

Butchering Time

There was one Indian summer day which Tom never forgot. That was the day when Pa took the pig catcher down from the nail in the barn. Then Pa and Tom together started for the Big Woods. The pig had been running wild in the woods all summer, feeding on roots and berries. Now it was time to bring the pig home and fatten it.

The pig catcher was like big pincers, with one handle longer than the other. A piece of rope joined the two handles. You held the pig catcher by the long handle until the pincers were around the pig's leg. Then you pulled on the rope, the pincers and the handles closed, and there was the pig, caught by the leg.

Has anyone ever told you that you can catch a bird if you sprinkle salt on its tail? Well, pig catching is like that. You can catch the pig if you can get the pincers around its leg.

All the way to the woods Tom begged Pa to let him have the first chance at the pig catcher. Tom would have that pig in a minute. He knew he would. But Pa would not listen. Pa was going to catch the pig in a hurry and be done with it.



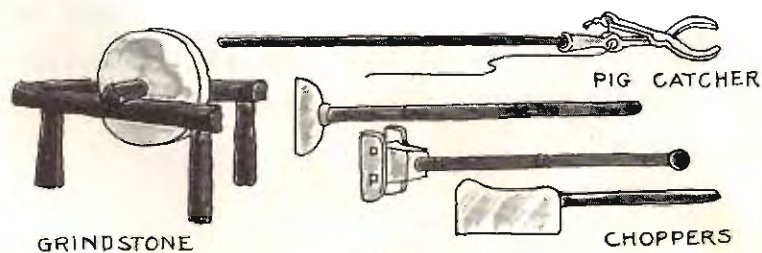
The minute Pa caught sight of the pig, he started after it on the run. Pa may have been quick, but the pig was quicker. Around trees, across the clearing, into the underbrush, and out again went Pa and the pig.

Just as Pa almost had the pig, the pig turned around, doubled on its tracks, and ran between Pa's legs and upset him. I don't know how many more times Pa tried, but I do know that it was Tom who finally caught the pig. The best of it was that he caught it almost as soon as he got his hands on the pig catcher.

"I declare," said Pa with a hearty chuckle, "you are a better man than I am. It takes you to bring home the bacon."

Then Pa and Tom made a pen of logs beside the barn, and there they put the pig. They fed the pig until it could eat no more, and every day they watched it grow fatter.

Now Indian summer came to a close and was followed by the gray days of late November. Each day that passed grew shorter and colder. It was dark in the mornings long after Pa and Tom had finished their work in the barn. The frost lay thick on the long prairie grass, and there was a coating of ice on the rain barrel by the back door. Even



at noon there was a chill in the air which made Tom shiver inside his warm woolen coat.

"Wind's from the north! The cold has come to stay," said Pa one morning at breakfast. "Time to think about butchering!"

The next morning Frenchy and Indian Jack did not go to the woods as usual. They came to the Hastings cabin with their butcher knives already sharpened. They were going to help Pa kill the pig and a yearling bull.

Early that morning Pa had set Ma's great iron kettle upon some flat stones near the barn, and Tom had filled it with water. Then together they had built a big fire under it. Now the water had begun to boil, and Frenchy, Pa, and Indian Jack went to kill the pig and the yearling bull.

Sally, who was helping Ma, ran into the little room to hide her head deep down among the goose feathers in the big feather bed. She knew that the calf would bawl and that the pig would squeal, and she didn't want to hear them. She stayed there with her fingers in her ears until Ma called and told her not to be silly. The killing was all over. Anyway, it hadn't hurt the pig and the bull. It had happened too quickly.



As soon as the pig was killed, Frenchy and Indian Jack took hold of it by the legs and dropped it down into the boiling water. They lifted it up and dropped it again and again. Then they laid it on a board, and with their hunting knives they scraped off all the bristles.

When the yearling bull had been killed, Indian Jack hung the pig and the calf by their hind legs in a tree and cut them open. He took out the insides and put them into one of Ma's smaller kettles. Frenchy carried the kettle into the cabin.



