magazine, 10 (November 1933): 235.

Three Miners In Their Cabin

The men in this miners cabin are wearing work clothes and leather work boots.



Three Miners in a Cabin

Photo: Denver Public Library, Western History Collection

More About This Topic

Men in the Colorado mining camps found that they needed better shoes than they had worn back home. Climbing over rocks and wading in water quickly wore out the light work shoes worn by farmers or factory workers. Miners found that heavy, leather boots lasted much longer. Many wore hobnailed boots. These boots had short nails with thick heads to protect the soles. They wore dress boots only for special occasions.

Their Own Words

"Ted Durbin, one of the young men-- not a miner--is quite a dandy and very particular about his clothes. He has very small feet and tonight had on a pair of new boots. All the young men have their boots made to order, in fact, every man does unless he wears the hobnailed mining boots; and a pair of dress boots costs all the way from sixteen to twenty dollars--sometimes more. Of course, Ted wanted every one to notice his new boots, and to call attention to them he remarked that they were rather tight for comfort. Among the crowd was a miner called Dutch Henry, a small man not more than five feet tall, but wearing a very large boot, a No. 10 or more. He finally asked Ted what he would take for the boots. Ted looked at Dutch Henry's feet a moment and then said: "Dutch, if you can wear these boots, they are yours." Henry sat down on a convenient box . . . took off his boots, and began unwinding round after round of old cloth and burlap sacking. When he finally reached his feet he pulled on the boots without effort and walked away"

Source: Emma S. Hill, A Dangerous Crossing and What Happened on the Other Side (Denver, 1924).

Telluride Miners' Family

This family from the mining town of Telluride, Colorado had their photo taken at a studio. They dressed up for the occasion. On the backside of this photo are written the names "Uncle Roy, Aunt Ruth, Maggie, Dan, and Minnie."



Telluride Family

Photo: Denver Public Library, Western History Collection

More About This Topic

Photos taken in photographer's studios usually show people dressed up in their best clothes. In this photo, the mother is dressed in a long shirt with a blouse or jacket that has puffed sleeves. The father is wearing a dress suit with a vest. The girl standing next to him is wearing a pinafore with ruffles. The young boy, Dan, has on a suit with a large bow, short pants, and knee socks. People everywhere in the United States in the late 1800s wore clothes similar to these when they dressed up.

Their Own Words

"We lived in Breckenridge for a few months [in 1895-96]. . . . A bad fire broke out in the town; my cousins and I hastily grabbed some precious shoes to save them from the fire. They were black ones, painted white with silver or gold pasted on them—to be worn in some kind of entertainment—very beautiful in our eyes."

Source: Mattie Edwards Stuthman, "High Altitude Memories," Colorado Magazine, 24 (January 1952): 33.

Peyer Family Of Leadville

The couple in this photo are Mr. and Mrs. Peyer of Leadville. He is wearing a dress coat with a white shirt and tie. Mrs. Peyer is wearing a long dress with long, fitted sleeves, and is wearing her hair in braids gathered high on her head.



Peyer Family of Leadville

Photo: Colorado Historical Society

More About This Topic

How well people dressed in Colorado mining towns depended on what they could afford to wear. The Leadville couple in this photo were wealthy people. They dressed like wealthy people in cities everywhere in the United States at that time.

Their Own Words

“Mr. Rollins is a tall, broad gentleman, with a pleasing face and manners, and iron grey hair. He looks like a son of toil [i.e., a working man]. He was dressed in ministerial black, and wore a white shirt, with common china buttons in place of studs. Mr. Rollins is pretty well off. He sold a gold mine once for \$250,000 and has succeeded in keeping the money. . . .”

Source: John Q. A. Rollins, Jr., "John Q. A. Rollins, Colorado Builder, Colorado Magazine, 16 (May 1939): 116.

Mine Manager's Family

This is the Samuel F. Rathron family standing in front of their log house in Bonanza, Colorado. Bonanza as a mining camp north of Alamosa in Saguache County. Mr. Rathron, a mining engineer, is wearing high-topped boots. His wife is dressed up in what probably is one of her best dresses. The girl is dressed up and is wearing a hat with a silk band.



Mine Manager's Family

Photo: Colorado Historical Society

More About This Topic

Mining engineers were among the best-educated and best paid mine workers. They lived and dressed accordingly. Most mining engineers wore high-topped boots like those Mr. Rathron is wearing.

Food

What do these photos tell you about what food people ate?

Miners In Camp

This was a miners' camp in the mountains of Colorado. The men are eating a meal. Their campsite is littered with empty food cans.



Miners in Camp

Photo: Colorado Historical Society

More About This Topic

The first gold-seekers to arrive in Colorado brought their food with them. There were no grocery stores or meat markets. They brought dried and preserved food that did not spoil. That included beans, flour, salt pork, dried beef and dried fruit. The men in the photo also had canned goods.

Their Own Words

"I stabled the team and went around to get the supplies. I had difficulty in getting all the machinery that Mr. Austin wanted, but we got some ox chains and dried beef, sardines, beans and coffee and several sides of salt pork. I did not have funds enough with me to get the sugar, molasses, cheese, crackers, dried fruit and other delicacies on his list--as the machinery and provisions have advanced in price above what he had calculated on paying."

Source: Diary of a unidentified young man, Central City, December 10, 1865; from The New Mexico Sentinel, July 3, 1938.

Cooking On a Campfire

This was taken in the Colorado mountains in 1874 by W. H. Jackson. It was taken at the campsite of a government survey team. Miners also cooked over campfires like this one. This is a "trick" photo. Can you tell why?



