

“You know where your meat comes from”

— Rod Isaacson, butcher

By PHIL WRIGHT
East Oregonian

Rod Isaacson was busy Tuesday, unusual for him this time of year in the Walla Walla Valley. He slaughtered two lambs, six pigs and a small cow.

Wednesday he had just a couple of smaller hogs to butcher. Come harvest in the fall, he will slaughter around 20 beef a week, along with 15 to 20 hogs and several smaller animals.

Rod, 40, a husband and father of a 15-year-old son, can have half a hog hanging in the cold storage of the mobile slaughter trailer in 15 minutes and a beef in 45.

“There’s no butchers left,” Rod said while getting ready to hoist hogs he skinned in a small pasture off Stateline Road near Milton-Freewater. “It’s a dying breed.”

Rod has worked as a butcher more than 14 years, he said, most of that with Haun’s Meat & Sausage, just a few minutes down the road.

“When I started, there were three shops in the valley,” Rod said. “Now there’s just us.”

Rod handles the mobile slaughter end of the business, hauling everything he needs to do the work right on the spot. Rod said he got into the business the typical way: “I just took the job.”

He used a .22-caliber rifle to put down the hogs Wednesday. He has larger caliber guns for larger animals. He said he aims for a clean kill. He does not want a wounded animal to run wild, he said, and there is nothing worse than the screams from a pig.

Neither screamed after he shot them Wednesday, then made quick slices across their throats to bleed them out.

“I’ve been doing it long enough now it really doesn’t bother me any more,” he said.

Rod said he hails from Olympia, Washington, but moved around as a child, and his father used to trap.

“I watched my dad and an old guy skin all the time,” he said. “Truth be told, I never skinned once until I got this job.”

And the work he does, he said, is not like hunting wild game and is not glorious. Bending over four or five hours a day at the peak of slaughter season can take a toll, he said.

But Rod is diligent and frugal in his efforts. He placed the hog carcasses on sturdy aluminum work benches and briskly severed the hides. Every few moments he slid the blade in swift strokes along a sharpening steel.

Taking the skin off by hand is old school, he said. “Everywhere else in the world — or damn near — scalds them.”

He also views the job through a practical lens.

“You know where your meat comes from,” he said.

Those attitudes pervade the small business Jerry Haun and his wife Dee Haun started in 1996. Jerry’s experience as a meat processor goes back 35 years. Both of his grandfathers had meat businesses and his father was a butcher.

Years ago, Jerry said, he and Rod split the slaughter work. Jerry now spends most of his time at the base of operations taking care of the processing end, from hanging meats to age in cold storage to brining cuts to smoking them in the smoke house he bought used in 1994 for \$12,000.

Today, he said, that same model with all its modern “bells and whistles” would go for more



Dee Haun reaches out to pet Bobo in a pasture next to Haun’s Meat & Sausage. The Hauns raise their own beef and slaughter the animal for the meat.



Rod Isaacson with Haun’s Meat & Sausage uses a hacksaw to cut through the sternum of a hog while slaughtering a pair of the animals Wednesday outside of Milton-Freewater.

SLAUGHTERHOUSE DRIVE

Walla Walla Valley’s only mobile butcher last of a dying breed



Dee Haun, center, prepares T-bone steaks for packaging while Rod Isaacson cuts meat Wednesday at Haun’s Meat & Sausage, a mobile slaughter outfit outside of Milton-Freewater.



Dee Haun uses a steak wiper to finish beef short ribs. The wiper uses rotating brushes to remove excess pieces of meat and fat from the cut.

\$70,000.

Dee is right there by Jerry in the shop helping customers and cutting and wrapping meat.

Pork is the primary product of Haun’s Meat & Sausage, which processes about 400 to 500 pigs a year, most for a cadre of regular customers. The Hauns keep all those orders on paper rather than digital files.

“A computer is only as good as the people inputting the information,” he said.

Running the local endeavor takes national and global connections. A grinder for making hamburger comes from Europe. The plastic wrap for that beef is from a company in Pennsylvania. And the little metal clips for those

packages also are from out of state.

Jerry serves as the executive secretary for the Northwest Meat Processors Association’s Board of Directors, and that organization is an affiliate of the American Association of Meat Processors. He also puts his meat on the line.

One wall at the shop displays the multitude of “grand champion” plaques Haun’s Meat has

won in competitions, primarily for bone-in ham.

He explained each competition has several grand champions, one for each cut of meat. Those winners then compete for the big title of best in show.

Jerry said he has come close to that in years past, mere points away even.

Then at the Northwest Meat Processors Association’s contest

of March 19 in Moscow, Idaho, his bone-in ham took it all.

Being the little guy against bigger operations made it that much more special.

And if Jerry, Dee and Rod prove anything, it’s that bigger does not always mean better.

Contact Phil Wright at pwright@eastoregonian.com or 541-966-0833.



Jerry Haun injects brine into a cut of pork while prepping the meat for the curing process Wednesday at Haun’s Meat & Sausage.