Days Of Old ‘Boucheries’ Were Times Of Work, Fun

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With many of today’s farms as modern as Upper Fifth Avenue apartments and the barns and their equipment giving the appearance of a technical school, one wonders: “How many farmers today remember the days of the “boucherie” or, just plain old-fashioned “hog-killing time”?

This is the time of year when the farmer would begin to look at his hogs and consider when he would pen them up for that final “fattening before the slaughter” time in the late fall.

A boucherie was more than just a chore -- it was a way of life and as much a social gathering for friends throughout the neighborhood as it was getting the butting done.

Boucheries and the methods of slaughter varied from farm to farm but the camaraderie remained the same. (It was rumored at some killings that part of the men’s flushed faces came from spirits in a concealed bottle rather than the spirit of the occasion but -- no matter, the job was always accomplished.)

The warmth of the occasion, however, had to wait upon the coldness of the weather. In the fall of the year, farmers would begin casting their eyes skyward particularly if there were clouds, and mutter, “Maybe tomorrow.”

Pass the Word

If the next day dawned with frost on the ground, scheduled were put aside and the word was flashed from house to house that on “so and so’s” farm, a boucherie was to get underway.

No telephone or telegraph ever worked any faster than this word-of-mouth means of communications. Wagons and buggies -- later the Model T’s -- would soon be converging on the scene.

The methods of slaughtering differed — some hogs were shot, others hit in the head with an axe — but from that point on, most of the work followed a set pattern.

A heavy iron kettle or drum, filled with boiling water, was either sitting or partially buried in the ground. Into this cauldron, the hog was lowered by panting farmers who grasped the animal by the rear legs. After the upper portion of the carcass was fully scalded the process was reversed and the hog was immersed, “hind part foremost.”

Then the helpers descended upon the animal like gravity over rice. Cane knives were usually used to scrape the skin clean and then the actual butchering got underway.

Nothing was wasted — even the skin and the blood were put to good use. The most difficult task was to keep all the cracklings from being eaten on the scene rather than being saved for that winter’s cornbread and biscuits.

Potates Deux

Usually, some far-sighted individual had stacked the embers under the kettle with sweet potatoes and these were consumed along with the hot cracklins.

On some of the farms, soap was manufactured at the scene. Wood ashes and lye were added to the boiling fat to be made into strong soap that would be used in the old iron washpots, so prevalent in those days. (And woe unto him that had a scratch or rash on his hands and had to wash with that soap!)

Some boucheries took place in one day while others would take several, depending upon the size of the farm and the number of hogs. No matter, the neighbor always got his cut of meat. It wasn’t far the pay, however, that he pitched in and helped — the companionship plus the knowledge that he would be helped when his butchering time came around always took him to his neighbor’s to lend a hand.

Chitterlings, sausage, red and white boudin, cracklings, bacon hams ... all poured forth from the table set up near the scene.

While nothing surpasses the efficiency and cleanliness of today’s modern slaughter house, neither will anything erase from the minds of yesterday’s farmer the memories of the time-honored boucherie.