



country cured

Life in the country brought something new every day. Of course there were always some jobs — like plowing corn — that took considerable time. But for the most part, every time one job was finished another and quite different one had to be done. There was spring work, summer work, fall work and still different types of work during the winter season.

Getting up the year's supply of wood started in the fall and continued until late in the winter. It took a right smart of wood to run our place, for we did all the cooking with wood and heated the big house with it. But getting up wood took us to the big timber — a trip we always welcomed.

The old wood heater in the living room took sticks almost four feet long, two armloads at a gulp. But it certainly made things comfortable on a cold day. Our house had eleven rooms, but we tried to heat only three, besides the kitchen. The whole upstairs was always cold as a barn and never had any arrangements for warming. It was supposed to be better for us to sleep in cold rooms anyhow, but it was also a little rough.

During the coldest weather we used to undress and put on our gowns by the heating stove. Then we made a break for bed, through a long hall, up sixteen stair steps, along another hall and across a long bedroom — and without a rag of a carpet the whole way. We jumped into bed shivering like we had a chill, and snuggled under the wool blankets, head and ears, as long as we could hold our breath. After that it was all right until Pap called us next morning.

But it is some chore to roust out of bed in a cold room, when the weather is around zero, and run through the frosty air, bare legged, to the living room to dress. And when we got there, sometimes, the fire was so low that there wasn't a spark of warmth about it. But down under the ashes there was always a bed of live coals, and dry kindling on them soon brought on a roaring fire.

We never measured wood by the cord in those days, but mostly by the load. It took at least forty loads of wood to run our place a year. And it was a big lark to get up that forty loads of wood. We started out with the wagons and wound up with bobsleds when the snow got deep enough and it wasn't storming too bad.

We went a long way for our wood — five or six miles, I should say. We went past the Jim Linder hill, and about a mile below that the fences petered out and then we just followed a sort of trail that wound around away deep into the big woods. Pap owned a ten acre patch of the biggest kind of timber, and to find it was a regular Chinese puzzle. Of course the older boys and Pap knew well enough, but to a youngster it was a mystery how they ever got there and back.

Pap was a wonderful woodsman and handled an axe the best of anybody I ever saw except Charlie Jones. He chopped either right or left handed, and bragged that he never moved out of his tracks to cut down a tree. He left a stump about as square across the top as if you had sawed down the tree, with hardly an axe mark on it.

I always liked to watch Pap logging off. He could stand right on top of a log and whack it into lengths before he ever climbed down, and never bat an eye. I never saw him do it, but he claimed he could cut, split, and rick up seven cords a day. And I wouldn't be surprised if he could do it.

The boys loaded the big timbers first, tied ropes across the standards and over about two thirds of the load, and finished off with poles and limbs 'til the load

was seven or eight feet high. Then we climbed on top and started the wonderful trip home. There used to be lots of red sumac berries along the way, and they were pretty good, too. Then we used to pick red haws, and black haws, and hazel nuts, and once in a while we would run onto a wild plum tree, just loaded down with the finest tasting plums you ever saw. And you could eat a hundred and they wouldn't hurt you, if you spit out the seeds.

I used to dig into mice nests around hazel thickets in the fall and sometimes would find most a quart of nuts, all shelled out, that the mice had put away for winter. Some folks robbed the mice of their nuts, but Pap and Mother never allowed us to. They said the mice would starve if we took their nuts, and how would we like it to have our food stolen from us?

The men kept at wood cutting until they had a woodpile most as big as the barn. Then they commenced to work it up into stove sizes, all split up fine for the cook stove, with the knotty and gnarly parts sorted out for the heater. We had a cross-cut saw, a buck saw, and several axes, and all hands together could make the work go fast. When we got done there would be the prettiest pile of nice clean white wood you ever saw, and chips enough to kindle fires with for a year.

One of my jobs was to clean the ashes out of the two stoves, and pour them into a great big hopper. By spring there would be more than twenty-five bushels piled up there, then Mother would pour water in the hopper and drain off whole barrels of lye, and a little

later boil it down for soap. She made good soap, too, and always seasoned it with hog grease and bacon rinds and the like. It wasn't like store soap much, just a kind of thick jelly. But it brought out the dirt to beat anything you ever saw.

Mother always kept the soft soap in a barrel, covered up good to keep out the dust, and always kept the barrel out of doors. There wasn't room for it in the kitchen, and she was afraid it would make the meat taste if she kept it in the smokehouse.

We did all our own butchering, of course. Generally butchering time came along in January, in the coldest kind of weather. It took about eleven or twelve big hogs to keep our family in pork for a year, and we generally killed a calf at corn picking time, with a mutton for harvest and thrashing time.

Generally Pap would have a couple or three neighbors come to help us do the butchering. We had a big iron kettle that held thirty gallons and Cappes had a copper one that held even more than that. They hung both of these over a stout pole held up by a couple of chunks of wood, filled them up with water, and built fires under them. A big barrel would be set, slantways like, against the running gears of a bobsled, and that was what they scalded the hogs in, so the hair would slip off.

