

FAMILY BUSINESS

Introduction

The following ethnographic account was done with the Speelman family of Grants Pass, Oregon. The Speelman family is my own family and I interviewed my grandfather, my father, his brothers and other family members. This work is therefore done from an emic perspective. These are my family members and I grew up at Alpine Meat Company. This can potentially call into question the objectivity my research. My position in this regard is like that of Barbara Myerhoff when she was doing her fieldwork for *Number Our Days*. In Victor Turner's foreword for the book, he refers to it as being "thrice-born" in the anthropological sense. "The third birth occurs when we have become comfortable within the other culture—and found the clue to grasping many like it—and turn our gaze again toward our native land" (Turner, xiii). Raised within the Speelman family, when the time came for me to consider a career path, I did not choose to remain in Grants Pass and learn the butchering trade. Instead, I set off for the world of academia, which may as well be a foreign country when compared to Alpine life. My father, Dan Speelman, was and remains the only one of his siblings to attend college. I have thus been removed from the family business for twelve years.

My decision to conduct fieldwork with my family was in no small part influenced by the bioregionalism movement. In his essay, *Living by Life*, Jim Dodge says, "to understand natural systems is to begin an understanding of the self, its common and particular essences—literal self interest in its barest terms" (Dodge, 2). A true understanding of myself must include an understanding of the natural environment around me, and in cyclical fashion, coming to a better understanding of my family and the circumstances and culture I was raised in will

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ostensibly give me a better knowledge and understanding of my natural environment. It is with this in mind that I began my fieldwork process.

From Early October 2015 to late November 2015 I conducted several interviews with my family members. I began with my father, Dan Speelman who is the organic intellectual of the family. In November, I took advantage of my family's annual gathering on the Thanksgiving holiday to continue to interview my dad, and add interviews with my grandpa, Jim Speelman, my grandma, Lillian Speelman, my mother, Diane Speelman, my Uncles Roy and Joe Speelman and my brother, Denver Speelman. All of these interviews I recorded on video. Before beginning the interviews, I conducted research on butchering and slaughterhouses in general within an American context. Specifically, I focused on traditional methods of butchering in the united states, and the shift from small, local butchering to large, industrialized slaughterhouses after the USDA was established in the mid-1800s. This interested me in particular because of my study of bioregionalism and other environmental movements which put great emphasis on producing things locally.

It strikes me that, due to the intersection we commonly see between environmentalist movements and animal rights movements, the push to foster more local butchering is not as emphasized as that of buying local produce, clothing and crafts. Granted this de-emphasization is not universal in the movements, but it is undoubtedly there. As Dan Speelman observed in my interviews, "right now people are so disconnected from reality when it comes to the food they eat. They go to the grocery store, they see the steak that's wrapped and they think, "oh, ok that's meat." They have no concept what process that animal has gone through to get to

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where it's at today. And I think that's totally unfortunate." Slaughtering and butchering animals is not a pretty business, but as we are not a society that is 100% vegetarian, it is necessary. And yet, we continue to distance ourselves from both the animals we eat, and the process they go through between the farm and the little trays of plastic-wrapped meats in grocery store coolers.

As mentioned briefly above, I interviewed 7 Speelman family members. Those family members were Jim Speelman, the family patriarch and the first member of the family to become a butcher, his wife, Lillian Speelman, their sons (from oldest to youngest) Dan Speelman, Joe Speelman and Roy Speelman who have, at one point or another, worked as butchers. I also interviewed Dan's wife, Diane Speelman in order to show the perspective of someone who came from outside the Speelman family and adjusted to life on the meat plant. Lastly, I interviewed Denver Speelman, the son of Dan and Diane Speelman in order to include some perspective from a third generation that was raised in the Speelman family butchering tradition. For a simple family chart, see figure 1. The ages of my informants are as follows; Jim aged 84, Lillian aged 80, Dan aged 59, Joe aged 57, Roy aged 51, Diane aged 60 and Denver aged 28.

