

THE "TIMES" PRIZE-WINNING COLUMN



From **ALMAR FARM**
In Transylvania
BY CAL CARPENTER

This is the hog-killing season. Anywhere from Thanksgiving until the end of December is the best time if you plan to country-cure the meat. It's therefore a good time for a couple of columns on that subject.

First I should say that anytime is hog-killing time if you don't plan to do country curing. Modern meat processing plants, with their efficient coolers and freezers have taken the season out of this old-time happening. And the same is true with beef-killing.

But there was a time, before the advent of local packing houses and home freezers, when meat slaughtering was a cold season thing because most meat preserving processes had to begin in cold weather.

There are many ways of preserving meat other than the modern one, all developed out of necessity over the years. Beef (and bear meat, venison, and mutton) can just simply be hung up and cured after a fashion — if the weather is right when it is first killed and stays right for a few weeks.

Right means that it is cold enough to immediately chill out the animal heat and stays cold enough so that the temperature at the bone in a piece of meat does not remain for any length of time above 45 degrees Fahrenheit.

This process allows a natural preservation, particularly in beef, that produces steaks and roasts hard to beat, but it is good only through the winter months.

For, with the coming of warm weather, there is a heavy spoilage on the outside of the meat, necessitating a lot of trimming before eating and heavy waste. With the coming of hot weather, any remaining beef is a total loss because of souring from the bone out, for the meat is never truly hot-weather preserved in this method.

There is also the "jerky" process for beef and wild meats. This consists of thin-stripping the lean meat and smoke drying, a process similar to the sun-drying technique our plains Indians had been using for hundreds of years when the white man first came. There is also "corning", or the process of packing meat in salt brine. This method of preservation is old too; it once provided the only meat available on long sailing ship voyages.

But the meat curing done in this area today is largely salt-curing, or country-curing pork. The process is also called sugar curing. I've done a goodly amount of this at ALMAR Farm and I've learned a lot by talking to older-timers and reading state and federal government pork-curing booklets. I've come up with a process that completely suits me.

I've written my country ham (and shoulder too, of course) curing process in these columns and in my 1969 book, "The Best From ALMAR Farm in Western North Carolina." I shall give it again later in this column for those who don't have a copy available and maybe want to beat the high price of meat nowadays and at the same

time enjoy a real taste treat, by curing their own country ham.

For actually, you don't have to live on a farm to do this. Fresh-killed hams and shoulders can be bought at packing houses. All the rest you need is an unheated room and a little knowhow.

As I noted in the first write-up some years back, everyone who has experience in country-curing hams has his own process and every process I ran across was different. I spent considerable time rationalizing the many processes I heard and the government-recommended cures into the one I use.

I don't urge my process on anyone who has experience and is satisfied with his results. As the old saying goes, "all roads lead to Rome," so there are no doubt other ways. I would note, however, that there are four traditional requirements for good country-cured hams. My process meets these and any that does not is depriving someone of an old-fashioned taste experience unique among foods. The requirement:

One, it is not salty. This is the major fault of most commercially-cured hams I've tried. They're usually cured too hurriedly and the only way to do that and avoid a too-high risk of spoilage is to use heavy amounts of salt.

This is done either by injecting the salt solution into the veins with hypodermic needles or actually packing the hams in salt brine. They may be smoked later, but in my opinion this is about as far from real country-cured ham as you can get. These should not be sold under that name — they ought to be properly labeled as "corned ham," or "corned smoked ham."

Two, it is tender and has a distinctive, faintly sweetish taste. It should be kept in mind that curing meat is what might be called a controlled putrefaction process. The meat changes toward decomposition but in a way that is desirable rather than the usually undesirable. In good country ham the slow process results in a tenderness — not the leather toughness associated with "corned" meat; and produces the faintly sweet flavor. It has a special taste in a class all by itself, and once tried will never be confused with "corned" ham again.

Three, it has a powerful, penetrating smell. One piece of frying country ham in the morning will arouse a household with appetites honed like nothing else can do. It smells something like it tastes, faintly sweetish (if there's such a thing as a sweetish smell.)

