"MEAT ON THE TABLE"

(THE OLD FASHIONED WAY)

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By
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Selecting a topic for an Athenaeum paper is never an easy task. By the very definition of our Society, a paper should inform and expand the knowledge and understanding of our members. But on the other hand, many of us could easily be taken to task on this count when presenting the fruits of our labor to the Society. I, myself, have been guilty of this on more than one occasion by relying on, what is to me, the magic of history and nostalgia. So it is again tonight, as I delve into what is a quickly dying annual activity for many in our area, as well as much of America.

For you see, it is in this season that, in the rural districts of Kentucky, an annual event of great importance in the life of the farm took place. If James Whitcomb Riley had been born in our fair Commonwealth rather than Indiana, I think that **"When the Frost is on the Pumpkin"** might never have been written. Rather, I picture him putting pen to paper and writing a poem extoling the glories of hog killing time.

I was first exposed to the results of an old fashioned hog killing at a very young age. A fine country ham aged, processed and purchased from one of the many farmers who frequented my family's store, was served with much pride in our home each Thanksgiving and Christmas. Another experience was when the local farmers would bring their cut pork to the store to be ground into sausage rather that grinding it by hand at home. I still recall the great "to-do" made by the farmers as they made sure their mixture of sage, salt, brown sugar, black and red pepper was just right. The grinding and seasoning of the sausage was always done under the producers watchful eye.

But alas, time and adolescence pushed these experiences to the back recesses of my mind. By the mid-seventies I had read many accounts of a hog killing and the related activities but had never experienced them first hand. Then late one November as I was traveling out the Dawson Springs Road, I spied three

hogs hanging in a roadside farm lot. Unable to resist, I stopped and was welcomed to observe the process for a while. Since this introduction, I have been able to witness most of this event in various stages.

I have over the past several months spoken to several old-timers and as well a surprising number of younger folks concerning this home processing of hogs. I realize that many of you have taken part in this activity in your younger days and would be much more qualified to address the subject than I, but I beg you to indulge me as I relay the facts that I have gleaned them from my research.

In the early days many farmers left their hogs on the loose. These animals were allowed to roam free most of the year feeding from the mast in the forest. Each farmer would mark or "brand" his animals with markings cut into the ear of the hog. The practice of allowing hogs to feed on the mast of the forest was much more prevalent in the mountain regions of our state. The type of natural diet these hogs consumed determined much about how suitable the animal might be for slaughter. For example, hogs fattened on chestnuts had the sweetest meat. However, instead of rendering good white lard, the fat of these animals usually boiled down to a dark oil. Acorns made the meat taste bitter and also altered the consistency of the fat. For these reasons, hogs that were to be slaughtered were usually brought to the farms where they were penned and given an exclusive corn diet. No Kentucky thoroughbred was treated with more distinguished consideration. To eat and grow fat was the sole end of the hog's existence for the next few weeks. A corn-fed hog can take on 150 pounds in seventy days, a gain of more than two pounds a day. This corn diet removed any bitterness from the meat and softened the fat properly for rendering high quality lard. It was often stated to me that the most ideal weight for a hog before slaughtering was between 180 and 260 pounds. If the weight exceeded 300 pounds there was too much fat on the lean cuts of the hog.

Country hog-killings, like the old fashion husking-bees or house-raisings were often neighborhood affairs which generated interest and talk for days in

advance. Some neighborhoods would have a central slaughtering place to begin the long task of killing and processing the hogs. The farmer and his boys would make frequent trips to the pens with friends and neighbors to speculate about the amount of lard each porker might yield and the weight of the hams. As often as not, the phase of the moon was a prime consideration when making plans for the big event. (Though I must admit there were many conflicting ideas expressed concerning exactly where the moon should be to get the finest results for one's labors.)

Preparations for the event usually began several days in advance of what was perceived to be a suitable stretch of cool weather. Putting up scaffolding, sharpening knives, preparing a scalding barrel or trough, preparing kettles and building the heap of firewood that would be needed were only a few of the tasks to be completed. On the day that the grand event was scheduled, work began several hours before sunrise. The first task was to ready the scalding tank. This was accomplished in several different ways depending upon the resources available to a family. Sometimes a trough was dug for a fire and a metal trough or huge kettle was placed over the fire. Other families simply used a barrel and heated the water by placing hot rocks or metal strips in it. Ashes were often added to the water to help loosen the hair. Regardless of what method was employed, everyone I spoke to stressed the importance of properly scalding and scrapping the hog. Sometimes, despite ones best efforts, a poor scald would result. In these cases the hair had to be cut off portions of the hog rather that pulled out. People always apologized for meat that had hair that had been cut. This was considered a shame by many families and would never have been served to guests or sold at market.