Alpine Meat Company

While butchering has been a family trade for the Speelmans since the 1940s, they did not always own their own meat company. Jim Speelman started working at a butchering company at age 10 or 11 in Ontario, Oregon. His first job was at Ontario Meat Company. Jim was born in 1931. He worked at several different meat plants after that before finally getting a job around 1955 which would have been after Jim and Lillian's daughter, Janet

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was born, but before their oldest son, Dan was born. Dan estimates that Alpine was built in the 1920s. The building sat on the banks Rogue River in the town of Grants Pass, Oregon. Grants Pass is roughly 45 minutes to an hour North of the Oregon/California border and approximately

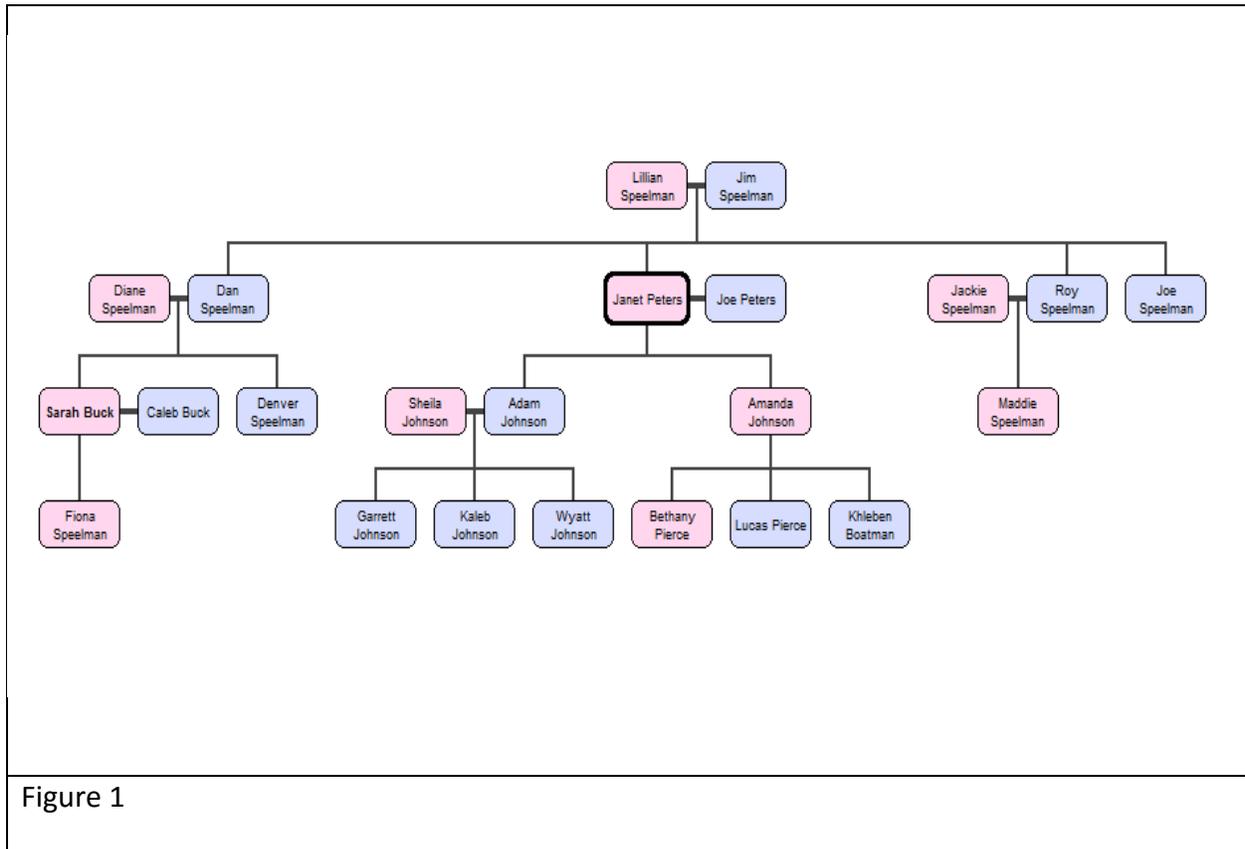


Figure 1

an hour and 30 minutes west of Brookings on the Oregon Coast. When Alpine was built, there was a feed lot on the grounds as well as the slaughtering floor and the processing floor. The feed lot was used to feed the animals that they raised and then butchered on site. Dan reports that Alpine was one of “6 or 7 different little plants here in the valley.”

