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A NORWEGIAN CHRISTMAS TRADITION

By William Warner

"DEAD-PIG COMIN' THRU!" I actually hollered it – husky and prison-like – though I doubt my fellow guards got it. The atmosphere was ironically cheerful, as Christmas should be. But it was more akin to Easter. The steel gate clanked, and as we walked down death-row I wondered what his last supper was like. Probably like his first.



Slaughtering hogs is a Christmas tradition in Norway, which explains why you see more pictures of hogs than Santa. Rib roast is the highlight of Christmas dinner; marzipan and gingerbread pigs are the seasonal sweets. At first thought, it's kind of odd. All religions have a tendency to feature some dietary injunction or prohibition, but the oldest is the hatred of the pig. It emerged in primitive Judaea, and was for centuries one of the ways – the other being circumcision – by which Jews could be distinguished. Muslims are also porkophobic, though they appear to see nothing ironic in the adoption of this uniquely Jewish taboo. (Did you know that Muslim zealots in Europe are demanding that the Three Little Pigs, and Miss Piggy,

and *Winnie-the-Pooh's* Piglet be removed from the innocent gaze of their children?) But you can understand why Norwegians favor the other white meat. Although most are registered Lutherans, they're devout Druids. Moreover, they're only one generation removed from being an agrarian society.

Having said that, you might better understand why my invitation to help with Johan's seasonal slaughter was an honor. (That might sound odd, but it ranks up there with a request to attend the Nobel Peace Prize and the annual sheep-head dinner.) And I was looking forward to it, along with the other four.

The photo left shows Johan (left) and Dohter (center) and me ushering hog number 2 down death row. Johan's father, Nicoli, captured a few snapshots, which require explanation.



To begin with, the temperature of the scalding water dictates when the first task is executed (excuse the pun). It must be 65° C (149° F), precisely. Give or take two degrees

and the hairs won't come off. That's "Foreman" measuring the water. But his special skill is butchering. The iron coat-hanger on the bench will be used later to suspend the hog from the tractor's front-end loader.

Johan waits patiently, calming the hog with soothing words and stroking his head. As soon as the bathwater is right, Foreman gives the word. Johan dispatches the animal with a baton-like gun. It's about the size of a 4-cell flashlight, and he holds it to the hog's forehead. When he triggers it, a pressurized bolt thrusts a Mike Tyson jab, and the beast collapses immediately. In a flash – and I mean a split-second flash – Johan goes for his knife. It takes two other people to hold the thrashing beast while Johan slashes the jugular. Surprisingly, there's no squealing. The death throes are brief but violent. We all stand back (minimum ten feet) and watch the twisting and kicking: the arching back, scrambling legs, banging head. Even the veterans wince. It's a bad scene in *Braveheart*. The hog is glistening crimson and Johan is splattered like Mel Gibson.

But the grim spell is broken by some gallows humor and we get moving, fast. The temperature waits for no man.

I chain a rear leg to the tractor and Nicoli raises the hog for washing. Johan takes a weapons-grade high-pressure hose and blasts away the blood with hot water. Unless I hold the hog, pressure from the hose spins it like a top.

Then Nicoli dips the hog in the tub of scalding water. After a few minutes we roll it out on the bench. Four of us scrap away the hair. It's not a job you linger about.



There're always a few places where the hair doesn't come off, so Foreman brings over a steaming teakettle and hollers, "Stand clear!" When one side is clean, we roll it over and begin again.



Next, Johan singes the residual bristles with a blow torch (above right), and Foreman hoses while I scrub. The skin takes on a human-like quality, which is somewhat disturbing. Aside from the head and legs, the hog's body is eerily quite human-like at



this point. You see, it hasn't been gutted, just bled. And after all that scraping and brushing, it looks like a sun burnt senator on the beach. Maybe that shouldn't be so surprising. After all, it shares a great deal of our DNA, which explains why it shares its skin, heart valves, and kidneys in transplants. No skin off *my* nose! Fact: the barbaric vernacular word for roasted human in New Guinea was "long pig": I have never had the relevant gastronomic experience myself, but if I had put my money on real finger food, I'd bet that we do taste very much like pigs.

The tractor hoists the hog for butchering. Quite unlike Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle*, a graphic novel (and agonizing read) of a Chicago slaughterhouse, butchering is more akin to surgery than slaughter. With scalpel-sharp knives, Johan and Foreman slice with surgical precision. I don't know how Nicoli hones a hunting knife to a cutthroat razor, but he does. His left forearm is as smooth as a baby's butt from testing blades.



I don't do much other than observe and pass a knife or saw, or toe away a mound of entrails. There's surprisingly little blood... until the end. The *coup de grace* is somewhat tongue-and-cheek. Foreman delivers the tongue like a heavyweight midwife – after considerable labor and a deliberate and mighty pull. He drops it on the pile of lungs, heart, liver... then raises his bloodied hands like a prize fighter and bellows. A shriek would be bad taste.

After washing the hog we weigh it. We butchered four that day, ranging from 85 to 92 kilograms (187 to 202 pounds). Then we transport it to the locker where it will hang with the rest for three days. Per will come and butcher the lot to hams, cutlets, bacon... I'll get a quarter, which means I'll have to get a freezer this week. On Saturday we'll slaughter the last three. It should be quite an event, because a celebration follows in typical Viking tradition: we'll raise a glass of aquavit with bloody hands and salute the vanquished merrily, "God jul!"



Bill Warner's writings are not strangers in my *Whippoorwill* E-Comments. He lives in Norway with his Norwegian wife and son and daughter. Bill is my sole overseas correspondent. I consider him to be the finest writer of all my thousands of former student associates. His letters and articles are a joy to read, and from which I always learn the most interesting things. Reading this article brought back strong latent memories of growing up in a farming community in central Kentucky as a child.

Our neighbors traditionally killed hogs on Thanksgiving Day if the weather was cold enough. I remember watching the killing, scalding, and scraping process, the butchering and preparation of sausage and souse, and the rendering of lard from fat boiled in large iron kettles. Nothing was wasted, and farmers bragged that the only part of the pig that wasn't used was the squeal!

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Wishing all my AJ friends a wonderful
Saturnalia and Happy New Year