While the water was heating, the porkers would be slaughtered. This was usually done by shooting the animal in the head or delivering a fatal blow to the back of his head. Next, the animal would have his throat slit and he would be hung on a tripod or pole to bleed. The hog was usually hung by placing a strong

stick or hook through the lower portion of his back legs and catching the leaders or tendons. The head was, as often as not, completely removed at this stage of the processing and saved for the making of headcheese at a later time. (One of my informants spoke of saving the blood to make blood sausage.)

After hanging the hog and while the blood was draining the hog was gutted. This was accomplished by making one long deep cut down the underside of the pig from his throat to the crotch. Great care is taken not to cut the membrane holding the intestines. The hog's large intestine are cut loose from his body and securely tied shut. At this point the intestinal membrane is cut and the gullet cut completed to the base of the throat allowing the entrails to fall into a bucket or washtub placed under the hanging carcass. Usually the processing of these items was begun immediately by the ladies of the group since these items usually had to be used in short order. The carcass is then thoroughly rinsed several times to remove all traces of blood. If your hog killing is done during a neighborhood gathering these steps would be followed until everyone's hogs had been slaughtered and gutted. The carcasses were then left hanging all night to be thoroughly chilled or cooled by Mother Nature. Even today the first extended period of cool weather is often referred to as "Hog Killing Weather." The best hog killing weather will keep the temperatures between 34 and 40 degrees for several days.

The next order of the process is to take the hog and place it on a table or platform and let the best carver of the group display his artistry. The cutting operation could be performed in several ways. I shall attempt to describe the most common. Each family would have set up its own sausage pot for the lean trimmings and a lard pot for the fat trimmings. With an axe, chop all the way down both sides of the backbone as close as possible and lift out the vertebra. The meat should now fall into two pieces. (This is the method used by most of our forefathers. Today they usually saw the backbone down the middle and get pork chops and fat-back.) The tenderloin should then be removed. It lies on

either side of the backbone's cavity. Under the tenderloin is the fat-back which is usually taken out to be used separately in cooking along with beans or other fresh vegtables. Remove the two sections of rib cage by slicing the mesentery between the outside of the ribs and the inside of the middlin' meat. Each section should come out in one piece.

These steps completed, you should next find the joints and cut the shoulders and hams off. Everything that you have left is middlin' or side meat. This thick slice of meat from each side, if cured and smoked, is the source of country bacon. You simply slice off the middlin' meat in the same direction in which the ribs originally ran. If this same cut of meat were salted and not smoked it was referred to as "streak-o-lean."

The ribs were then placed on the chopping block and cut into two inch sections and put aside to can. These spare ribs were not your city ribs, trimmed to the bone, but big fat country spare ribs containing an abundance of delicious meat.

The hams, shoulders, and middlin' are trimmed. The trimmings are put into either the lard or sausage pots and the rest is set aside for salting.

The neighbors usually left after the cutting up of the meat was finished. If the neighbors didn't have any hogs involved in the processing they still usually departed with some backbones, ribs, livers and hearts for their own use.

However, returning to one's home or the departure of the neighbors by no means meant an end to the work of a hog killing. There was sausage to be ground and seasoned, and meat to cure.

Meat was and still is cured by families in several different ways. Professional butchers would probably shudder at the apparently haphazard measurements which are used.

Hams, shoulders, middlin' meat, and sometimes the jowls were the pieces most commonly cured. These pieces were taken to the smokehouse as soon after the slaughter as possible - preferably while the meat was still warm but never

more than twenty-four hours later.

On some farms, smokehouses were constructed of two to three inch slats with a three-quarter inch crack between each slat. It was not uncommon in the spring to see a smokehouse with gray smoke bellowing out the sides. Other folks preferred a sealed smokehouse, usually a log structure chinked with mud. This type of structure helped keep out the insects and kept the meat cool in hot weather and from freezing in the winter. This is the type of smokehouse most often found in Western Kentucky.

The meat taken to the smokehouse was thoroughly salted with coarse meat salt, then was allowed to "take the salt." The mixture of the salt and the amount used varied widely from family to family and from region to region. Recipes range from using five pounds of salt per hundred weight to more than twenty pounds. Additional ingredients might include black pepper, molasses, sugar, honey and red pepper. Many people preferred setting the salted meat on a shelf so it could get good ventilation while others left the meat covered by salt in a rat-proof salt-box or barrel. These cuts were left salted for three to six weeks depending on the weather.

When the weather began to get warm, usually in mid-spring, the second phase of the operation began on the meat. The meat was taken out of the salt mix and thoroughly washed. It was then rubbed with another mixture which usually included peppers and sometimes a sweetener. Borax or saltpeter was often added to keep out the skippers or the larva of the skipper fly. Corn or corn meal was sometimes used to help draw out the salt and to keep the meat from tasting strong. Meat was then bagged and hung high in the smokehouse.

