BEANS FOR 400

As provided by Robert W. Sawyer IV and Amanda Barker

The Ashland Logging Museum was formed in 1971 by a group of foresters, landowners, and loggers who recognized that the age of horses and winter logging camps was fast coming to an end. That is when George “Pete” Sawyer donated two acres of land to the Museum and the work began.

Certainly, any preservation of logging history should include bean hole beans. The Museum has several authentic, usable bean pots. Our pots are all cast iron and have tripod legs, the smaller pots holding six pounds of dry beans, and the larger pots that hold ten pounds of dry beans.

We, here at the Museum, would like to tell you that the recipe we use is a time-honored camp cook recipe, however, it is not. Men who had eaten a lot of woods camp bean hole beans ceremoniously consulted the recipe on the back of a State of Maine bean bag, and allowed that the beans tasted “about right” and “a lot better” than some of the beans they had eaten. They did agree that it needed more salt and salt pork to be like woods beans. The amount of salt pork that they used was for food preservation rather than flavor. In today’s standards, with the combined amount of salt, would leave your face puckered and your throat parched. Omitting the salt, and being agreed upon by George “Pete” Sawyer, Eben Ellis, Gib Gagnon, and a host of others, the official recipe was dated June 30, 1976.

We were asked by the Allagash Wilderness Waterway (AWW) if we would be willing to make the bean hole beans for their 50th Anniversary celebration. We said yes, and broke out the official Ashland Logging Museum bean hole bean recipe. While the museum has made a lot of bean hole beans over the years, we usually make enough to feed one hundred fifty people. The AWW event called for feeding four hundred. Thankfully, the Patten Lumberman’s Museum graciously loaned us their authentic bean pots. Using the recipe below, we struck out for Churchill Dam:
Beans for 400

68 pounds of dry beans (yellow, navy and pea are our favorites)
23 pounds of salt pork
Brown sugar (approximately a 5-pound bag)
1.5 gallons of molasses
35 onions
¾ cup of dry mustard
Pepper

What is important about bean hole beans is not the taste, but the process. Here is how we do it:

The night before:

1. Pick over the beans to remove any small rocks and bad beans.
2. Soak the beans overnight, adding water if necessary

3. Dig a bean hole that is at least three feet deep. You will need two feet of dirt over the top. This is very important. You don’t want your bean hole too shallow as you’ll lose your heat and moisture too rapidly. Look for well-drained soil. (We were limited in our spot at Churchill Dam to somewhere that we could place a 9 foot-long by 3-foot-long trench. By good luck, a Blanchett crew was at the dam doing bridge work and dug us a hole using their backhoe. By bad luck, we had a deluge of rain a couple of days later that quite literally filled our bean hole. A frog was living in it when we went back to pump it out!)

4. If the bean hole is wet (like ours was), place some old dry boards on the bottom of the hole before you make your fire. (That’s an old camp cooking trick.)

5. Build a fire using seasoned hardwood that will leave you with about 8” of coals.
6. While the coals are building, add the salt pork, brown sugar, molasses, onions, mustard, and pepper.

7. Do not drain out our overnight soaking water. Add water to it until it is just under full. Cover in aluminum foil, and make sure the lid is tightly closed.
8. Put your beans in when the coals are glowing red and when you can’t see solid wood anymore. When you place the bean pots into the ground, make sure they are level. Really push them into the coals, then use a bent shovel to scoop coals about half way up the pot.

9. Top with dirt. As you bury the pots in soil, make sure the bail of the pot is standing up. When you uncover them, you’ll find the bail first and will hopefully miss hitting the pot or prying the lid off. If you have multiple pots, take rocks and place them on either side of the trench so that if you were to draw a line between them, your pot would be along that line.
10. The beans are left in the ground for a full 24 hours. When they are taken out they will be plenty hot and fully cooked. (We like getting our beans in the ground around 10-11 a.m.)

11. Be careful when you dig them out as it is easy to hook a cover and fill the bean pot full of dirt.