It seems that rural Oregon remained free of the suffocating grip of the USDA longer than other areas. The Rogue Valley remained relatively untouched until the early 70s when, Dan

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says, they came in and “started basically just making up a lotta rules that just made it practically impossible for them to keep their kill floor open and keep their USDA inspector approval there.” As the words “inspector” and “approval” roll off Dan’s tongue he gives a roll of his eyes. The Speelman family has strong feelings about the USDA, who they view as somewhat tyrannical and definitely haughty.

In many cases, when the USDA got a hold of a small custom butchering plant, the plant ceased to exist entirely. Alpine, however, survived the tightening of the administrative noose by buying themselves a mobile slaughter truck. Equipped with hoses, tracks to hang carcasses from which are encapsulated by a large steel box, a mobile slaughter truck that drives to clients’ homes to dispatch animals, which they drive back to the plant for processing. The USDA (in theory) demands to inspect any animal that is going to be sold commercially daily. It is also in the USDA’s best interests to keep as much of the Nation’s meat supply at the large, industrial complexes as possible, which leaves many custom butcherers feeling extra, and potentially undue pressure from the USDA inspectors. The loop hole is, of course, people raising their own animals and calling on the services of businesses like Alpine when it comes time to eat them. As Dan says, “if I wanted to sell you a cow, I could sell it to you and then as long as I was state inspected and everything, then I could process the animal for you. So, it’s different, if you’ve seen the cow you know if it’s healthy or not.”

Not long after Alpine bought what they called the “kill truck,” Joe Speelman bought the kill truck from them. Joe had started working at Alpine around age 15, as Jim recalls it, “mostly cleaning.” After graduating from Grants Pass High School in 1978, Joe went to work at Alpine

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full time. After purchasing the kill truck, Joe did the remote butchering, and the owners of Alpine ran the plant proper where the animals were processed. In 1980, after the owners had, Dan reports, “run off a lot of the customers,” Jim and Joe Speelman decided to buy the entirety of Alpine Meat Company. In 1981, Dan Speelman married his wife, Diane and moved back to Grants Pass from Eastern Oregon to help run the plant with his father and brother.

The Folklore of Butchering

In his essay *Toward a Definition of Folklore in Context*, Dan Ben-Amos broadly describes folklore thus: “folklore is one of these three: a body of knowledge, a mode of thought, or a kind of art.” (Ben-Amos, 5) In Ben-Amos’ point of view, these three categories are not exclusive to themselves. Frequently folkloric content situates itself within two or even all three of the categories. For the purposes of this essay, however, we will be viewing the Speelman family butchering trade as a body of knowledge. To specify what Ben-Amos means by a body of knowledge, he employs three more subcategories. Social context, time depth and medium of transmission. The social context of a folkloric body of knowledge he quantifies as communal possession, time depth as antiquity and medium of transmission as verbal or imitative.

In the Speelman family, their butchering knowledge was passed down from father to son, and from brother to brother. While this was common in family run butchering families before the mid-1800s, it defies the contemporary model of transmission of butchering knowledge, giving the Speelman family’s business a unique folkloric bent. The methods used by the Speelmans when butchering vary very little from the butchering techniques used hundreds of years ago, which means that the Speelman family possesses a communal knowledge of

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butchering that is a small cross-section of antiquity which is transmitted through family members verbally and through imitation.

