Hog Killing

By Rhunell Boyd and John Ray

Introduction

By Rhunell Boyd

The fog is hovering around the farm of Naomi Boyd in the Everett's Crossroads community in eastern Beaufort County on Saturday morning, January 4, 1997. The rifle cracks. Pow! The big hog drops dead, just like that. Topper Boyd lowers his rifle. He, his family, and friends have gathered at daybreak to continue the disappearing practice of killing hogs: no waste, no pollution, only the eternal ritual of feeding the family.
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Hog killing has been a family tradition and a means of feeding their family for as long as he can remember, explains Topper Boyd and his mother, Lola Boyd, as we sit around the kitchen table in Mr. Boyd's home. Dr. Roy Armstrong, journalism students John Ray and Rhunell Boyd (not coincidentally Topper's wife) interviewed the Boyds for Life on the Pamlico on Thursday night, December 19, 1996, two weeks before the hog killing. The easy expressions on the Boyds' faces indicate that hog killings are more than simply a practical way of providing food for several families; they are a time for fellowship as family and neighbors come together to help one another.

Dressed in his gray work shirt and jeans, Topper Boyd sat easily at the breakfast table as he began the interview by offering some background history on how hog killings have changed over the years. Mrs. Lola Boyd, or Miss Lola as she prefers, offered helpful comments as the interview progressed, noting that not too many families have old time hog killings anymore. She should be regarded as an expert since she has seen quite a few hog killings in her 80 plus years.

Life: Do you raise the hogs?

Mr. Boyd: Well, we have; the way it's set up over there at Aunt Naomi's, her son-in-law raises the hogs. And he kills for his family and Aunt Naomi, and sometimes we buy hogs from them. Or it just depends on what the situation might be, but they raise their own hogs all the time.

Mrs. Lola Boyd: There's not too many that does that anymore now, used to every family raised his own hogs and had his own hog killing. We did till my husband died; then, of course, we went out of the hog business.

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Life: How many hogs are you going to have?

Mr. Boyd: I think they're killing six or seven.

Life: What's the first thing you do at a hog killing? Shoot them?

Mr. Boyd: Usually the first thing we do is take a drink of liquor [laughter]!

Life: That's kind of the first thing I do before doing anything.

Mrs. Lola Boyd: Most especially when it's cold weather.

Life: What time of day do you begin?

Mr. Boyd: Usually, the way we start off is, the person that's having the hog killing, they get up probably about an hour before day break — they've already got their vat and everything set up and their pots. They build a fire underneath the vat and get the water temperature built up to what it needs to be so when it comes day break when everybody comes over, the water is ready to kill the hogs. Normally, this time of the year, you'll probably get up about 6:00 or 5:30 a.m. and build your fire, depending on how cold it is. The colder it is, the earlier you got to get your fire going to get your water temperature up. So the person who's killing the hogs will start about 5:30, and most people who's helping kill will get there about 7:00 a.m. Just as soon as it gets light enough to be able to shoot the hogs, you go out and shoot the hogs and stick them.

Life: You shoot them in the head?

Mr. Boyd: Yes sir.
Life: What do you use, a 22?

Mr. Boyd: A twenty-two rifle, usually.

Life: You were talking about these big vats of boiling water. That's the first thing to do. Then you shoot the hogs with a 22?

Mr. Boyd: Right.

Life: Where? In the back of the head?

Mr. Boyd: The way I always shot them, draw an imaginary line between the top of his ear to his eye, top of his ear to his eye, and then where the lines cross is where usually you try to shoot them, depending on his head. If his head is a little bit low, you kind of allow for that.

Life: And then you say you stick them?

Mr. Boyd: Then you take a knife just between their shoulders and try to hit the tip of the knife into his heart, and then when you flip your knife and take your knife out, he bleeds.

Life: Is he lying on the ground?

Mr. Boyd: Yes, when you shoot him, he drops, just like that—that's it! Pow!

Life: Then you let him bleed?

Mr. Boyd: Right, let him bleed, then load him up—depending on how far you got to carry him, usually with an old tractor and trailer.

Life: Throw him in the trailer and back him up to where you got your hot water in your vat.

Life: The men physically pick him up?

Mr. Boyd: Right.

Life: And then get him to the vat.

Mr. Boyd: Right. And then you pull him out of the trailer and put him in the vat and try to have your water temperature about 156 - 160 degrees—something like that.

Life: So it's not boiling?

Mr. Boyd: No, just hot enough to get the hair off of him.

Mrs. Lola Boyd: You put the hogs on chains and two men get on both sides.