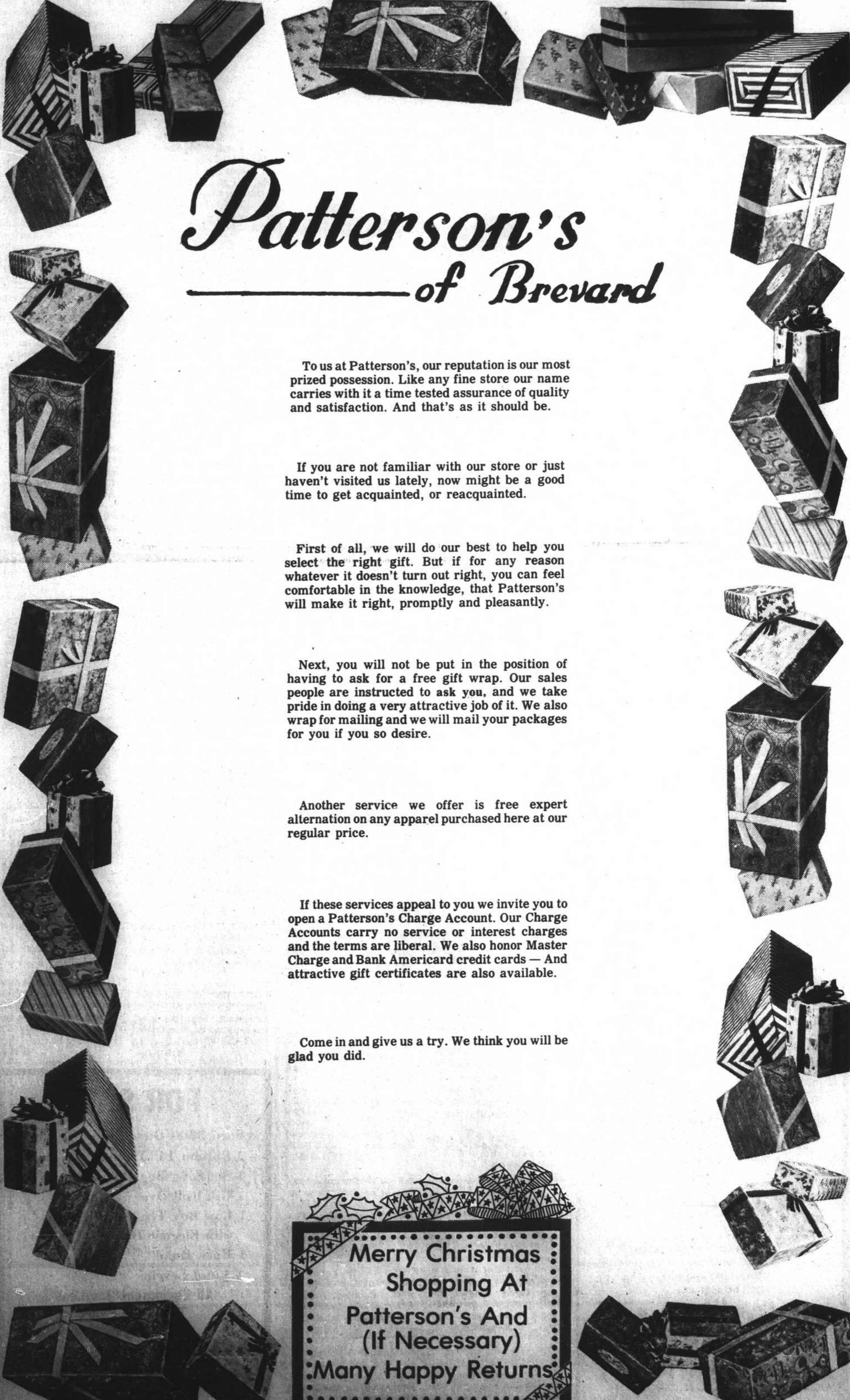
Four, it produces a faintly iridescent grease that is the unique ingredient of "Red eye" gravy. The surface of the ham, hot in a pan, shows a greenish iridescence. The grease from this properly mixed with water, will have one or more round, reddish spots like big red eyes looking up from the bowl — thus "Red eye" gravy. Coffee can be used instead of water in making the produce (my own coinage) "Brown eye" gravy.

(To Be Continued)

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