



Look! Ovens!

As you can see, there were two ovens on site here at Camp DuBois. Lewis and Clark's party couldn't just run down to the grocery store for bread, so it is likely that they built an oven very much like one of these to bake their bread in when they stayed here through the winter. Really old ovens like this are still in use in Quebec, Canada!

What They're Made Of

Both of these ovens are *cob* ovens. They may look slightly different, but they are both built the same way. First we built the base out of stone one of our friends brought us from their creek. On top of that, we wove a framework of thin branches, almost like a basket. The frame was covered with fabric to keep the cob from falling through when we put it on.

Cob is a mixture of clay, sand, and straw. That's what the domes of both these ovens are made of. We dumped all those ingredients together on a tarp and mixed them by stomping them together. It takes a lot of work and a lot of time to get the cob mixed well enough.

Once it was mixed, we pulled blobs of the cob off and patted them into blocks which we slapped onto the frame, starting with a fat row at the bottom and working up to a thinner top. The blocks of cob are smoothed together as they're put on to make a solid wall.

The bigger oven is made mostly of clay dug up right here on site. You'll notice it's kind of yellowish and maybe a little crumbly. Lewis and Clark's party would have used clay just like this that they found on site.

The cob for the smaller oven is made from clay brought to us by a friend from Fort Wayne, Indiana. It is very clean, pure blue clay that makes a slightly less crumbly cob when it's all mixed up and dried.

Cob is not waterproof, so the Lewis and Clark expedition would have probably built a small A-shaped roof over their oven. We have plans to build a shelter, too!

How They Are Used

You've probably noticed that the bigger oven is pretty plain. That's because it's a production oven. We bake a lot of bread in it—sometimes a hundred pounds in one day! To make it hot enough to bake in, we build a fire inside and let it burn for a long time to heat the oven all the way through. Then we rake the fire out. The heat from the fire has been stored in the oven walls and roof and floor and it radiates back out to bake the bread.

Once we've raked the fire out, we seal the opening with a door to keep all that heat in. At this point, the oven is too hot; if we put bread in, it would burn. We wait until someone who has some experience can hold their hand in the throat of the oven to a count of three without having to yank their hand back out because it's too hot.

When the temperature is right, we swab the floor with a wet mop to clean it and cool the floor just a little. Then we put the raw bread loaves on a flat wooden board with a handle, called a peel, and slide them into the oven, shuffling them off the peel right onto the floor! Swoosh! Then the door gets shoved into place and braced to keep it from accidentally coming open. Soon, the scent of bread comes wafting out! When it's done, we take it back out with the peel.

The smaller oven took some damage last winter, but will be rebuilt as soon as we manage to build a roof to protect the ovens. It will bake bread pretty much the same as the big boring one. It can also be used with the fire pushed to the back and the door off to bake pizzas and pretzels. Someone has to stand in front of it while those are baking and keep moving them, or they'll burn. You can't bake bread like that, though. It would burn on the outside long before it was baked inside.

Come Visit!

We often bake during Rendezvous. Come back to see us in action and eat some bread!

