

[Originally posted here](#) in response to a query about why Americans must can everything, even bread dough.

Canning has a long tradition in America, going back to the colonization of the east coast and later of the west, where isolated farmhouses might go weeks without access to a dry goods store and had no access at all to fresh food in the winter (barring winter hunting, which could not get you fruits and veg). Canning was a common practice to make sure you had some kind of plant food to survive the winter months.

During the early 20th century, when industrialized food preservation and production was picking up -- especially because long-term preservation was necessary for feeding troops in combat -- canned food became commonplace, including in poor urban areas where refrigeration wasn't available. Canned meat, because of mass production, might be more available and less costly than fresh meat, and would certainly last longer. It's now considered subpar to easily available fresh meat, but many people still have a can in their pantry or two, just in case, and canned tuna is a quite popular way to keep fresh cooked fish around for snacking without dealing with the smell.

For households with two working parents or with only one parent, canned food was a convenient way to stock the larder for the week and still be able to provide your family with a decent meal. During the war, women who worked during the day and had a husband off in combat, or had a husband who had died in combat, still had to come home and feed their families. They had to do this without the eight hours a day they normally had to shop, prepare, and cook a meal -- and do the laundry, and clean the home, and the million other unpaid labor activities that are always overlooked in homemakers and took a lot longer before industrialization.

After WWII, canned food was a major sub-industry because of all this, but with improved shipping speeds and preservation methods, it was also on the decline as an in-demand product. Americans across the country started getting seasonal fruit and veg year-round, which put the demand for canned food, sold next to said fresh food, on the decline. Marketing offices for canned food producers turned to aggressively marketing quick-cook recipes as a method of selling more product.

If you can empty a can of condensed cream-of-mushroom soup into a dish instead of chopping and sauteeing fresh mushrooms and adding a cream-soup base, you'd save at least forty to fifty minutes of your time, you wouldn't have to worry about buying mushrooms and cream -- neither of which keep long, even in refrigeration -- and you'd get a meal that was still pretty tasty. Particularly for baby boomers, who were raised on this method of cooking, it's a totally normal flavor in prepared food. Keeping a can of cream-of-mushroom soup in the pantry was standard, and when I was a child in the 1980s we used them in our house with regularity. The only reason I don't keep one in my own pantry is that I have a dry soup mix that just requires adding mushrooms, and I have pre-chopped mushrooms available to me within two blocks of my apartment, plus the time, money, and able-bodiedness to procure them. You can get five or six cans of cream of mushroom soup for the cost of a pint of cream and a container of mushrooms, and you don't have to walk from the veg aisle on one side of the store to the dairy aisle, usually on the opposite side.

Also in the 1950s, canned food was a common stockpile item against nuclear winter. Cold-war thinking bred two generations, the Baby Boomers and the older GenXers, who wanted lots of food on hand in case we ended up nuked by Russia. Preparation for the Cold War is likely the reason that people freak out about natural disasters and end up buying tons of fresh food, because those two generations were indoctrinated into the idea that any disaster means lack of available food.

And canned food in the pantry means if you get home at the end of the day and you're exhausted, you don't have to drive to a supermarket -- remember that in the US there are very few corner groceries outside of major urban areas anymore, and many urban areas contain "food deserts" with no groceries at all. You can open a can, pour it into a pot, maybe dress it up a little, and have a decent hot meal. Making baked beans from dried beans, if you don't have a pressure cooker, takes hours even if you do have a slow cooker; making baked beans from a can takes 30 minutes if you have plain canned beans (this also requires some form of sauce, plus brown sugar or molasses and seasonings) or 10 minutes if you have canned pork and beans, which might enjoy some added mustard and bbq sauce but don't require them. And it's a reasonably nutritious, filling meal.

Canned bread dough has to be refrigerated. It's a sub-luxury food -- it's cheap and convenient but still needs to be bought relatively fresh and requires some, but not much, labor to prepare. It's a nice dressing on the table if you have extra energy, or a fun meal to make with your family that doesn't involve hours in the kitchen. Rolling little sausages up in Pilsbury dough takes maybe half an hour, but it doesn't take the hour and a half to two hours it would if you had to make the dough from scratch. And in our culture where "quick cook" is aggressively marketed to sell convenience foods, there's some competition to be had in terms of who can come up with the most imaginative use of this food -- what's the best thing to stuff into the bread, how do you cope best with the triangular shape. How delicious can you make this essentially convenience food?

So, in short (too late) canned food in this country arises from need and continues to cater to it, influenced by a combination of Madison Avenue, the military-industrial complex, and the shrinking quality of life for the middle and working class.