Where did the smoked meat tradition come from?

I've been on the road a lot these past few weeks, working at my job as a travel writer. Lately, the stories I've been writing have been about Acadiana. I can't tell you how much I have learned while being a tourist in my own backyard.

One story is about the smoked meat highway, La. 15, the Crowley-Eunice road. First of all, I found some splendid boudin in Mousea. Bobba Frey makes his own magnificence every morning. I thought it was my own, personal discovery. "Oh, Mowata," said my neighbor, "that's the famous Saturday morning boudin stop on the way to Fred's Lounge." So much for my voyage of discovery. But hey, I didn't know about Bobba's boudin.

For that matter, I didn't know much about smoked meat. Down here in New Orleans, where I buy my groceries, most of the sausage is fresh. I eat seafood more than I eat meat. Once I crossed I-10, the great smoked meat divide, everything about butcher shops was different. For one thing, everyone with a meat saw also had a smoke house in the backyard.

Bobba claims that the art of fine smoking was perfected by his German ancestors. "I learned from my great uncle, Laurence Frey. He made sausage at home. This recipe here," Frey passed some pork sausages he was stuffing, "I'm sure comes from his daddy, who came from Alsace-Lorraine. My great uncle was bi-lingual. He'd sit on the front porch and talk in German. The butcher or the cousin would answer in French. The German influence, that's where the smoking came from. I don't believe the Cajuns know how to make sausage until the Germans taught them."

That sounded like a good theory, but I couldn't always make it fit the picture. At Lafayette's Sausage Kitchen in Eunice, the Lejeune siblings, John, Ron and Tash, make the finest smoked sausage and tasso I've ever had. Their ancestry is French.

Carl Brasseaux, history professor at U.L. Lafayette, knew of the emigration of the Lejeunes to Acadiana. His studies place the family in a community between Church Point and Eunice called Pointe Seco. Their arrival is documented to coincide with the Louisiana Purchase, 1803. German families didn't arrive on the Cajun Prairie until the late 19th century.

So, where did the Lejeunes learn to smoke meat? "My gut, my best guess, is from the Indians," Brasseaux said. "We know there were Indians here who did have a smoking tradition. That was the only way to preserve meat, other than salting it, at the time. So the evolution of smoke houses right now is speculation. Certainly there is German influence. I'd call it a case of convergent traditions."

"Why don't we smoke meat much south of I-10?" I asked. "By the time the French and Acadian settlers arrived, most of the Indians had disappeared from the Teche area," was Brasseaux's answer.

My recourse on all things cooking, Marcelle Bienvenu, couldn't answer the question, either. "I've been wondering about that, myself," she replied. "If you find out anything, let me know."

So, I'm throwing this question out to the keepers of information in Acadiana. Where did the tradition of making meat come from?

My neighbor, the way tells me my curiosity will be the death of me. "Why look a gift horse in the mouth?" he asks. Why indeed, while I sit here contemplating whether I should make black-eyed peas with the old-fashioned pork and jalapeno sausage from Johnson Mercery in Eunice, or whether I should use the smoked turkey wings from Gilboy's Grocery in Pine Prairie in a gumbo, or make a two-pobo.

And then there is that chitterlings from Rabbit's, in Breaux. But I guess that's purest of a different color.

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