

Weather

Partly cloudy today. Fair and clear
Friday, Saturday with warming
trend Sunday

The Mount Airy News

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89TH YEAR - NO. 50

MOUNT AIRY, TUESDAY, JUNE 15, 1970

15 CENTS PER COPY

At Ray's 4,000 Hams Cured Old Timey Way

By Otis Gossman
Business-Fares Editor

MOUNT AIRY - Ray Goad tells the story of a gentleman from the north who received some country ham cured the old fashioned way. The gentleman, after getting a whiff of the heady aroma and eying a rather heavy coating of mold on the outside of the ham, promptly dispatched everything but the aroma into the garbage.

A few hundred feet from the office here where Goad watches over his 21-chain restaurant operation in a new building that would give the gentleman from the north an uneasy pause. But for those addicted to country ham cured over the long route, the building is apt to cause a certain watering of the mouth.

At the moment the building is home for about 4,000 hams averaging about 18-20 pound each. Building and contents are worth about \$75,000.

Now ham houses are nothing new under the sun. What is new is that the smaller ones which have been responsible for turning out long-cured country hams have fallen upon hard times - the result of a recently enacted state inspection law.

Rather than unleash the money - even if they had it - to bring their operations up to par, most operators have simply called it quits. Some people would hold that this is a good idea but at the same time it comes pretty close to spelling finis for the old method of turning out hams.

One of those who decided to call it quits was Walter Sparger, a 72-year-old gentleman from Low Gap who has been curing hams commercially for about 40 years. More important, Sparger had been supplying Ray's Starlight Restaurant here with country hams.

Quick Cure Method

The prospect of losing his supply and having to buy the 90-day "quick-cured" hams gave Goad sort of a nervous stomach. Goad is just like that with the country hams that greased his path from a side-of-the-road eatery in Pinnacle 15 years ago to a chain grossing several million dollars annually today.

The solution was an arrangement with Sparger whereby Goad would put up the building and Sparger would put up the know how. Apparently the plan is off to a good start.

Sparger, incidentally sees nothing wrong with the quick cure method used by virtually all other commercial packers. He says it's fine one is willing to accept "half the flavor".



Walter Sparger and Ray Goad examine country hams curing the old-fashioned way.

Staff Photo by Jim Keith

Once a Year

The quick cure method obviously is more economical. It takes 75 days rather than six months. It can be done all year long. Shrinkage is about 10 per cent compared to 20-25 per cent via the longer method.

The old method, is one used for uncounted years. Hogs were killed once a year during winter. The hams were salted for a month and then hung. Salt penetrates to the bone, making refrigeration unnecessary.

A really first rate country ham, according to Goad and Sparger is one just over a year old. Kept much longer than that and the meat is apt to become stringy and what have you.

Half of the hams in Goad's building were placed there in December and now have been put in "stockings" and hung up. The stocking help give the ham its shape. The first batch will be ready about July.

The second 2,000 (those in the photograph) were scheduled to be hung up just before the weekend.

Most of the hams are destined for the Starlite here, another on Stratford Road in Winston-Salem scheduled for early summer opening, and still another in Virginia.

Goad is enough of a businessman to know that the costs related to his country ham operation will not be recouped easily. Basically it boils down to a merchandising matter - having something no other restaurant is likely to have.

"Competition is getting keener all the time and you have to look for new ideas," was his way of putting it. Whatever the reason, it's sort of reassuring to see something done the old way linger around a while longer.

The hams themselves are bought from commercial packers the day after slaughter. From then onout the state keeps a watchful eye on the process - checking the temperature of the meat and even keeping the inspection stamp under lock and kept at the ham house.

The wood stanchions in the house are not allowed to be either painted nor stained, to cite just one of the rules the operator must live with.

Sparger's reputation has even received the blessing of Col. Harlan Sanders the founder of the Kentucky Friend Chicken chain.

Once he paused for breakfast at Ray's Starlite here and apparently was so impressed by the country ham that he asked where they came from. He later visited Sparger to arrange for a supply but was politely turned down. Sparger said he had all the business he could take care of.

And he still does.

(Facsimile from image of original - hand dated 1970)