

EVERY PEACH STONE COUNTS

By Ms. Christy Lindberg

In September 1918, "Save Our Soldiers From German Gas By Saving Peach Stones!"¹ was the immediate response to General John J. Pershing's plea for more gas masks. Pershing was commander of the American Expeditionary Force during World War I, and newspapers across the country quickly spread the word for this wartime need. Many companies soon sponsored the collection of all kinds of fibrous materials: "Save American lives by saving Peach Stones, Apricot, Cherry, Plum, Prune and Olive Pits, Date Seeds, Walnuts, Hickory Nuts, Butternuts and also the shells of these nuts!"² In a classified advertisement, Frank R. Jelleff, Inc. offered, "Dry the stones and bring them to us. We will deliver them to the government for you."³

The Red Cross, schools, churches, and other civic organizations and groups reacted with great patriotic fervor. The Boys Scouts of America "pledged themselves to 100 percent patriotism in winning the war."⁴ One little boy even wrote a letter to the "Aunt Anna's Little Letters" newspaper column that said:



Historic photo of a peach stone collection barrel



Historical advertisement for peach pit collection

"I have a brother in France, and I am saving all the peach stones I can to help make gas masks. I hope all the cousins [readers of the column] will save all they can. I get my playmates and we go around the streets picking the seeds up. I have gathered and had given me over 800."⁵

Considering that it took about 200 peach stones or approximately 7 pounds of nut shells to produce enough of the porous carbon necessary to outfit one gas respirator to save one American Soldier, this effort required unwavering support. It was estimated that more than 500,000 tons of fruit stones, nut shells, and seeds would be required each month to make enough charcoal to produce an adequate number of gas masks. Coconut shells yielded the most porous carbon; however, shortages of ships available to import the coconut shells often forced the hand of American ingenuity. Candy makers declared their intention to explore all possible uses for coconuts so that more shells would become available. The U.S. Food Administration contributed to the effort by ensuring that makers of coconut products had plenty of sugar, and consumers were encouraged to have that second slice of coconut pie.

THE GOVERNMENT ASKS
EVERYBODY TO
SAVE
PEACH STONES

As They are Urgently Needed in the Making of
GAS MASKS

Housekeepers, restaurants, hotels, canneries—whoever uses
peaches, all are asked to Save All Peach Stones, and dry
them and

Bring or Send to
"The Big Store"

Which has been directly requested by the Gas Defense Division,
Chemical Warfare Service, U. S. Army, to become a
"PEACH PIT DEPOSITORY"

Don't throw ANY peach stones away—each one counts—
save them all.

Women's war work clubs or associations can render very
valuable help to the government by appointing "Peach Stone
Committees," and using every means to collect as many stones
as possible.

"Peach Pit Depository" just inside our corner entrance.

—WATCH US GROW—

Brandon Durrell Co.
S. W. Corner Michigan Street and Jefferson Blvd.

Historical advertisement for peach pit collection

In a letter to city and county school superintendents in the state of Illinois, Alfred J. Benson, chairman for the state of Illinois war saving societies, wrote:

"Poison gas was one of the first fruits of *kultur*. It stings, blinds and kills. Charcoal, or carbon, made from fruit pits and nut shells, is used to neutralize it. The government needs carbon. It asks the boys and girls to save pits from these fruits: peaches, apricots, plums, cherries, prunes, and the shells of hickory nuts, walnuts, and butternuts."⁶

The Gas Defender, a newsletter distributed by the Gas Defense Division of the Chemical Warfare Service, detailed the process of turning fruit and nuts into lifesaving carbon:

"All the peach pits, shells and stones that are now being collected in New York and throughout the rest of the country are converging on the several carbon plants of the Chemical Warfare Service . . . about 8 tons a day are being yielded from the various hotels, department stores, restaurants and schoolhouses.

As the shipments arrive at the wharf of the plant the various kinds of pits and shells and other carbon producing substances are conveyed to hoppers, from which they are fed into a grinding machine which breaks them into more or less uniform sizes. Thus far the following materials have been used: Cocoanut shells, apricot pits, peach pits, cohune nuts . . . and cherry pits.

After being sized through the foregoing process, the material is conveyed to retorts, where it is carbonized and all the volatile gases driven off . . . From here the carbon . . . is carried on cars to the treaters. The mass is still hot from the distilling process and it is therefore necessary to reduce

its temperature to prevent the mass from . . . burning like charcoal.

The treaters are immediately adjacent. Above them are grinders and screens, where the material is further reduced in size before entrance . . . The carbon enters at the top and comes out the bottom, where it is caught in 225-pound drums . . . This is the finished product."⁷

At the Astoria Light, Heat, and Power Company in New York City, New York, 1,500 personnel, including 600 officers and enlisted men of the Chemical Warfare Service, worked around the clock to convert fruit pits and nut shells into carbon for the gas masks used by deployed Service members and their British allies.

Americans united in patriotism and dedication to the cause. In just a few short months, several states posted notices that read, "Need No More Fruit Pits; To Use Those On Hand Here As Fuel."⁸ The materials were then transferred to the Red Cross. In addition, private companies sold their supplies of tropical nut shells and peach pits, advertising them as a great fuel source. Even small children participated in the effort. Ms. Elizabeth Farson, Principal, Hamilton School, Chicago, Illinois, summarized the benefit of teaching lessons from the Peach Pit Campaign:

"The newer teaching may easily connect the collecting, scrubbing, and drying of these [peach pits] not only with arithmetic and language lessons but also with the larger lesson of social significance — What can I do to win the war? How many [S]oldiers' lives can I have the privilege of helping to save? If our room, our school, our city, [and] our Nation all work in unison in such projects, how much have all the power to do?"⁹

Ms. Farson's writing is just one example of how Americans rose to the challenge and responded to the introduction of chemical warfare with ingenuity and gusto. Through the Peach Pit Campaign, U.S. citizens rallied together in a unique and widespread common effort to save American Soldiers.

Endnotes:

¹Classified advertisement by Frank R. Jelleff, Inc., *Washington Post*, 8 September 1918.

²Ibid.

³Ibid.

⁴"Boy Scouts and Peach Pit Saving," *Christian Science Monitor*, 1 October 1918.

⁵"Little Letters," *Washington Post*, 20 October 1918.

⁶"Seeds and Nut Shells Mean Life for Troops," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 31 August 1918.

⁷The Gas Defender, 1 October 1918.

⁸El Paso Herald (El Paso, Texas), 2 December 1918, p. 8.

⁹"Peach Pit Problems," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 15 October 1918, p. 8.

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