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Cold-Weather Event — Butchering Day

an essential activity

By Imogene Barger

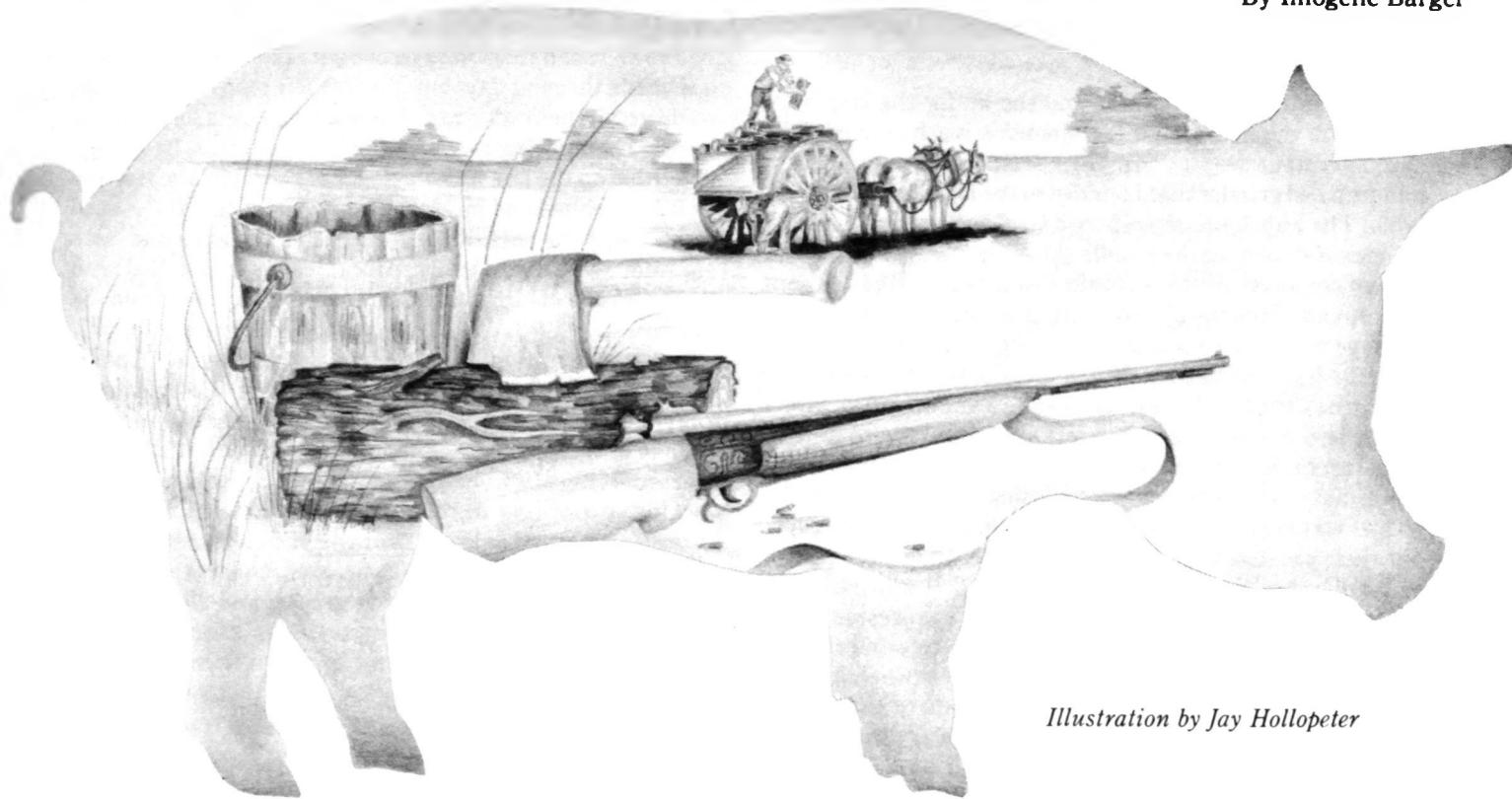


Illustration by Jay Hollopeter

I guess I could write forever and never get down all my memories. Although none of my memories are anything earthshaking, they make up the happy whole of over sixty years of living in Western Oklahoma.

I was born and grew up in those red rock hills east of Binger in Caddo County where modernization was slow to arrive and everything was done in the same old-fashioned way of our forefathers for many years.

Butchering time is high on my list of memories. All of the frying chickens had been long gone; and since there were no freezers in our part of the country (we didn't even have electricity), all the meat the family had eaten for some time had been an occasional old hen that had quit laying or some squirrel or rabbit. Therefore, everyone was looking forward to hog-killing time and having enough fresh pork to eat.

The rule of thumb was to fatten out one hog for each member of the family, the fatter and bigger the better. Some of them weighed up to six hundred pounds when they were killed. They were supposed to furnish meat for the winter and up into the spring and enough lard and soap for the whole year.

Late fall arrived and everyone was set on "go" just waiting for the weather to get cold enough so the meat wouldn't spoil. All the wood to heat the water to scalding had been cut with an axe and a crosscut saw and hauled in on a wagon pulled by a team of horses or mules. If there wasn't a suitable tree limb, a tripod of poles had been made and a pulley attached so the hogs could be pulled up to gut and split in half.

