

## *Curator's Column: Hog Scalding Vat*

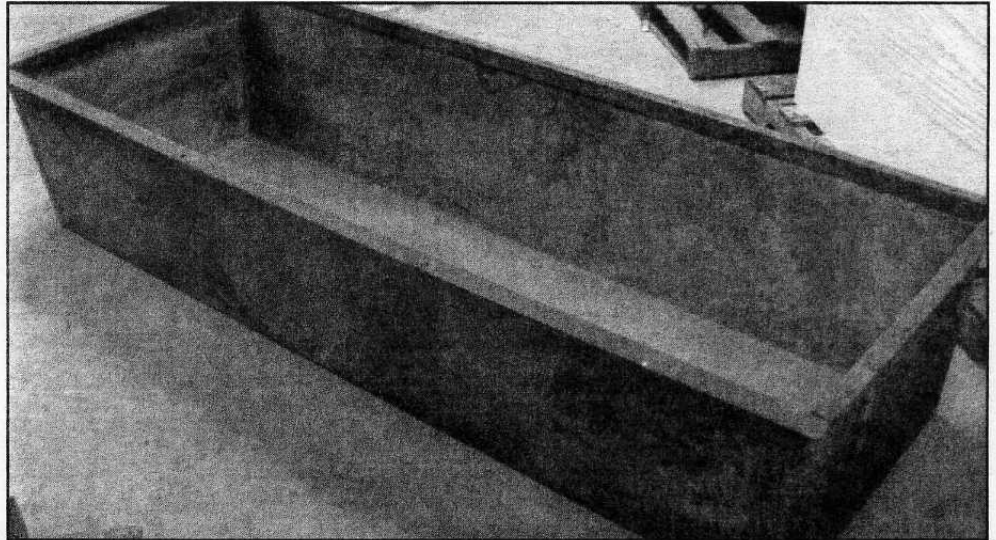
The primary diet for most 19<sup>th</sup>- and early 20<sup>th</sup>- century southerners was corn bread and pork. Rural families raised their own swine in order to have pork for every meal. Hams, shoulders, jowls, and sides could be cured to last almost indefinitely in the pre-refrigeration era.

Hog butchering was done in the winter during the first cold snap that was likely to last for several days. It was an annual event which often became a social gathering for neighbors. Many hands were needed to do the work. A few basic tools and equipment were needed to complete the job.

After the hog was killed, it was dipped into a large vat of hot water, generally around 140 degrees. After soaking for a few minutes, the hair was scraped off for use in brushes. Then the hog was hung upside down, disemboweled and weighed. The intestines were scraped and cleaned for use as sausage casings. Fat from the hog was melted and rendered into lard. A 250- pound hog would typically produce around 30 pounds of lard for cooking or soap and candle making.

The carcass then went to the cutting table, which consisted of large planks across sawhorses, where it was cut into manageable sections. Certain parts were usually smoked while others were pickled. The best cuts of meat were destined for the smokehouse. The first step in the process was to salt the meat. Pepper, brown sugar and other spices were sometimes added to the mix for flavoring. Saltpeter was added to aid in preservation. Once the meat was thoroughly rubbed down, it was put into barrels or tubs with salt packed around it for up to a week. This process, called sweating, drew the moisture out of the meat.

The meat was hung from the rafters of the smokehouse from hooks. A small fire was lit in the center of the smokehouse using green wood, typically hickory, cedar, pecan or oak. The fire was restarted every morning. Smoking would last for two or three weeks. The smoke and soot would adhere to the meat, creating an



*Hog scalding vat.*

*Jones Collection*

external crust. While this process added flavor, the main purpose for smoking meat was to preserve it. This method would ensure a supply of meat for up to a year.

The Layland Museum collected several artifacts related to hog butchering including a chain and hook used to hang the carcass, and a metal hog-scalding vat. These items were donated in 1999 by a local family who used them around the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The size of the 7-foot vat and the strength of the chain and hook are a testament to the size of the animals and intensive labor required to butcher a hog.