

SMOKEHOUSES

By Oliver Cameron
with Ole Wik

How did you make a smoke house?¹

That's an "any much" question again.²

When I was a youngster, my father built a smokehouse on top of a bank alongside a creek. The stove was down almost at the creek. A stovepipe 15 or 16' long went from the stove up through the bottom of the smokehouse.

The smokehouse was maybe 6-1/2' high, 6' wide, and about 2' deep from front to back. It had sort of a trap door on the front side that you could raise and prop open so that you could look right in. It was made fairly tight, but there were a few holes drilled along the top, just under the roof. Smoke couldn't have moved up if it had been completely sealed.

That smokehouse worked very well. It was handy to reach inside and easy to maneuver whatever was hanging in there.

My father used to make bacon, hams, corned beef, and all that sort of thing. He bought what was called a sugar cure. I'm not sure what was in it. He rubbed that on the hams, and more or less cured them first. Then he hung them up in the smoke house for probably a week or so.

I was the one who usually maintained the fire. I would fix the fire in the morning, and then go do the other chores. I'd come back and load the fire up again with punky wood, shut the damper down, and go to school. After school I'd start it up again, and then again before bedtime. That was all the attention it took.

Now I have a portable smokehouse made of small poles. It's made with Visqueen³. It's designed just to sit on the ground.

The ground is the floor. Then there's a sheet of plastic with a pole fastened to each end, and four uprights to make a sort of a square or rectangle, a little wider than deep. That forms the trap for the smoke. It has a roof over it, and a rectangular base with holes in it. The holes are about 1-1/2" in diameter. The uprights that form the corners of the smokehouse fit into that. Then it has another setup similar to that up about 7' above that.

There are a couple of posts inside, with a crosspiece on which to hang meat. In some cases I have a kind of a lattice work made out of small willows that I lay some types of things on.

It doesn't smoke very much at one time. The latticework is about three layers deep, one above the other. Or, instead, I can just put a crosspiece on top of the two posts inside there so that if I want to hang something bigger in there, I can.

There is no stove. I just use a large metal dishpan, maybe 18” across. I build a little fire in that, smother it down with punky wood, and set it in there on a few little stones to hold it up off the ground.

That smokehouse is not a commercial venture by any means. It’s just something to pamper my taste or my family or friends with something that has a little bit of a smoky taste to it.

Usually what I put in there is already more or less cured, either by drying or, less often, with a mixture of salt and sugar. I don’t remember the exact formula I used for it, but I did have a formula at one time. I smoked mostly fish, but sometimes meat.

That’s just about the extent of specifically smoking, although just in the process of drying fish, it ends up tasting a little bit smoky because we often have a smudge built under it to keep the flies away.

My fish rack is covered over with the tarp, though it’s open on the ends. The tarp helps catch some of the smoke. Fish don’t dry very well when it’s raining, and if you aren’t careful, a lot of them end up lying on the ground.

When you have a net in the water, you can’t always predict what the weather’s going to do. If you’ve got fish cut and the clouds come over, you have to keep after it a little more, watching your meat to be sure that the flies aren’t starting to blow it. You have to keep smoke under it in rainy weather, or even at night when the weather is cloudy.

What kind of wood did you use?

I’ve used alder quite a bit. Dead alders fall down and lie on the ground, and it’s easier to find wood that’s about the right consistency—conky⁴ and slightly damp. It holds a fire better than most other woods.

I’ve also used willow or birch. Willow gives a little more bland taste. Ordinarily I avoid any resinous wood, though I’ve used a little bit of it when I didn’t have anything better handy. I don’t usually use poplar either. It tends to dry up after it dies, so it doesn’t get conky as easily as alder.

If you really want to know about smokehouses, you should go along the Tanana or the Yukon and see where people are really smoking fish. The people along the rivers have fish wheels and gill nets out in the summertime. Their smokehouses are rather tall affairs. They smoke a lot of fish, and have much bigger operations than I had at any time.

They’ll cut a filet off the side off a salmon, cut it into strips about 3/4” across, more or less square, and hang them in there. The finished product is quite a specialized food called “squaw candy”. It’s not at all necessarily the product of a woman’s work. Quite often the whole family is involved.

I’ve never helped with or worked around one of those. I’ve seen them, and that’s about it.

In the mid-1980s there was a lady in Kotzebue who smoked salmon commercially.

I knew about that. I was trying to think of her name. I wasn’t there during that time. Carol Schlentner once helped her with that operation.

What was your best product?

That's a hard one. My father used to smoke meat or cure and smoke meat for the neighbors around. It was an entirely different product from what I usually had.

The fish that I hung on a rack were more dried than smoked. I like dried meat and dried fish when it's put up right, whether smoked or not. Since it's a principal part of my diet, I preferred to have it unsalted and unsmoked. But for a treat sometimes, it's nice to have a little bit of smoky flavor in some of your food.

I worked at Brooks Camp in Katmai National Monument one summer. Sasha and I made a hot smoker by stringing wire to form a mesh about three inches from the top of a cut-off 55-gallon drum. We built a smudgy fire in a buried can, using punky alder, and set the drum over that. We covered the top of the drum with the cut-off end. The fish didn't get dry, but got baked and smoked at the same time.

Did you know of Abraham Lincoln in Kotzebue? I think maybe he died just before you folks came up there. He was a neighbor of mine. He was hunchbacked and short and somewhat crippled from TB, but he was very handy. He made quite a few items for the tourist trade—native tools like ulus and *ichuuns*⁵.

He made a smokehouse with two barrels, one above the other. I think that the lower barrel still had the bottom in it, and the top cut out. It had a fireplace built in.

The top barrel had both ends cut out, and I vaguely remember that he had holes knocked in the sides. Pieces of pipe went through there to support the rack for the fish. He used something like a hardware cloth, only more coarse. In some cases he might have hung his salmon and salmon strips right on the pipes. I think he loaded it through the top, and had some kind of loose cover over it.

Was it a hot or dry smoker?

I don't really know. I think that he just cut the fresh fish and put them right in there, but I'm not positive about that. What I remember mainly was walking by his place and smelling the smoke from that smokehouse. Finally I noticed where it was coming from.

1) This essay stems from a series of telephone conversations that Ole Wik had with Oliver between December 2007 and February 2008. Highlighted text indicates remarks made by Ole.

2) This is an Ambler-ism. Asked how much of something, a villager (or any of us) might reply "Any much".

3) "Visqueen" is a brand of polyethylene plastic sheeting, and has become a generic description for any plastic sheeting. It is commonly between 4 and 10 mils thick and is available in clear, opaque, and black. (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Visqueen>)

4) Conk: The shelf-like fruiting body of certain wood-decaying fungi; bracket. (<http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/conky>)

5) An *ichuun* is modern Eskimo skin-scraping tool made of a tube of metal fitted onto a shaped wooden handle. This is one of Oliver's, from the collection of the Cold Climate Housing Research Center at the University of Alaska Fairbanks.



Image courtesy of Molly Rettig, CCHRC