Ma washed the hearts and livers and put them carefully aside. She saved all the bits of pork fat to make lard.

While Ma was busy in the house, Pa was skinning the calf. The skin came off in one piece. Pa would save the calfskin to make shoe leather.

As soon as the meat was cold, the men took it down from the tree and began the cutting. The calf was cut into quarters, and the quarters of beef were hung in the coldest corner of the attic where they would freeze and stay frozen until Ma wanted to use them.

All the pieces of fat pork were packed in salt in a big barrel. The hams and shoulders were put into another barrel filled with salt water called brine. After they had stayed in the brine long enough, they would be taken to the smokehouse and smoked like the venison, with good hickory smoke.

All morning long the men were busy with the meat. Tom and Jim helped whenever they could. It was a gay and busy time. Frenchy whistled and told jokes and sang French songs which Tom and Jim didn't understand but enjoyed anyway.

That noon there were spareribs for dinner, and Ma said that Frenchy and Indian Jack must stay for dinner. Everyone who sat down to the table declared that he had never eaten sweeter, juicier meat than the meat which had come from the flat ribs of what had once been the Hastings pig.

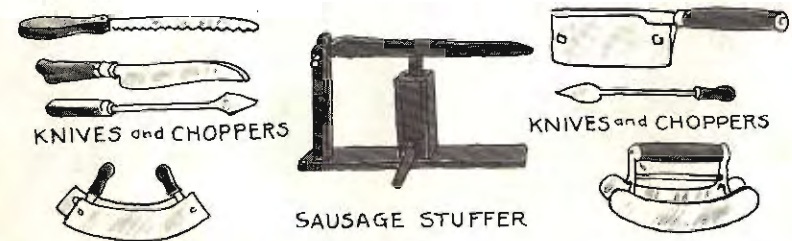
That day the men's work was over, but Ma's had just begun. All the next day she was boiling the pork fat in a big kettle over the fire. Ma said she was trying out the lard. Sally brought wood and kept a watchful eye on the kettle. The lard must boil, but it must not smoke.

When the lard was done, Ma poured it through a white cloth into a big earthen jar. Ma squeezed



the cloth to be sure that all the lard went into the jar. Then she put the lard away to cool and harden. When Ma was through with the squeezing, there were some brown cracklings left inside the cloth. Jim liked good brown cracklings with salt on them, but Ma would give him only a few. Cracklings may taste good, but they are very rich, and it isn't safe to eat many.

The next day Ma made the headcheese. She boiled the pig's head and the calf's head until the meat fell from the bones. Then she put the meat into her wooden bowl, and she chopped it fine with her chopping knife. After that she seasoned it with salt and pepper and bits of dried leaves from certain plants in her garden. Ma called the plants herbs. Then she poured some of the water, in which the heads had been boiled, over the chopped meat and mixed it well. After that she set the chopped meat away in a pan to cool. When it was cool, it was like jelly and would cut with a knife. It was called headcheese.



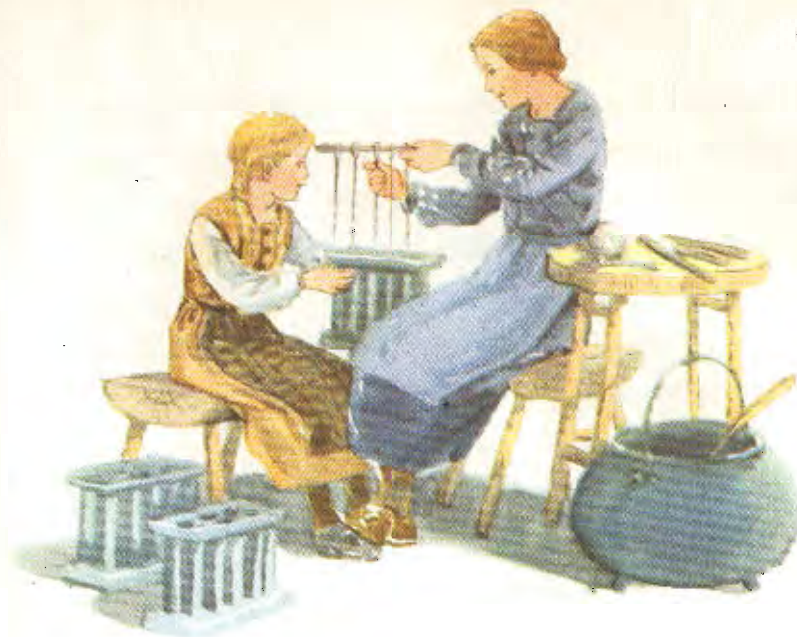
All the little pieces of meat that were left after the men had finished with the cutting were made into sausage. Ma chopped and Sally chopped until the meat was chopped as fine as fine could be. Then Ma seasoned it with salt and pepper and herbs, molded it into balls, and set the balls away in the attic to freeze. Ma set the sausage balls on one piece of cloth and covered them very carefully with another.

