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## The Simple Delights Of Hog Killin' Day

*Watch out w'en youer gittin' al you  
want. Fattenin' hogs ain't in luck.*

*---Uncle Remus*

When winter has chilled the air, the down-country fancier of brown sausage cakes and good pork "tenderlin" knows it is "hog killin" weather. Only the wrong stage of the moon or a brief reprise of Indian summer can keep the butcher knife away from the emery stone.

With the first clear, brisk morning of a winter cold snap, the neighbors and some of the kinfolk arrive after breakfast. Black cast iron cauldrons and well-scrubbed scalding boards have stood ready for several days. Gaunt cedar and pine witness the mauling, the sticking, the bleeding. Crackling-like oak leaves survive here and there on tree branches soon to sag with the weight of corn-fattened hogs.

Except for the hogs, everything has seemed to anticipate butchering day. Even on their last morning alive, these heavy-jowled barrows and sows have grunted passively, grinding away at corn they will not digest.

As with the doomed hogs in the fattening pen, a dominance of stomach over mind is the schoolboy's response on first catching the aroma of supper on the evening air. After a hard day of memorizing multiplication tables and states and capitals and staying out of trouble with an all-grades, one-room school mistress, the boy's mind is no longer troubled by thoughts of the marked hogs, except as browning cakes of pork sausage and tenderloin sputtering and popping in the frying pan.

The men are still hacksawing bones, chopping up ribs, saltcuring slabs of bacon, "sow belly," or jowl and hanging hams, shoulders, and middlings of meat in the smokehouse for the slow curing of hickory smoke. The womenfolk are stripping fat from tubs and pails of entrails and organs, rendering the lard from these and the meat skins. Superstitiously, the spongy "lights" -- or lungs -- of the hogs are hung up out-of-doors, away from livestock. If the schoolboy helps with the chores, runs errands from smokehouse to kitchen, or just agrees to stay out of the way, he may be rewarded with the present of a hog bladder. Fitted with an oat straw, the bladder serves passably well as a toy balloon.

Indoors, coal oil lamps have been lit for some while. Lanterns light the work outside. Darkness comes early on a winter evening. On its way from woodrange to oil-cloth, supper gives the kitchen a spicy aroma: fresh, fried pork, sausage gravy, kraut, wheat biscuits, cornbread, steaming mugs of coffee, and tumblers with sweetmilk or buttermilk as chill as the cellar from which the butter comes. Canned greenbeans, corn or turnip greens add color and variety. Apple cobbler or an open-faced cream pie rounds out the feast.

Before they leave, relatives and neighbors set times when those whose hogs have been butchered can swap work with them. One by one they go, carrying parcels of fresh meat home with them. Someone has been "tickled" to take pigs feet, tail, ears, and several other delicacies passed up by everyone else. This good soul can find more nourishment in a soup bone marrow than most folk find enclosing the bone.

Modern and perhaps more satisfactory means of slaughter and preservation have made their inroads upon a peculiarly country custom, but hog killin' day with all its simple pleasures comes back as fresh as memory and crisp cold days of winter.

W.D. Haden