At this point the meat was basically cured. Many, however preferred the taste of smoked meat. Obviously, a fire was needed to provide the desired flavor. If the smokehouse had a dirt floor the fire was built on the floor; otherwise, it was built in a washtub or pot set in the middle of the floor. The fire itself was made of small green chips of hickory or oak, pieces of hickory bark,

or corncobs in some cases. Using this fuel the smoke was kept bellowing through the building for two to ten days or until the meat took on the brown crust that was desired for its flavor and for its ability to keep flies and insects out of the meat. The temperature in the smokehouse should not top 100 degrees

The sausage grinder was a vicious machine that contained fearful knives and a heavy metal core. In the days before modern electric grinders, this chore was powered by hand. Seasoning was usually added during the second or third grinding of the sausage. In the days before refrigeration and year-round slaughtering, fresh sausage was often considered a seasonal treat. The next best alterative to fresh sausage was to can a portion of it. This was done by partially cooking the sausage and placing it, along with the grease the cooking produced, into canning jars. The jars were then capped and turned upside-down to cool. The jars were stored inverted to allow the grease to act as a seal for the canning process. The remainder of the sausage was packed into either cheese-cloth bags or cleansed sections of the small intestines and then smoked for storage. The bulk of the sausage consumed by a family was of the smoked variety.

It was often said that the only parts of a hog not used were the tail and the squeal. This was in fact possible, but I did not find this to always be the case. Many families would discard various portions of the hog which they found distasteful, or in some cases disgusting. Most of the internal organs had to be consumed shortly after slaughter because there was no suitable way to process these items for long term storage. The head, ears, brains, snout, jowls and sometimes the feet were often combined and cooked to form head-cheese or souse. These items were cleaned and soaked overnight in salt water to remove the blood. After cooking, the concoction was boned, ground and seasoned. Portions that were not eaten immediately were stored in the spring house or smokehouse where the winter weather kept it fresh. Other uses of the products might include hog's head stew, boiled tongue, or and Brains eggs.

The fat trimmings of the hog usually ended up in the lard pot. These were

usually left sitting out all night to solidify and make them easier to cut. The resulting egg sized pieces were placed in a large pot and slowly cooked to begin the rendering of the lard. This mixture must be stirred often to avoid burning the lard. After eight to ten hours the grease will have boiled out. The lard was then poured into containers, allowed to harden and used for cooking throughout the year. The residue of the fat pieces which are left are squeezed and allowed to dry. This becomes your cracklings. These were used for making cornbread and for snacking by the children. While all this doesn't exactly sound healthy, given today's knowledge about cholesterol, it made for some mighty tasty dishes during the winter months.

How could one conclude a discussion about the wonders of dining on pork products without smentioning, what I am sure someone in our group will speak of as the ultimate delicacy? Chitterlings. These were simply the intestines of our porker. They were thoroughly and repeatedly cleaned, for obvious reasons, and allowed to soak in salt water at length. There are generally two methods to prepare them for serving, fried and boiled. I have, on occasion, had them fried, but personally have never progressed past the smell when attempting to taste the boiled variety.

Yes, a good old fashioned hog killing was indeed a lot of work, but work in which the fruits of one's labors could be enjoyed in many ways. It always resulted in some mighty fine eating. Oddly enough, the farmer often didn't get to enjoy what many consider the greatest delicacy from his hogs, a country ham. There were far too many city folks willing to pay top dollar for this tasty treat. Several of the people I spoke to made mention of the fact that the hams were reserved for selling in order to provide the family with much needed cash.

While still practiced by several families in our area today, the home butchering of hogs is yet one more activity which is quickly disappearing into the annals of yesteryear. I know of one farmer in Trigg County who had his hogs hanging near his home and was spied by a passing health inspector. Thinking he

was just an interested passerby, the farmer confessed to having slaughtered the hogs himself and to curing and selling hams to augment his income. The health inspector informed him that such activities were indeed a violation of some obscure regulation. Today events such as I have related to you are all to quickly being regulated to sanitized processing plants and handled by professionals meat cutters. This is done to the point that many children in urban areas have little or no concept of just where their daily bread actually comes from.

While I do not subscribe to the theory that all would be right with the world if we could only just go back to the good old days, I do lament the passing of many activities of bygone eras. Whether these activities are a hog killing, building a log cabin, making white oak baskets, or moonshining, they are forms of artistry which are slowly dying with the passing of the generations that simply saw them as tasks required for survival. These art forms are being lost in the hurry-up and get it, so we can throw it away and replace it with something new world, that we live in today.

Hopefully, organizations, such as ours and the Historical Society, and people, like Tom and David Riley, George Boone, and William Turner, will continue to pass along stories, skills and tales about everyday people, doing everyday things, to our children and grand-children so that they may develop an understanding and appreciation for the way things were and just how they got to be so good today.

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