Now butchering time was over, but there was other work in preparation for winter still to be done. One of the most important things was the candle-making.

Pork fat makes lard, but beef fat makes tallow, and it is beef fat, or tallow, that you need for candles. Ma put all the beef fat into a kettle and melted it into tallow. Then she took out her candle molds.

If you had been there, you would have seen that a candle mold was just two rows of tin tubes fastened together. There were five tubes in a row in Ma's molds, and each tube was just the shape of a candle.

Ma had made the wicking for her candles many days before. You can never guess how she made it.



She made it from the soft silk of the milkweed. Jim had gathered the milkweed when he was wandering over the prairie. Ma took the soft silk, and she spun it on her spinning wheel into strong string to use for candlewicks.

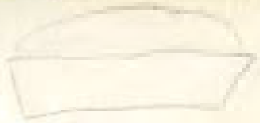
Now Ma cut the wicking for each candle. The wick must be two times as long as the candle, and a little more. Ma doubled the wicking for one candle across a small stick. Then she rolled the two pieces of wicking between her hands until the two pieces were rolled into one. She wet her finger and rolled the tip end of the wicking into a sharp point.

When Ma had five wicks on the stick, she dropped the wicks down into the five tubes of the candle mold. She let the stick lie on top of the tubes. The pointed ends of the wicks came out through the little holes in the other ends of the tubes. Ma pulled the wicks tight and tied their pointed tips together to hold them in place.

When each tube in Ma's molds had its wicking, Ma poured hot tallow into the molds and filled each tube to the very top. A few minutes later Sally put the candle molds outdoors to cool.

When the tallow had hardened for a day or two, Ma dropped each mold into boiling water and took it quickly out again. Then she cut the tied tips of the wicks apart, lifted the sticks, and out came the candles, five candles on each stick.

Sally cut off the wicking until there was no wicking showing at the bottom and only a little showing at the top of the candle. After that she piled the candles away in the top drawer of the chest. Ma took her empty molds and began her candle-making all over again. The pile of candles in the chest drawer grew slowly. Candlemaking was tiresome work, and it took a long time to make candles enough to last all winter.



Pigeon Pie

All through the long days of butchering and candlemaking, Ma's thoughts turned continually to Thanksgiving. The more she thought, the more she tried not to think; and the more she tried not to think, the more she thought. Ma's thoughts went around in circles.

The trouble was that she was bothered about something. She tried to think that the something didn't matter. She was going to laugh and forget about it. But she couldn't laugh, and she couldn't forget. She was too deeply disappointed.

Ma loved Thanksgiving. She enjoyed it more than any other day in the year except Christmas.

The thing that Ma liked best about Thanksgiving was the turkey. She didn't mind the hours of work it took to get the turkey ready for dinner. She didn't mind them a bit. She enjoyed picking the feathers. She enjoyed making the good dressing, even if cutting up the onions did bring the tears to her eyes. She was sure there wasn't a smell in the world as good as the smell of a turkey roasting in a Dutch oven among the red coals and hot ashes of a fireplace.