Boucherie shows off traditional methods

BY ERNEST S. BERNARD
Advocate correspondent

LAFAYETTE — It is said that the only thing the Cajuns lost when they butchered a pig was the squeal. On Saturday at Vermillionville, the living history village here, Cajuns young and old gathered to relive the ancient, traditional boucherie that is still an important part of the culture for many. “All parts of the hog were used,” said Charles Goulas, a Vermillionville craftsman. Near the blacksmith shop where Goulas is an apprentice, he stirred a big, black iron pot with an iron bladed paddle. Sizzling in the pot were the hog’s head and bones, boiling down for boudin, the sausage of meat and rice.

“Times were hard and the meat was too good to waste,” Goulas said. Goulas remembers helping at bouchers or butcheries. “I was six, eight, ten years old. A lot of the people who are here remember doing it. It brings back memories and that’s how we keep our culture alive,” he said.

On the winter-brown Kentucky blue grass between Goulas’ smithy and Harold Bernard’s weatherboard house, the men had set out wooden tables. Women and girls brought meat for boudin. Men sliced the thick skin of the pig with razor-sharp butcher knives. The chunks of skin will be deep-fried to make “gratons,” a crispy snack food. And Goulas stirred the fire under his black pot, chinking another split oak log into the blaze.

The butchering of an animal in a traditional culture is always a sign of prosperity. It was no different for the early Cajuns, Goulas said. “It was a sign that there would be meat through the winter,” he said. “So the family was happy. Life was hard then, and they endured a lot, but they were happy. The gathering of family and neighbors to ‘make the boucherie’ was about more than food. It was a lesson in how to survive.” Lessons not only in butchering and putting up food so that it wouldn’t spoil, but also about the value of work and the worth of cooperative effort.

“Everybody had a job to do, from the little kids to the grandmothers,” Goulas said. While boys collected firewood, girls might help with cooking stenias and caring for the very young. No one was allowed to stand around unoccupied.

“If one of the kids was standing around, kind of in the way, somebody would send him, find something for him. Go get this, or go bring that to the cook,” Goulas said.

Once the cooking was done, about mid-afternoon, Vermillionville guests tasted the boudin, gratons and fricasse made from the pig’s backbone.

Shirley Sonnier, a village guide, played the role of the matronly Mrs. Robichaux, guiding visitors through the 18th century home that was moved here piece by piece from Loreauville, 30 miles away.

Sonnier, taking a break from cracking the meat grinder, surveyed the scene. Her eyes settled on the men carving the hog, the visitors helping stir the pot and dodging wood smoke, the women making sausage.

“This is really living history,” she said. “Believe me, this was really very much a part of life then. They had a good time helping each other.”