Pap always used Old Dalsey to shoot the hogs with and generally butchered six at a time. As soon as a hog quit kicking he was heaved into the hogshed of scalding water and chounded up and down, head first, until the hair started to loosen. Then the men would

pop the tail end in and chounce him some more. When the hair was good and loose they would haul him out on some boards and everybody began to scrape and pull hair to get it all off before it cooled.

Pap, being an extra good hand, always cleaned the feet and snouts while the common workers finished off the body. Then a gambrel stick was fastened under the whit-leather of the hind legs and the hog swung over a pole. Out came his insides into a tub. Then he was left to cool off, while the women stripped off the gut-fat, sorted out the livers and hearts, ground the sage, and got ready to make the sausage.

In three or four hours time, with some great fires roaring to heat water, steam whipping around in the cold so thick you could hardly see sometimes, the scalding, scraping, rinsing down and dressing was done and half a dozen great big hogs would be swinging by their hind legs, as naked as could be and white and clean as though they had never waded in a mudhole in their lives. They were allowed to hang there until after the evening chores were all done and supper over, then the job of cutting up began.

It was fun to see the men lay a big dressed hog on the table, flat on his back, spread his legs apart and cut him up. Off came his great head, out came the spare ribs, off came the hams, shoulders, sides, and all were trimmed up complete as could be. The scraps were thrown into a tub for later rendering into lard. When the cutting up was all done, the different parts were salted down and put away in barrels and boxes until dripping time came

in the spring. The job of butchering was done again. It surely was a high spot in the winter line of sports.

When you hadn't had a bite of fresh meat for several months on end, that fresh pig liver, and heart, and tenderloin, tasted about as wonderful as anything that can be imagined. That, with spareribs and backbones, kept us mighty well fed for a good long time after the butchering was over.

It gives people a kind of comfortable feeling to have over two thousand pounds of pork laid away, to say nothing of pig's feet, and souse, and bags of sausage, and jowls for dandelion greens in the spring. The way we lived out there, there was always a lot put away to eat, and nobody ever went hungry.

Our smokehouse bulged with hams, shoulders, side meat, jowls and canvassed sausage, the finest you ever saw. The folks always packed the fresh pork in brine until along in the spring when they hung it in the smokehouse to drip for a week before it was smoked.

Then we chinked all the cracks, fastened down the window and started a smudge fire with hickory chips. In a short time the smokehouse got so smoked-up we had to either get out, or sneeze all the time. After that we went in only to put on more chips or put out a blaze.

We kept that up for two or three weeks. By that time the meat had turned brown on the outside and was just about too good to eat. Any kind of meat seemed good, but that smoked meat was always better than anything else, and there is no way of making anybody understand who never tasted it.

We had a wonderful cellar, too. The cellar itself wasn't anything to brag about, maybe, but what was in it is what I mean. There was a big bin at the back that held fifty bushels of apples. There were five sections to the bin, and each part had a different kind of apples in it. Some were to cook, and some were to just eat raw. Off to one side — in barrels — we always kept the snow apples and little red romanites, which were the best ones to take to school. There is nothing better, sort of in between times, than to gnaw an apple when you get a little tired of studying at school.

Over to one side in that wonderful cellar was a potato bin that must have held at least forty bushels. And there were places for beets, cabbages, onions, carrots, and all other kinds of garden truck, so that we never wanted for good things to eat all winter long. On the floor, at the right hand side of the door were five or six big jars of lard with cloths tied over them, while just back of them were a lot of pickles. There were cucumber pickles, tomato pickles, pickled apples, pickled pigs feet, and every other kind of spiced and fixed up goodie that you ever read about. Up on shelves sat rows and rows of canned fruits — cherries, plums, gooseberries, peaches, pears — put up in tin cans and sealed with wax. Sometimes a little of the wax would slip down into the fruit and make it taste a little off, but it was mighty good for all that.

There were a good many kinds of preserves down there, too. These were mostly put up in stone jars with a paper pasted over to keep the ants and cockroaches

out. Once in a while a mouse or something would nibble a hole in the cover and cockroaches would get in there. It was a job to fish them out and generally Mother just threw the whole jarful away, and let it go at that.

Sometimes one of those soaking rains would come along and maybe last a week or so, and get the ground so soggy that water would seep into the cellar and stand a foot or two deep for a week or two. The planks that were laid down to walk on would commence to float around, and it was a wet job to go down there to get anything out. So Pap took a notion to put in a drain so as to always keep the cellar dry.

He had the boys dig a ditch as deep as the cellar was, leading away down through the apple orchard. He sent to the timber for four or five loads of poles, and dumped them in the ditch 'til it was nearly half full, and covered them up with dirt. It worked, too. After that there was never any more water backed up in the cellar, and we got along fine.

Between that wonderful cellar and all that was in it, and the smokehouse and all the lovely smoked meat in there, and a hogsheadful of sauer kraut, a pile of buried turnips, and a barrel of Silver Drip syrup, we never lacked for plenty to eat from the time the frost began to fly until pie plant time the next spring.