Campfire Cooking

Photo: Colorado Historical Society

More About This Topic.

This photo shows some of the cooking equipment used in mining camps. The man is holding a skillet in his hand. The pot on the lower left is a Dutch oven used to bake biscuits. The other pots were used for cooking stew and other dishes. The “trick” in the photo is the pancake being flipped in the air. It was drawn on the negative later. A camera shutter of the 1870s was not fast enough to capture a pancake in midair.

Their Own Words

[A gold rush breakfast]

“I, this morning tried my hand at baking ‘Slap jacks’ or pan cakes, the first bread I have undertaken to make, and I tell you that I had excellent cakes—light, clean and nice, and not a burnt one in the lot. They went first best with good butter and white sugar sprinkled over. The boys say I must ‘do some more.’ Won’t I be just the handiest fellow when I get back to bake cakes for you? Brag on me little can’t you?”

Source: “The Letters of David F. Spain” (to his wife, Apr. 30, 1859) in John D. Morrison, ed., Colorado Magazine, 35 (April 1958): 103.

Three Miners In Their Cabin

This photo shows men sitting at a table in a mining cabin. They are playing cards. The dishes on the table indicate that they have just finished eating. A water kettle, skillet, and covered pot are sitting on top of the cook stove. A pan probably used for washing dishes is hanging on the wall.



Miners playing cards in a Cabin

Photo: Denver Public Library, Western History Collection

More About This Topic

The first gold seekers lived in tents and cooked out-of-doors. In time they built log cabins or frame cabins like the one in this photo. Then they cooked indoors on an iron stove and ate at homemade tables and stools.

Their Own Words

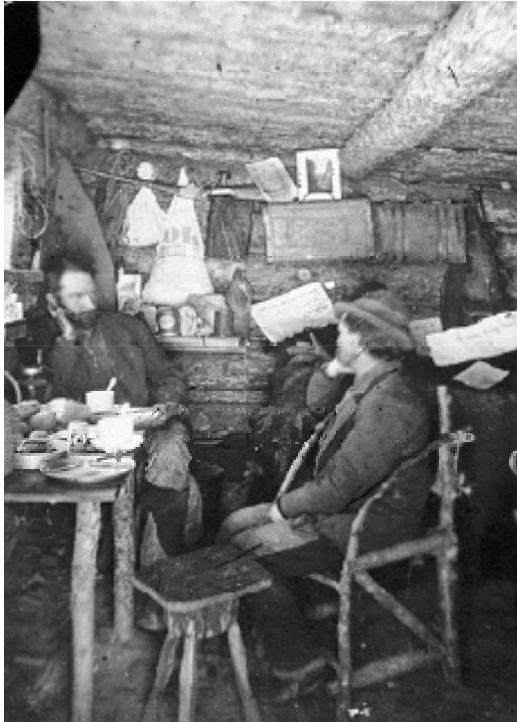
[Supper in the Diggings]

"Yesterday John and I went a mile and a half up the creek to Doc Davenports Cabin. Spent the afternoon and ate supper with them, which consisted of Venison, Coffee, Rice & Stewed fruit. All hands had to use the same spoon and two or three the same knife and fork."

Source: "The Letters of David F. Spain," (to his wife, April 30, 1859), in John D. Morrison, ed., Colorado Magazine, 35 (April 1958): 106.

Two Miners In Their Cabin

The two men in this photo are sitting at a table in a log cabin. They have just finished a meal. The white bags hanging on the wall next to the rifle and suitcases probably contain food. Miners hung food and other supplies on the cabin walls to keep them out of reach of mice and rats.



Two Miners in Their Cabin

Photo: Colorado Historical Society

More About This Topic

Most of the early miners in Colorado were either single men or married men who came without their wives. Three or four men usually lived together in a cabin and cooked their own meals. Very few of the miners who came to Colorado were good cooks. They had little experience. Cooking was nearly always a woman's chore in the 1800s.

Their Own Words

"We are all well, and the Boys do say that I am getting fatter every day. I still do the cooking, and am getting to be quite adept in the art. I can Bake Bread good Enough for any body. Yesterday John and I went a mile and a half up the creek to Doc Davenports Cabin spent the afternoon and ate supper with them. Which consisted of Venison Coffee Rice and Stewed fruit. All hands had to use the same spoon and two or three the same knife and fork. They are not half as well fixed as we are. Doc says d—d if I aint 'down on' this HE cooking. I laughed at him and said wait till we get Home. Won't we make the provender [the meals they would get at home] suffer."

Source: David Spain letter to his wife Ella, "The Letters of David Spain," John D. Morrison, ed., Colorado Magazine, 35 (April 1958): 106-07.

Two Miners By Their Stove

This photo shows two miners sitting next to a stove in a log cabin. Their cabin had shelves for storing food. The men hung their skillets on the wall behind the stove.



Two Miner by their Stove

Photo: Colorado Historical Society

More About This Topic

Most of the food items on the shelves in this photo were canned goods. Canned food was very common in mining camps by the late 1800s. Nearly every kind of food was available in metal cans.

Their Own Words

"Maryland oysters shipped frozen in cans, canned salmon, chicken, and turkey which I kept on hand....

"We bought [canned] fruit, vegetables, and milk by the case. Occasionally two or three neighbors

divided a case of something special to vary the monotony without investing too much. Canned food and eggs were allowed to freeze, but never potatoes or oil."

Source: Harriet Backus, Tomboy Bride, reprinted in Carl Ubbelohde, Maxine Benson, and Duane A. Smith, eds., A Colorado Reader (Boulder: Pruett Publishing Co., 1982): 98-99.