Mr. Boyd: Oh, yes, once you put him in the vat, then you got two men on each side working the chains—got your hog laying on the chains and you're raising him up and down to give the hair a little bit of air while you're continually rolling the hog back and forth in the vat from one side to the other.

Life: So, these vats are very big?

Mr. Boyd: About the size of a hog, five feet long and three or four feet wide, something like that.

Life: What are the vats made of?
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Mr. Boyd: The one I’ve got is made out of pine, [with a metal lining] on the bottom of it. The one that my daddy used to use, I think, was tin, had a tin lining or some type of metal, you know, so that you can build a fire underneath the vat and keep the water hot.

Mrs. Lola Boyd: [The lining] keeps the wood [fire] from burning the vat.

Life: So you’ve got these chains under the hogs.

Mr. Boyd: Right.

Life: Are you kind of raising him up and down to get the hair off?

Mr. Boyd: Right.

Life: After you’ve got the hair off, what do you do then?

Mr. Boyd: You just keep checking him; you’re picking part of the hair off of him while he’s in the vat.

Life: Are you actually doing this with your hands?

Mr. Boyd: Yes, or you got a scraper, what they call a hog scraper. After that, the hair is ready to come off completely; then you run the hog out of the vat, and then everybody finishes taking the hair off of him. Then you take butcher knives and shave him to make sure [to remove] any hair that’s left on him—you cut it down to the skin. And then you pick him up, hang him on the poles; you got a pole laid up there to hang the hogs on.

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Life: How high?

Mr. Boyd: They’re about five feet. Then you put what they call “gambles” or “gambling him,” and then hang him on the poles.

Life: All four legs?

Mr. Boyd: No, just the back legs.

Life: So he’s up vertically, hanging from his hind legs. You cut their heel string—there’s two of them in the back of each foot. You cut into the skin and pull the heel string out and stick it into a gamble, which is nothing but a wooden stick, and hang them on the pole. And then you clean him down again, scrap hair with your knives until you know he’s real clean and then you gut him.

Life: How do you gut him?

Mr. Boyd: You usually start off at the top and make a slit down, and then you come up—he’s upside-down. You take your knife and cut his bones open and unchime [take the bones apart] his back legs to where he opens up and cut around his tail end and take the guts out from there.

Life: Do the guts just fall out?

Mr. Boyd: Yes.

Life: And you catch them in a bucket?

Mr. Boyd: Washing tub most of the time. Roll the guts into the washing tub and then after you cut the end of the guts loose from
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the liver, then you’ll take your liver, guts and heart out; and they’ll hang them on the pole.

Life: Do people eat everything?

Mr. Boyd: Well, used to years ago, you know, long time ago. Mama [Mrs. Lola Boyd] she gets into the cleaning of the guts and stuff like that if anybody wants hog chitterlings and things like that.

Life: Do you still do that, ma’am?

Mrs. Lola Boyd: I did as long as I went to hog killings, but I ain’t been to the last two they’ve had over there, but yes, if anybody wants to eat, we do but so many people now have got so they don’t...
Topper uses a hand saw to cut the hams, shoulders, pork chops, and backbones.

The ax, as well as the saw, is used for butchering.

The cooking of the lard requires much stirring.

The men use sharp knives for the side meat.
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No woman is too young to cut fat and sausage meat.

A grinder prepares the meat for sausages.

The women stuff the sausages.

Finished sausages hang in the smoke house.
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want them—they just give them to somebody that does want them or bury them.

Life: [Mrs. Lola Boyd told us that the women usually work with the entrails.]

Mrs. Lola Boyd: When the entrails fall into the tub, they carry and dump them on a big table, and then the women separate the large intestines from the small intestines and cut the bladder off and throw it away. And then you strip that fat, what they call the gut fat—it looks like a big valance—I don’t know whether you’ve ever seen one or not but it’s wrinkled up, looks like a big curtain valance. Well, you strip that down off the little ones and then take them and link them from one hand to the other one and go out and strip them down and get all that stuff out the inside. And the big ones—you have to go there and separate them cause they’re curled, fastened differently to what the little ones are and you have to go there—separate them until you can get them in a long string and you also empty them. And when you get them all done, why then you have to take them and wash. We wash the outside of ‘em and then we get some water and turn them—take a long reed and turn the guts and you don’t put no water in that tub; you just turn them dry in it. Then you get a big container, a lot depends on how many guts you have—and salt and just wallow them, and wash them good in that salt to cut all that old slime and mess out of them. And then you add water to them.

Life: The men let the women do all this?

Mrs. Lola Boyd: I’ve not seen any men do that yet!

Life: I can’t imagine why!

