Lancaster Farming
Antiques Center

Chef Collects Cookbooks, Canning Supplies

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ELKTON, Md. — Antique collections often begin from hobbies or career interests.

Such is the case of James Coffey, who has more than 3,000 "old" cookbooks and numerous canning-related antiques.

Coffey grew up watching his grandmother cook and can food from the garden. Soon his grandmother was relying on his help in the process — a job Coffey relished.

"I memorized the canning processes and the times required," Coffey said.

Although the old-fashioned method of water canning has been updated with the pressure canning process in his own kitchen, Coffey still retains the information absorbed from watching his grandmother.

His interest in baking influenced his decision to attend Baltimore International Culinary Arts. Since then, Coffey continues to work as a professional pastry chef.

He lives with his mother Mary Coffey in the Elkton community where he grew up. The two have honed a partnership in the kitchen where he cooks and his mother washes the dishes and helps with some food prep work.

When he is not in the kitchen, Coffey can be found pouring over cookbooks that he reads for pleasure or canvassing the Internet and yard sales in search of additional cookbooks to add to his collection.

Although he has some newer cookbooks, Coffey much prefers the "old" ones, especially those printed by canning companies and by Amish and Mennonite communities.

He has hundreds of pamphlets and booklets that he preserves in archival binders and files.

One of those he most values is "Handy Housekeeper" printed by Farm Journal in 1886.

In addition to recipes, the book includes articles on the art of soap making, the care of household pets, the process of butchering and canning, drying foods, and even instruction about proper manners and etiquette.

"Ask him to find a recipe or a cookbook, and he can find it immediately," his mother said. "I don't know how," she said as she shakes her head at the mass accumulation of cookbooks that can be found in every room of the house. In addition to seven bookcases, Coffey has stacks of his collection stored in boxes.

