Back In 'Boucherie' Days

THE FIRST COLD SNAP to hit the Southland brings a nostalgic feeling for many of the French families of Southwest Louisiana. Back come the memories of the "boucherie du voisin," a custom which has almost passed out of existence. The "boucherie" of old was the farmers' answer to high meat prices, lack of deep freeze units, or other modern conveniences.

The boucheries were held at intervals, spaced according to the length of time the fresh meat lasted, thus insuring the neighborhood of a supply of fresh meats all winter. They were conducted by a voisinage (neighborhood) of about 15 families. The first of the series was always the one whose hog was the fattest. These hogs were fattened in small pens during the fall when beans, corn, and potatoes were plentiful.

On the day of the neighborhood boucherie, the family acting as host for that day arose long before dawn to build the fires around the huge cast iron kettles, filled with water to be used in scalding the hogs. I loved the excitement prevailing because of getting up at the unusual hour, and would gladly scamper about to procure additional scraps of wood to make the fire burn more brightly.

The neighbors were invited according to their skill in the art of butchering, it being understood from time immemorial that they would inherit a lion's share of the day's produce. Hence, it was considered quite an honor to be invited to participate in spite of the hard work entailed.

By the time the water in the huge kettles was hot, the neighboring farmers were there, sharpening their knives—and their wits, for the jokes told in French flew glibly from their tongues as the knives flew over the stones used to sharpen them.

The men caught and stuck the pigs, and their cries were the signal for all to be in readiness. The bowls, with a pinch of salt in the bottom, were brought quickly to catch the blood oozing out of the gash in the hog's throat, forced out in order to make the meat better and also provide blood for use in making that rare delicacy known as "boudin" (blood pudding). Then the hot water was used to remove all hair from the skin until it was smooth and white. The most skillful butcher was selected to slit the skin right down the center, the pig lying on its back with feet held by the helpful hands of children eager for the first glimpse of the inside.
The women were divided into two squads of workers; one inside the house to prepare the noonday meal for all hands, the other outside to clean the entrails for sausage casings and the stomach for "gang," both of which were filled with highly seasoned ground meat.

The fat of the pig was sliced into long strips then cut into squares called gratons or cracklings. The farmer got his yearly supply of lard by cooking these fatty squares in the same large kettles in which the water was heated.

The smokehouse where the hams were cured, the deep barrels filled with brine and layer upon layer of meat salted away, and the long rods filled with sausage in the coolest part of the kitchen, where they cured slowly—all these took the place of the present-day freeze units.

To the children was given the job of running errands, the most important of which was to go to each neighbor's house with his "morceau du voisin," (neighbor's piece) after the final phase of the boucherie was completed. The division of the meat was not as complicated as one might imagine. These old-timers simply made mental notes of the pieces which they had received from the neighbors from by-gone boucheries, and to the best of their ability, they returned a like amount and identical cut.—Contributed by Mrs. L. F. PLAUCHÉ, 121 Maple ave., Houma, La.

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