

The Beef Ring

Around the end of the 19th century ... rural people developed creative solutions for providing fresh food ...

Mid-July heat. No deep-freeze units. The closest meat market at least an hour by horse. Yet many farm families were not deprived of a fresh supply of meat in those early summers, thanks to the “beef ring”.

Seventeen or eighteen farmers would form a ring, and each would be expected to provide a beast of a stated weight range once during the summer months – each, that is except the farmer who acted as butcher. He paid for his beef with services rendered.

Friday the critter was delivered to the butcher’s farm. It was slaughtered and cut. Along the wall of the slaughterhouse were cubicles, one for each member of the ring. The standard cuts had been charted. Today the Jones family was slated to receive the shoulder roast, and next week they would get some rump cuts.

Early Saturday morning the roads were busy. The older youths came from miles around, each carrying a fresh white sugar sack. Maybe they would pick up meat for a neighbour or two as well. A little socializing, a word about the weather and the state of haying, and they were off home.

Always, fresh meat was cooked for Sunday dinner – enough to last into the week. What couldn’t be kept safely, considering the limited “refrigeration”, was quickly canned or fried down and sealed in jars for a future meal.

Never a dollar exchanged hands throughout the summer. The transaction was based on a neighbourly sense of common need and cooperative effort.

Today motors, machines, a clerk behind a counter, and cash are supposed to satisfy our needs. We live a sterile existence in more ways than one!

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