Coffey frequents yard sales, flea markets, and paper sales in search of rare finds. Finding missing copies of a series of printed cookbooks is especially rewarding to Coffey. He tries to accumulate every piece of literature published by Kerr, Ball, Altrista, Bernadin, Golden Harvest, and other canning companies, even those from Canada and Germany.
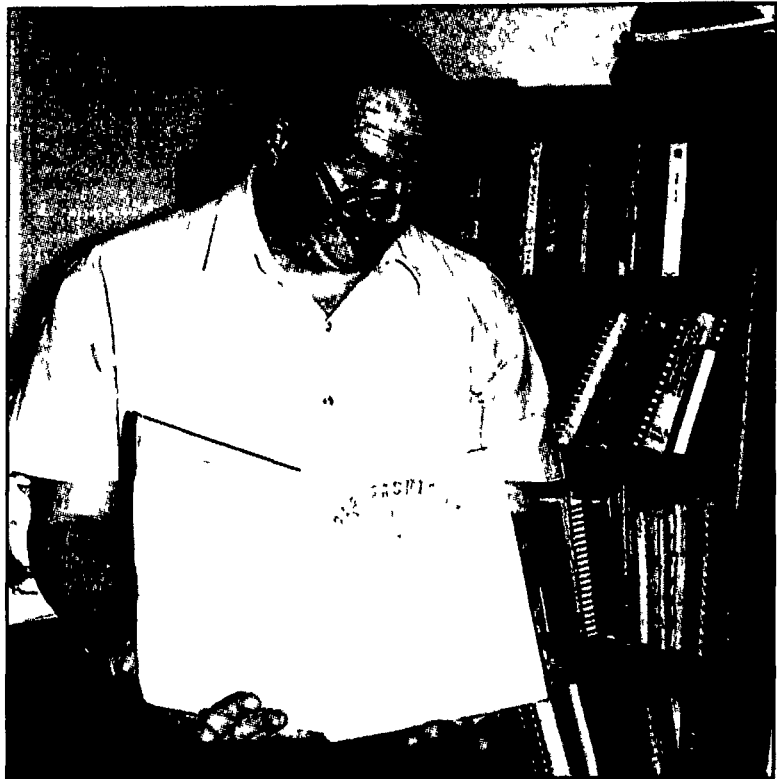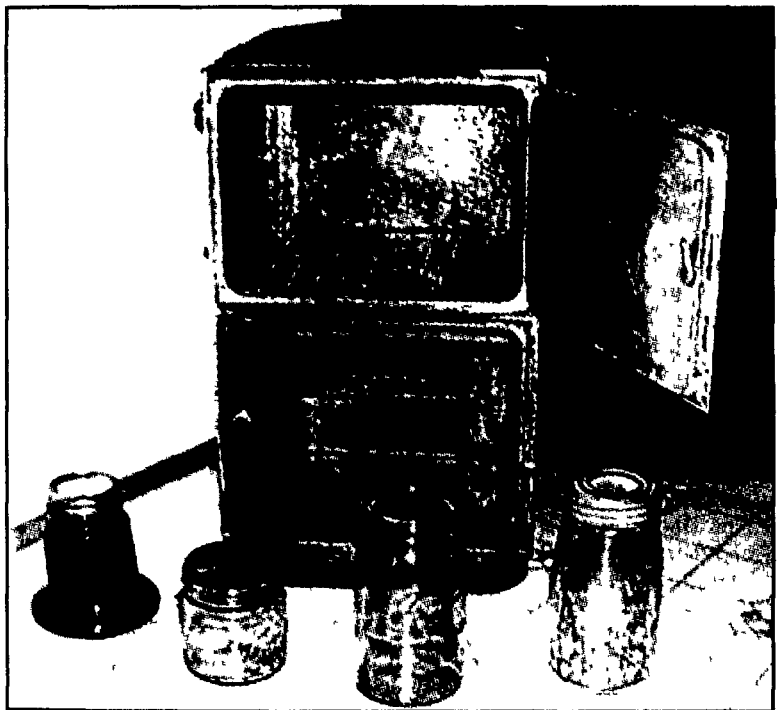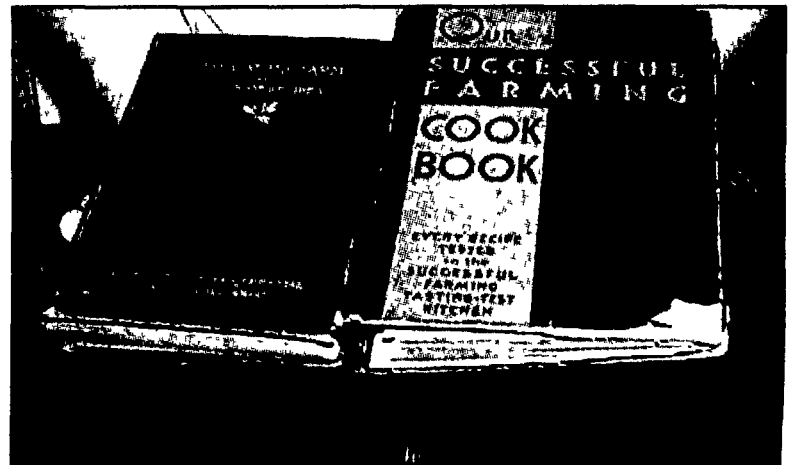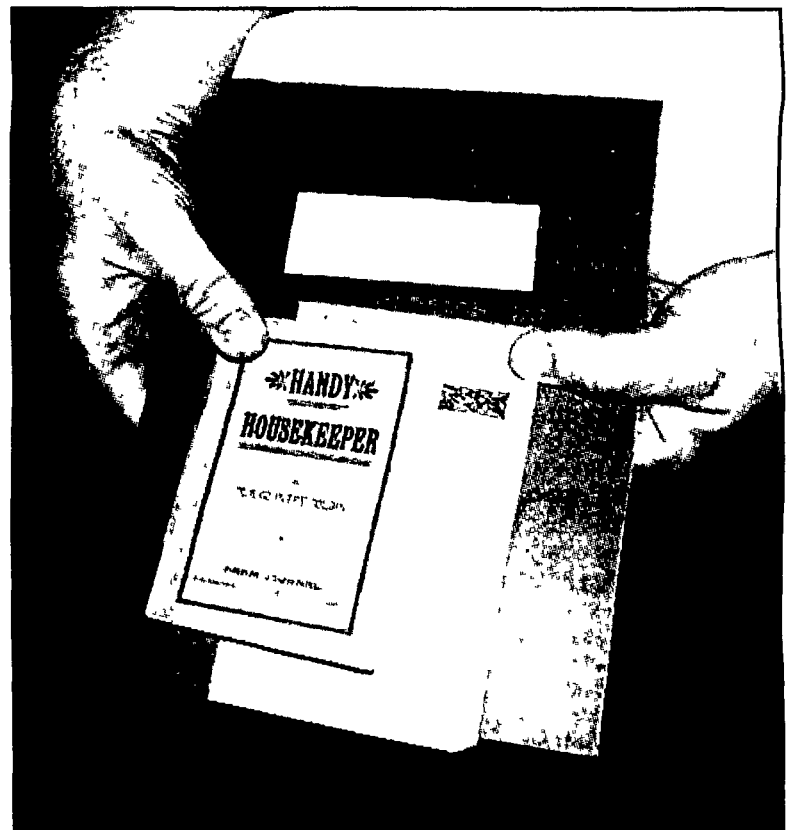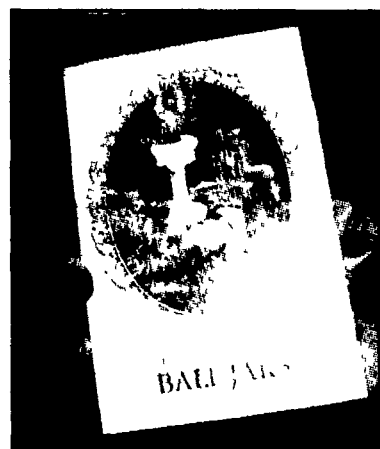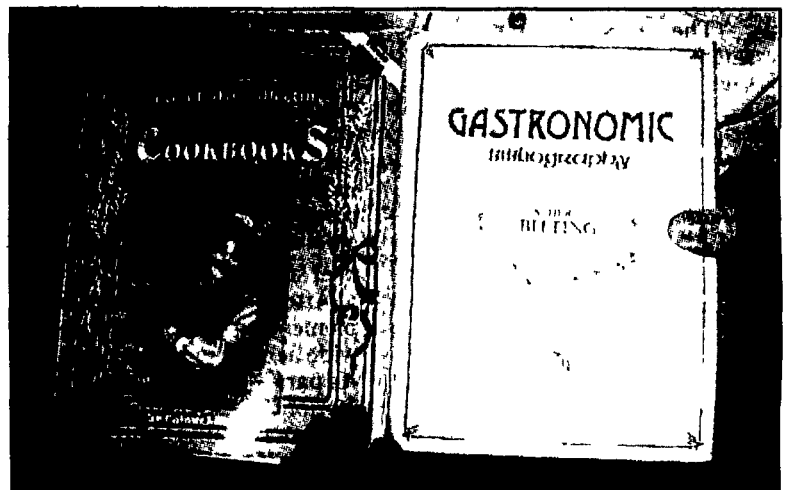

