



Eight year old Craig Jones shows off some of the eggs laid by the family's chickens, as he is backed up by his proud mother, Helena Jones, and his three year old brother, Darren.

PHOTO BY BILL HESS

Ambler-grown vegetables grace tables

By Bill Hess

Tuscarora Times Staff

It is lunchtime in the home of John Topkok, 37, a city plant manager, and he is about to serve lunch to his guest. He breaks eggs, fresh eggs with brown shells not yet a day old, and scrambles them in a frying pan.

Along with the eggs comes up some patties made of soy beans and other vegetables, which look and even taste somewhat like meat.

"Would you like some fresh onions?" Topkok asks his guest, then disappears out the door. He reappears soon with fresh green onions, just now pulled from his garden. They are good. "How about some lettuce?" Would you like some lettuce?" he asks. Topkok is up from the table, goes to a cupboard which serves as a stool, and heads toward the south wall of his tiny one-room home, which he built himself.

There, sitting on a shelf, is a tiny refrigerator, with one can of corn in it. But Topkok does not use it. He is a vegetarian, and he does not eat meat, fish, or eggs.

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Growing in his garden are lettuce, are tomatoes, pepper,

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Honey bees, chickens become commonplace

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and other plant foods, including what is probably the only lemon tree in the Arctic.

It is a dwarf lemon tree, and was almost dead when it arrived in the mail at Ambler. Now, a tiny lemon not as big as a kidney bean grows, and Topkok hopes for its survival.

Next, Topkok offers his hungry and obliging visitor some rye crackers. "Do you like honey?" he asks, offering a jar. Gratefully, the visitor accepts, and with a butter-knife smears the sweet spread across the cracker. He does so under the watch of a gigantic honey bee, wings spread

apart, diagrammed in a large poster hanging on the wall off to his left.

This jar of honey came from the store, but before long, Topkok plans to be spreading his crackers with honey made right here in Ambler, a few yards from his house, by his own bees.

Topkok takes his gardening and bee-keeping seriously. After studying the Bible, he concluded that he ought to follow a diet similar to that which that book says that two people named Adam and Eve did when they lived in the Garden of Eden. No meat.

Topkok, who could be the only Inupiat vegetarian

around, eats no fish or meat, but has found room in his diet for an occasional egg. He eats no processed sugar, so the 20 to 30 pounds of honey which he expects to reap from his bees will be most welcome.

"Last year, Ambler received about \$60,000 for a garden-experiment project," he mentions a Maunillaq-run program. "About eight or nine hives were ordered. Of course, they didn't keep any through the winter." Too cold.

Ambler can go past -70 degrees, and spend months below zero. In that climate, bees would quickly consume all of their honey as they attempted

to warm their hut, and would eventually die.

"Several of us ordered our bees together this year. When the bees arrived here May 4, it was still too cold. Some of mine tried to go out and died in the snow. I lost about 2,000 to 3,000 bees! I put the rest, about 9,000, in the greenhouse."

Topkok figures that with reproduction, he now has about 20,000 bees. The workers among those are busy flying about the community, gathering pollen and nectar, and risking their lives among children who have never had honey bees to play with before, and now, like other

American children, have a new creature to toady with.

Topkok plans to defy conventional logic about bees in the Arctic. He intends to keep his hive through the winter. "I'll put them in a box underground," he says. "I'll put a light down there to help keep them warm." Topkok may not eat sugar, but to insure that his bees do not eat all the honey they have produced, he plans to feed them sugar water.

Besides keeping bees alive through the winter, there are other problems associated with Arctic bee-keeping. Katherine Devereaux, the agricultural coordinator for Maunillaq, notes that when bees were first brought to the Arctic, they came on Wien jets, along with special feeders.

Those feeders broke because of cabin pressure and the plane had to make an early landing. Then the bees which had been able to escape from their containers worked their way into the passenger cabins, and the plane had to be evacuated until the bees could be cleared out. Wien now refuses to transport bees to the Arctic, and they must come up on other airlines.

A short distance down the street from Topkoks, eight-year-old Craig Jones dons some coveralls, strolls past a gigantic sled dog chained to a tree, takes a bucket full of feed and crawls into a plastic-topped, wire cage. Inside, some 20 chickens cackle their delight at his approach, for that means dinner.