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Mrs. Lola Boyd: It’s kind of a nasty job, but I’ve done it a many a year, I tell you that! Then we get us about four or five [containers of] clear water and wash them out of that salt and slimy water. Then they’re clean enough to put on and cook when you get a pot ready for them.

Life: Now, what people call chitterlings are the intestines?

Mrs. Lola Boyd: That’s right.

Life: Both small and the large?

Mrs. Lola Boyd: Yes. Some don’t like the large; some cleans them both and eats all of them. Now, my husband, he used to eat the large as well as the small ones. Then you put them in a pot later on when you get a pot. A lot of time they clean the feet and put them with the chitterlings to cook, you know, cook until they’re tender.

Life: The ladies are doing this with the guts, intestines and all that, and the hogs are still hanging up?

Mr. Boyd: Right.

Life: What do you do after you’ve gutted him?

Mr. Boyd: It’s time to take another drink then [laughter]!

Life: Ladies take a drink when they’re doing all that?

Mrs. Lola Boyd: I’ve never seen any of them! Maybe the younger set’s beginning to. I never was involved in any of that!
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Life: Okay!

Mr. Boyd: Then usually after you get the guts and everything out of them you wash them out good and leave them hanging and let them drip. Then you go back and take off the poles and throw them back into a trailer, truck or whatever you got to move them from one point to the other. Then you take them around to what they call a meat bench. Just throw them up on the meat bench and then you cut them up, depending on how a person wants them cut up. Only two ways I know. They call it the "old timey way" of cutting up hogs and they’re people that want pork chops and stuff like that; there’s another way of cutting them up.

First you got to take his head off; then throw him up on the table. The old timey way is you take an ax and cut from where his head is at, all the way to the back and take the backbone out, and then from there on you cut him up, depends on what a person wants. And the other way is to lay him on his side and come right back of his shoulder and take a hand saw and cut through the bone on that end, and to his hams on the other end. And then the middle part you come back around and take a hand saw and cut through the rib bones about two inches on each side of the back bone; that’s where you get your loins from, where pork chops come out of and hams. You know, old people used to didn’t have any way of slicing it up, I guess, so they either smoked it or ground it up into sausage, one or the other.

Mrs. Lola Boyd: Most people smoked their hams and shoulders.

Mr. Boyd: Then you had what they called the side meat—rib side meat or what have you. You could smoke that or cut it up into sausage, just depending on whatever a person wants—ever how he wants his meat to be.

Life: You see in convenience stores fried pork rind.

Mr. Boyd: Cracklings.

Life: Cracklings—that’s the skin?

Mr. Boyd: That’s the skin on the fat and everything that’s cut off when you trim your meat. Say if you’re going to have your ham for slicing—for cooking in the house or whatever—you’ll trim all the fat and skin off of them and then that goes into what they call lard. Most of the time more women folk cut up the majority of all the lard. You cut it in smaller pieces, and then you throw that in the pot and cook the lard until you get all the fat out of it and then you put it into a press and that’s what we call cracklings.

Mrs. Lola Boyd: But used to the older people would skin the meat; that’s where the meat skins come in at. They always skinned the meat, and then when you cut up fat and fried it; that’s what we call cracklings. But years later they quit skinning meat—I don’t know of anybody really now at a hog killing that skins meat. They cut skin and meat all together and it all goes as cracklings.

Mr. Boyd: Jesse [Mr. Boyd’s uncle] used to skin most of his meat.

Mrs. Lola Boyd: I don’t reckon there’s been none done since then. Cracklings are better if you cut that skin off, but it takes a whole lot longer and it’s harder work. There’s one thing about separating guts I forgot awhile ago and that’s what they call — you’ve probably heard what they call maw, but it’s actually the stomach. You have to separate it from the guts. You can skin that, take it
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out, split it, and skin the insides with all that food grounded up. Corn mostly, is dumped out and you can skin the outside of the maw and you can cook and eat that.

Life: So there’s not a whole lot that’s not eaten.

Mr. Boyd: Used to [be little left]. The younger generations quit eating more and more of it, you know. But used to there wasn’t anything threwed away, you know.

Mrs. Lola Boyd: And you had to separate it, like he was saying when you cut up the meat for the lard. There’s always lean meat in there, and you cut that up and lay it in a separate pile and grind it up for sausage. Then, you mix your seasoning into your meat for sausage and grind and stuff it into skins or keep it out for patties. Old people used to scrape the guts for stuffing sausage, but now we buy what we call skeins. Used to people only used sage, red pepper, and salt, but now they have packaged seasoning, so you just make it to fit your taste.

Life: What about the chitterlings? How do you cook them, fry them?

