

'Hawg Killin' Time'

RONA MORRIS WORKMAN
ROCKING W RANCH

The other day when I was in the butcher shop I saw a forlorn looking half of a small ham lying in the show case, under lock and key with an armed guard standing watchfully by. Speaking in an awed whisper, I asked the price. As proudly as if he were the custodian of the crown jewels, the guard answered that it was ninety-five cents a pound. I bowed politely to the ham and bought a hunk of hamburger, then I went home and made my way out to the domicile of the once-lowly pig. "They who were humble have been made great"—and how! The pigs grunted sleepily at me, unknowing the thoughts in my mind as I looked at their fat backs and considered their weight. The Big Boss came out with a bucket of feed and we stood in silence, then he said, "They'll be ready next week." I nodded in agreement and their doom was sealed. The gods of their destiny had spoken.

Now I don't know just how much it cost to feed those pigs so they could attain their present satisfactory condition, because I am afraid if I figure it all up, the total will be so staggering that we won't enjoy eating their hams and bacon, and I like to enjoy my victuals. It is getting so that every particle of food you put into your mouth tastes just like a dirty dollar bill. If you raise the food, it costs too much to eat, and if you buy it, it still costs too much to eat, so what the heck is a person going to do?

I remember when my father used to butcher in the fall—and that is one disadvantage of being fifty-two, you have such pleasant food-memories of the past in contrast with the present. Always enough hams and bacon and lard in those days to carry them through the year, and instead of being one of the luxuries of life, smoked meat was merely a common, unvalued, food of daily eating. Even the "poor-white trash" in those times had ham and bacon to waste, or to feed to their dozen hungry dogs, but hog feed in those days was hog feed and

not gold dust, which changes the status of things.

Then there is all the work connected with butchering. "Hawg-killin' time" when you are a child, and when you are one of the working members of the household, are two entirely different things. It was all fun and excitement when I was seven. The big fire to heat the water in the hog-scalding trough, the bustle and talk and the grunts of men heaving and straining to turn the huge hogs in the water so the hair would scrape off without leaving unsightly patches of bristles, and the roasting of the pig tails in the hot ashes. (I tried an ash-roasted pig tail after I was grown. Something had happened during the intervening years. The thing didn't taste one bit good, and I was childishly disappointed. It is always a loss when a pleasant memory dies.)

I learned something about the other side of butchering—the working side—when I was running this ranch alone. I decided I would keep one of the fat pigs for home use. (I sold the others, and, because I couldn't judge pig weight, I had let them get too fat, so I got "docked" on the price, yet at the time the radio was shouting to save every ounce of waste fats because there was a fat shortage. There are so many things about this economy of ours that I fail to understand. However, since this is a dissertation on pig and not a treatise on government economy, I'll refrain from further remarks on the subject.) Mr. Kirkbride came out, killed my pig and skinned it neatly—and I mean neatly—and split it down the back for me. I can't remember now why I didn't have him cut it up for me. Maybe he was too busy, or I wanted the new experience; at any rate, I tackled the job myself.

Roy, our old hired man, helped me carry the carcass to a big table, then he left me alone with the thing and departed swiftly to the farthest corner of the ranch. I looked at that huge mountain of meat, weighing almost three times as much as I did, and decided that the Big Boss was absolutely right when he contended that I was always biting off more than I could chew. That pig looked bigger than an elephant to me, and I knew just as much about cutting up a pig as I did about

cutting up an elephant, but, since there is nothing one can do with a pig in that state except cut him up, I got out the book on butchering, picked up a knife and went to work. With desperate concentration I followed those pictures and instructions just as one follows instructions in knitting, and some five hours later I had a dis-membered pig, an aching back, four cut fingers, grease from the top of my head to the soles of my boots, and was vowing by everything I held sacred that never again, so long as I lived, would I ever touch a piece of pig meat.

Oh, well, that was three years ago, and one can forget a lot of vows in three years, besides the

Big Boss can cut up a whole pig in the time it took me to get one ham off and trimmed properly, so butchering now means for me only the usual amount of wifely interference plus the rendering of the lard—beautiful, beautiful lard—and helping with the curing, which means galloping out to the smoke-house and putting on more vine-maple wood whenever the smoke stops filtering through the air-hole. Who wouldn't be willing to do that for the where-with-all of pies and cakes, of platters of juicy brown ham with cream gravy, of crisp crunchy bacon with your toast and eggs in the morning, of crusty roasted spare-ribs, sputtering and fragrant? I know this is cruel of me; I can

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see you slaving at the pictures I am making; I even have myself drooling. Ah, the odor of frying bacon on a crisp cold morning! How on earth am I going to be able to wait until these pigs become bacon? 'Give me strength.'

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