

Sausage: the old fashioned way

by Wilma Lass

"There was nothing like cracklings and apple butter on home-made bread. You can keep all your fancy restaurants," said Paul Haseley. All the other speakers nodded in agreement.

It was obvious that this treat showed pride in food that was all of their own making, and it meant the end of an annual chore for the six men invited to talk about butchering and sausage making to the Historical Society of North German Settlements in WNY.

Each January, the society holds a "Memory Meeting" in which days of the past are recalled and recorded. This year, Darrell Blank, Paul Haseley, Martin Kroening, Calvin Pfohl, Ken Retzlaff and Edwin Scherrer were the principal speakers, but members of the large audience chimed in with their own recollections.

"No one grows pigs in Niagara County any more," said Kroening, "except for 4-H projects."

"Cracklings" are the brown bits left over from making lard. In Plattdeutsch, the language these men spoke in their youth, they are called "graem." But that's near the end of the process.

It was best to butcher on a cold, clear day, much like the meeting day on Jan. 21.

"The pigs used to squeal so, the sound went right through you," one of the men said.

These men killed with a sure, close shot with a .22 while the pig was being held down. Immediately, the animal had to be "stuck" with a sharp knife in a certain place near the left

front leg so it would bleed completely. Some families saved the blood for "blutwurst," but most did not, especially towards the end of home butchering. Blood sausage was blood and barley, and the men weren't sure what else.

"Families worked together," said Haseley. "Often there were eight or nine pigs slaughtered in a day. Our record was 11."

The next big job was to get all the hair off the animal. The pigs were dunked into very hot water to loosen the hair and soften the skin.

"Before World War II, pigs were fed for fat meat and lard, so they would weigh as much as 300 pounds. That's a lot of pork. Five or six inches of fat was good then," Haseley said.

With block and tackle the men lifted the hogs in and out of large iron cauldrons or big metal barrels of water; it was the boys' job to keep the water hot, but not boiling. Some families rolled the wet hogs in rosin. When tractors with buckets became available, they were used to carry the carcasses.

Pig scrapers are round, concave, not-too-sharp pieces of metal attached to a handle. On display were several that were both pig scraper and candlestick. Every hair had to be gone, but the skin shouldn't be cut or even nicked.

Kroening and Retzlaff displayed wooden gambrels, or "hangelstock," used to spread the back legs apart while the animal was gutted, and later to help the carcass cool. They were of two different sizes, the size of the animal determined which to size use. A sharp knife and a sure hand were needed to cut the belly, then a saw severed the breastbone. Later, the saw was used to divide the backbone.



Among those sharing their memories of butchering and sausage making at the January meeting of the Historical Society of North German Settlements in WNY were, from left, Paul Haseley, Darrell Blank, Calvin Pfohl, Edwin Scherrer and Martin Kroening. "It's amazing that most of us didn't die off long ago," said one about their fat-filled diet. (photo by Cindy Sileo)

"You had to be careful then," Kroening said; "so the hangelstock wouldn't slip."

First to be taken from the hog were the intestines. They were handed over to the women to be turned inside out, cleaned, and later used to hold sausage.

"I can see grandmother washing casings at the sink. She said they were clean enough to use when you were willing to lick them," according to Diane Retzlaff.

Later, these natural sausage casings were available from Slipko's Market in Niagara Falls or at some farmers markets.

Liver was also valuable, but the butchers had to be careful not to puncture the gall bladder.

green sack that lay right next to it. The juice inside would ruin the liver, so they cut off some extra liver rather than take a chance. Some people would use other inner organs, but it seemed that most did not.

Butchering was usually done on Saturday. The animals were left hanging outside over Sunday. Early Monday morning the cutting began, and it was still going on when the kids went to bed.

Making sausage is tedious and long. It could take up as much as a week. It was cold working outside. If it looked like it was going to freeze overnight, the meat had to be taken downstairs.

Recipes for sausage varied, but they usually included thyme, mustard seed, salt and pepper.