James Coffey has collected more than 3,000 cookbooks, pamplets, and brochures because he loves to study recipes and compare them with today's methods.

This old canner called a Conservo was manufactured between 1900-1920. It holds 14 quart jars. A tray in the bottom held water. The conservo was set on a stove and the water brought to a boil in order to process the food inside the jar. Although this method is no longer recommended or considered safe, it helps show a part of household history. Surrounding the Conservo are some old jars Coffey has collected: a Kerr economy jar with original clamp lid from 1903, a limited-edition Kerr Liberty Bell jar manufactured for America's Bicentennial, and a Ball standard jar, which required a wax seal in the early 1900s.

Early Ball and Kerr books were printed in 1909.

At left is a copy of ""Mary at the Farm, 1915, and "Our Successful Farming Cookbook," 1932.

In 1886, "Farm Journal" published the Handy Housekeeper, which Coffey preserves in an archival binder.

Coffey uses these books to help him determine prices and history of his collection: "Collector's Guide to Ball Jars" by William Brantley and "A Guide to Collecting Cookbooks" by Col. Bob Allen.

"Gastronomic Bibliography" by Katherine Bitting was printed in 1939 and reprinted in 1981. The cookbook author gave Coffey her personal copy with her notes, because she wanted her private collection preserved by a Kerr collector.