Finally the weather was just right, and hopefully the day dawned cold and clear. Butchering day had arrived at last. Early in the morning, several neighbors would gather in to help and perhaps butcher some hogs for their families. The

big butcher knives were made razor sharp, and the hard work would begin. The water was carried from the well where it had been hand pumped or drawn out with a pulley and rope with a bucket attached to it. The vat or barrel was filled, and a fire was started under them to heat the water for scalding the hogs.

The hogs would be killed one at a time, usually with a well-placed bullet from a twenty-two rifle just behind the ear. Then the throat was cut so the hog could bleed out good. Then the hog was placed on a sled or in a wagon by the men and hauled to the vat or barrel to be scalded. The vat worked better because it was larger, and a fire was kept going all the time in a trench under it so the water could be kept at the correct scalding temperature. Next, all the hair was scraped off; then the hog was hung up and its front cut open as the entrails were caught in a large wash tub. The melt was usually given to us kids, and we would put pieces of it on a stick and cook it over the open fire. By the time it was done, we had dropped it in the fire a time or two and had ashes all over it; although parts of it were charred, we ate it anyway and thought it was good. Now the hog was washed inside and out until spotlessly clean, split in half, and put on the cutting table. It was cut up and trimmed of any excess fat and bloody places. The hams, shoulders, sides, etc. were taken to the smokehouse to begin the curing process. Each family had its own particular recipe, but everyone used salt and plenty of it. Most people used brown sugar, black and red pepper, and smoke flavor. Many actually smoked the meat for several days after it had drained well. Again, each person had his own method and favorite type of wood to use, but no matter how it was done the end product was delicious.

Most of us past fifty can remember how good it was to go to the smokehouse and cut off a big slice of ham and fry it in an old iron skillet on a wood stove — also how deprived we felt when we had to take that old ham and homemade light bread to school for lunch and our wealthier classmates had “boughten” bread and bologna.

The trimmings for sausage and the fat for the lard were taken into the house, and the women's work started. The sausage meat was cut in thin strips and ground in a hand-turned grinder that fastened to the big wooden kitchen table. The kids were often put to feeding the meat into the grinder and turning the handle. After the meat was ground, it was seasoned to taste (again, each family had its own recipe, and amounts of sage, salt, and pepper varied). The sausage was either stuffed into casings made from muslin, usually flour or salt sacks, or into casings made from intestines that had been cleaned, washed, and scraped inside and out with a dull knife until they were almost translucent. It took someone with a strong stomach to clean them, but they were very clean when finished. A special gadget was required for stuffing the casings, so most people put their sausage in the cloth bags. Later in the year if the sausage began to get strong, it was canned. It was fried, put in fruit jars, covered with melted lard, and processed.

The lard was cut in to little squares to be rendered the next day. It was done outside in the old iron kettle that was a must for every household. It was cooked slowly and stirred often to keep it from burning. It was finished when all the grease had cooked out of the fat squares and nothing was left of them but little crispy golden-brown cracklings. It was strained in to lard cans, allowed to cool and then stored in a cool place. If it had been cooked right, it was snow white.

Some of the cracklings were saved to make crackling cornbread or munchies for the kids. The rest were used to make soap. There were several kinds of lye soap; some of it was so strong and yellow that it nearly ate holes in a person's skin. Some was so white and mild that it was as good as any soap that could be bought. The soap didn't have to be made the next day; but if it was left many weeks, bugs would get in the cracklings. The soap was used for washing clothes, shampooing hair, and sometimes even as bath soap.

Nothing on the hog was wasted. For example, the feet and tail were cleaned and pickled. The jowl was cut off the head to cure, and the rest of the head, after the eyes had been removed, was boiled and souse meat (sometimes called head cheese) was made from the meat after it was taken from the bones.

Dinner (town people's lunch) on butchering day always consisted of fresh tenderloin and liver, mashed potatoes, gravy, hot biscuits, some kind of dessert, and whatever else the lady of the house brought out of her well-stocked cellar. Everyone thoroughly enjoyed the meal because besides working all morning and being tired, it had been a long time since everyone had enjoyed the taste of fresh pork.

By the time everything was done, everyone was sick of the smell of wet hog hair, blood, hot grease, and all the other smells of butchering day. Everyone was exhausted, but there was a contented feeling because there was the assurance that the family would eat well that winter. ❶

IMOGENE BARGER, a farm wife, lives near Lookeba in Caddo County not many miles from the place she was born. Her interests, in addition to her family, include writing, local history, genealogy, reading, sewing, and crocheting.

not for the lazy and sluggish

COUNTRY PEOPLE

By Fanny Dodgen

FANNY DODGEN has lived in Weatherford most of her life. A former teacher, she now does free-lance writing and photography and keeps busy with a variety of avocations — including the distribution of a popular weight-loss product.

Greet the rosy haze of light
 Eat hearty breakfasts of biscuits, eggs,
 sausage
 Unlatch barn doors at dawn
 Harness a palamino for a jaunt
 Cross cool streams in spring
 Walk tree-lined lanes in early morn
 Seek purple violets on creek banks
 Crumble soft, brown earth for planting
 Spread thorny berry vines to grasp dark juicy
 fruit
 Break ice on ponds at winter daybreak
 Squirt streams of warm milk into the mouth of
 a waiting cat
 Peel hulls from frosted pecans
 Gather around the fireplace for devotions in
 evenings
 Climb into bed for a restful night.