"Grandma Haseley had a big bed of thyme. She used it with pork and poultry. The only time I ever got in trouble with her was when I walked through her thyme patch," Haseley said. "We had to use extra salt when making sausage because it would go out through the casing."

"Sausage was two parts lean meat to one part fat. They got the best beef they could buy and added it to the pork mixture for certain sausages. The proportion of pork to beef was up to you," Mrs. Retzlaff said.

"I can remember Aunt Esther up to her elbows mixing sausage. Us kids would all sneak a bite. It was raw pork," said Jean Klettke. Some adult sausage makers did the same, some fried small samples to see if the flavor was right.

"We didn't know about e-coli, and the salt alone would make today's doctors freak out," one member said.

Several people brought sausage stuffers or pictures of them. In Plattdeutsch the name was "wust stop-

per." Some of the machines had three sizes of tube for three different sizes of sausage. The sausages that were to be smoked had to hang overnight. Plain sausage was kept in the cold as long as possible. Some was canned, but Bob Schroeder recalled that his mother fried sausage patties, put them into a crock and covered them with melted lard. Later in the winter, they could dig the sausage out of the lard, warm them up and the meat was ready to eat.

Some of the pork was canned in glass jars. Without a pressure cooker, that meant three hours of boiling, often in a wash boiler over the kitchen stove.

Some of the belly fat was made into

lard. The fat and salt were layered in a crock. Covered tightly with a heavy cloth, it would "stay all summer."

The rest of the fat was rendered into lard. This and butter were the basic cooking shortenings of the time.

The fat was gently "boiled." Near the end, a few apple slices were added to sweeten it, and a bit later the liquid lard and cracklings were poured into a lard press that also served as a sieve. Lard was stored in gallon crocks, covered with heavy paper or cloth. Those were carried into the cellar. The squeezed cracklings went into a bowl or two and were enjoyed immediately.

Smoking sausages was the next job.

"Smoke houses were all different. The one at dad's was made of wood, about four-foot square. The one at mother's was eight by 10 feet. At Bennie and Gladys' it was made of field stone," one man said.

The trick was to keep the temperature at 100 degrees for 10 days and not to let the fire break into flame. The wood was hickory or apple, sometimes cherry. It was cut into chips and soaked in water, and placed in a metal circle to limit its spread. Later, people used sawdust. Controlling it was an art. The smoke house had to be checked regularly around the clock.

When the sausages were done, hams and bacon slabs could go into the smoke house.

These were first processed either by soaking in a strong salt solution or by rubbing them with a dry salt mixture. The brine solutions had to be checked regularly.

"Dad would put a fresh egg in the brine. The egg had to float. If it didn't, he added more salt," a speaker said.

The dry method evolved into using a commercial mixture manufactured by Morton's salt, which included nitrates and sugar.

"When you go into an old house, you'll often see eight-penny nails all in a row in the rafters in the attic or the cellar," said Retzlaff. "That's for hanging the sausages and hams after they were smoked. Sometimes the mice would nibble at them, but we didn't worry about it - just cut that part off. Some people put their hams in paper bags and buried them in the grain bins in the barn. That kept the rodents away and insulated the meat so it wouldn't freeze."

Some people got a reputation for smoking meat. People would bring 20 to 30 pounds of sausage to them for processing. Dennis Walck, Edgar

Kroening, Norman Haseley and Ben Wolf were mentioned for their skill. A combination of venison and pig made good sausage.

The goal was to get all the sausage finished by Christmas. The smoke house was used until February. This was the end of a process that had started the previous May, when the farmer bought six-week-old "weaners," piglets that were old enough to eat on their own, to be fed the farmer's home-grown grain and grass and skim milk.

The idea was "to use everything but the squeal." That may not have been true in the most recent butchering when times were good and many had jobs off the farm. But some remembered with nostalgia eating stewed heart in sweet and sour gravy and giving pigs' knuckles to kids in the high chair for teething. No one remembered pickling pigs' feet at home, but they did come in jars at the stores.

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