Mrs. Lola Boyd: They’re already cooked when you get through with them at a hog killing. You put them in a washing pot and just boil them with some salt until they get done. Now my husband, he always wanted his packed in jars and would pour vinegar to them. Now, my mama and daddy, they always wanted theirs fried over on the top of the stove in a frying pan and would eat them hot. So I guess, however, they’re already cooked, you might say, when you get through with them at a hog killing.

Mr. Boyd: When you take the guts out and clean them like Mama was telling you a while ago, then you took them and braided them and put them in a pot and cooked them.

Mrs. Lola Boyd: Braided the little ones.

Mr. Boyd: And you put them in a pot usually with the feet. Clean the feet and take the nails and everything off the feet and throw all them into a pot and cook for an hour, two hours, something like that.

Mrs. Lola Boyd: Couple hours, probably depending on how old the hogs are.

Mr. Boyd: Usually, when the feet are ready, they take everything up and the chitterlings are already done.

Mrs. Lola Boyd: A lot of people eat them just like that, they want ’em just like they come out of the pot while they’re good and hot.

Life: The chitterlings, I guess a lot of people don’t eat now.

Mr. Boyd: Most people don’t, but you can still go out to the Meat Farm, or whatever, and still buy chitterlings, you know. But I don’t eat them unless they were cleaned at our hog killing, because if they were cleaned here, I know they’re clean. When you buy them, you don’t know what you’re getting.

Mrs. Lola Boyd: Well, I’ve cleaned a many one, but I ain’t never learned to eat them.

Life: Have you ever eaten one at all?
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Mrs. Lola Boyd: I’ve tried them, but I just don’t like them.

Life: You like them?

Mr. Boyd: Yes, I eat ‘em.

Mrs. Lola Boyd: I think the scent of them is what turned me against them. Seems like they want to taste like that scent, you know, and after messing in them to start with.

Mr. Boyd: Well it’s kind of like cleaning chickens. After I’ve cleaned several chickens that day, I don’t want chicken for supper. You know, you still get that smell!

Life: Have you had any unusual things happen, like maybe not killing one when you first shot him?

Mr. Boyd: Oh, yes! I’ve missed before. See, if you don’t hit him in the brain, they don’t drop. And sometimes you get ready to pull the trigger, and if they flinch their head a little bit, your shot will be off. If your shell or gun is old, they don’t have the knock-down power. Just like if you’re hunting a deer, the difference between a 30-30 and a 306, your killing power.

Life: Is someone restraining them when you shoot him?

Mr. Boyd: No, they’re just in a pen. I’ve never done it myself, but they used to knock them in the head with an ax. That’s the reason my daddy bought a .22 rifle back in the [nineteen] twenties, I reckon. You had to hold the hog and knock him in the head with an ax.

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I have seen when you shot him, he would fall down, and you would stick him and he’d bleed. Then you’d load him up and put him in the vat, and he’d try to get out of the vat! I know it doesn’t seem right and I don’t know how [it happened] and can’t explain it, but I have seen it a few times.

Life: How does the hog killing like you do differ from the huge operations going on today?

Mr. Boyd: The big operations are run by machines.

Life: What about the problems with waste of the huge operations?

Mr. Boyd: There are so many hogs, it’s just a problem. They dump all the waste in a hole. When it rains, the hole fills up and dumps pollution out in the environment.

Life: Do you think small farmers now can make a living just raising a few hogs?

Mr. Boyd: It’s got to the point now they have to be sold and graded.

Mrs. Lola Boyd: The rules [about hog farming] now have got so strict on a small farmer that they can’t do anything.

Life: How long have the rules been real strict?
Mrs. Lola Boyd and journalism student John Ray enjoy Topper's tales.

Mr. Boyd: For the last ten years now.

Life: So family hog killing like you do is going to fade out?

Mr. Boyd: Yes.

**Conclusion**

**By John Ray**

Before doing this interview, I had no idea about the processes involved in hog killings. As distasteful to some as butchering a
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hog may be, the practice is necessary because all of us have to eat—plus I enjoy a good pig picking!

Mr. Topper Boyd and Miss Lola gave us detailed information about the killing of the hogs. They told us how they worked together as a family. The men were responsible for the killing and boiling of the hogs; the women gutted, cleaned, and divided the hogs. The women, I would have to say, got the sloppier part of the job.

On the night of the interview, the Boyds also displayed the best of the legendary “Down East,” help-your-neighbor hospitality. I was running late, which is nothing unusual for me. I passed their house, pulled off on the side of the road to turn around, and got stuck in the ditch. I was going to call a friend after the interview, but Mr. Topper Boyd and his son, who had come in during the interview, without hesitation, pulled me out. To top it off, they gave me a half gallon of delicious home-made red wine!