"We started off last year with 30 chickens," explains his mother, Helena. "Now we have 24." Not bad after an Arctic winter. Helena's husband Scott, an aircraft mechanic, built an underground pen. Some of the chickens were kept there, and some stayed in the pen, exposed to the cold. "The ones outside did better than the ones in the ground," Helena muses. "The ones inside picked at each other too much."

The Jones have had a lot of eggs to eat. "The most we every have gotten in a day is 19," Helena explains. "The least is 10." She claims that their eggs are much better than any that can be bought from the store, because they are much fresher.

They are also much cheaper. Storebought eggs in Ambler cost about \$2.50 a dozen. Still, a family can get tired of too many eggs. The Jones sell eggs at \$2 a dozen, and even give some away.

The eggs which John Topkok served up came from the Jones' chicken coop. Raising chickens in remote Ambler can prove challenging at times. Fifty to 100 pounds of feed must be flown in every two weeks, and scheduled flights do not always make it into Ambler. Last winter, the chickens sometimes ate dogfood, which they like fine.



John Topkok and his bees.

Photos by Bill Hess

"They eat mosquitoes, too," Helena notes as a cloud of this type of chicken feed swarms around her, her children, and her guests, offended by the Cutters repellent which has been smeared across all exposed skin. Summertime in Ambler, there are plenty of mosquitoes for chickens to eat.

Art Douglas has neither chickens nor bees, but he does have a garden. Last year, he harvested 200 pounds of turnips and generous amounts of potatoes, cabbage, lettuce, and other goods. He and his wife, children and grandchildren were able to feed off of the harvest until January.

Unlike Topkok, Douglas is a meat-eater. Although he sometimes works as a Jade carver for NANA, subsistence hunting, trapping and fishing provides him and his family with their livelihood.

Yet gardening is nothing new to Douglas. His parents had him watering plants in Shungnak when he was just a small boy. It is not that much work, he says, and the harvest is well worth it. "Sometimes when my wife picks blueberries we cut up cabbage with them. Man! They're good! Turnips. When we have seal oil, we cut the turnips up in it. That is good!"

Although Douglas would be gardening whether Maniilaq was operating an agricultural program or not, he appreciates being able to buy starts already for transplanting, and having a roto-tiller to turn the earth with, instead of having to do it all by hand.

Nellie Johnson started her
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Mayor John Blower plants his gardens for the fun of seeing what will grow in the Arctic. If this corn makes it, the news would shock many a Kansas farmer.

Ambler gardens add to food chain

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garden in 1972. "My dad wanted me to make a garden, so I did. He saw other people eating fresh vegetables. He wanted some too." The garden which Nellie grew was by her parents. This year, she has one there again. Only her mother is left now, and she has started one by her home for herself and her small children.

It is work to keep a garden up. Nellie must haul water from a distant well, and there is weeding to be done. Last year, she says the mice harvested her potatoes. But she enjoys it. She is proud of the garden she and her mother put in but does not think her own is doing too good. "It's the first year," she explains. "Next year, it'll be better."

John Blower is the mayor of Ambler, and a long-time gardener. "Well, I'm just seeing

what grows," he says as he walks past some young corn stalks growing a short distance away from potatoes, broccoli, cauliflower, peas, experimental melons and much, much more. "I'm not in it for money or anything else. I just want to see what grows. I just want to be able to say I've grown corn and tomatoes above the Arctic Circle."

The obvious care which has gone into the well-weeded rows belies his nonchalant attitude. Blower obviously loves his garden. "It's a good hobby," he says. "A healthful hobby. I think it can add a lot more to the foodchain people have around here."

A mosquito on Blower's left chin grows fat with blood, but Blower seems oblivious to it. It is hot, and thunderheads growl in the distance. "We sure need some rain," he muses. "I don't irrigate, I just rely on

nature. Sometimes that well water is so cold it does the plants more damage than good."

Blower has spent a good deal of time studying information put out by the University of Alaska on cold-country gardening. He recommends anyone interested in Arctic farming do the same. "No use wasting your time on things that won't grow."

"I've read all the books. You can't always believe the books." Chief among the problems Blower faces is rodents, mainly rabbits and vole-mice, eating his potatoes, carrots, turnips, broccoli, and whatever they want.

"Rabbits love broccoli," he explains. "Arctic broccoli is fabulous." He steps through the gate of his garden fence. The fence was not meant to keep rabbits out, he claims.

"Rabbits don't bother me. Hell, they've got to eat, too!"