Jim himself reports that most of his butchering knowledge was picked up through imitation. As established, he was helping around meat plants from around the age of 10 or 11, becoming an official employee of Ontario Meat Company at age 15. Jim tells a story about when he was 10 or 11 and his duties were “draggin’ guts, pumpin’ water through the hog vats. All that kinda stuff.” Jim says the men working at the meat plant were drunks, and that one day, while they were processing hogs, they had dispatched 6 of them and had a 7th to do. “It took ‘em long enough to do that last hog that I had time to wash them all down, shave ‘em, gut ‘em out and have ‘em all ready by the time they got that last hog done.” This story is particularly fascinating not only because of the sheer amount of knowledge and strength an 11-year-old would have had to have picked up to even do this work, but also because here Jim is reporting to have learned in 1941 or 1942 the traditional butchering techniques used by generations before him. In very similar fashion, Jim’s sons report to have learned butchering from their time spent at the plant as young boys.

Dan says, “Well, I grew up in the meat business, so I kinda just picked it up from multiple people. But part of it was from Leo Berg when I worked at Cartwright’s Valley Meat Company here in Grants Pass and that’s when I was just out of high school. I worked at Alpine Meat Company a little when I was a kid so I picked up a little there...and then when I came back [from teaching in Eastern Oregon] to run the meat plant, and actually my brother [Joe] showed me again kind of the basics, and then I took it from there.”

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Roy Speelman also reported that the majority of his butchering knowledge came from his brother, Joe Speelman. Joe reports that he was taught by his father, Jim Speelman, and a couple other long-standing meat plant employees. In every case, the education in slaughtering and butchering was never formal, but instead an accumulation of techniques learned through imitation of their seniors. In all 4 cases, the Speelman men started very young. Jim's sons were interpolated into butchering culture even younger than he himself was. Dan estimates he shot his first hog at the age of 6 with a 22 caliber rifle under the supervision of one of Jim's co-workers. When I asked him if he hit the animal Dan said "oh, yeah," as if it were unthinkable that one could miss. This shows that, even at the age of 6, Dan had already started acquiring slaughtering and butchering knowledge.

It should be noted at this point that I have thus-far been speaking primarily about the men in the Speelman family since they were the ones slaughtering and butchering animals. However, it is important to point out that the women of the Speelman family were not exempt from this communally possessed knowledge. The Speelman women, namely Lillian and Janet, took up the important station of meat-wrappers, and, as mentioned previously, Janet ended up handling paper and office work once Jim and Joe had purchased Alpine. She was, in essence, HR, Accounting and management staff all rolled into one. While the Speelman women were not expected to participate in slaughtering and butchering, this did not mean they were ignorant of the process and techniques.

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“They knew what was going on,” said Dan, “they knew what the individual pieces of meat should look like so that if there was something that looked out of the ordinary they would ask about it and make sure that it was getting done the way it was supposed to get done.”

Lillian Speelman not only told me that, as a child, her family butchered their own chickens, but also that when she met Jim when she was 16 years old (Jim would have been 20) she would ride with him on long treks to Baker, Oregon from where she lived in Vale, Oregon. Lillian was not only company for Jim on the long journeys (80 miles one way) but, as she puts it, “I’d do the bookwork and collect the money while he delivered meat to the people.”

On the subject of time depth, the process the Speelman family uses for butchering is very different than the process used by large, industrialized butchering factories. Their process is nearly identical to much earlier practices that would have been brought to the United States from Europe. At the living history site, Connor Prairie in Fisher, Indiana they have a program designed to preserve the traditional butchering methods of early America. Their early 19th century method of butchering hogs follows these steps:

“The first step is to humanely put the animal down. The animal is first shot in the forehead. The correct spot is identified by mentally visualizing an X running from ears to eyes. Copper-encased .22 caliber bullets are used so there will be no chance of lead fragments in the meat. The next step is “sticking” the animal. Sticking is the term for cutting the jugular vein in the neck. This is done to remove all the blood from the animal.” (Sargent, 20)

The 3rd step is scalding the hog, the 4th scraping. This is followed with hanging, then gutting and then the actual processing of the carcass into the cuts of meat that will later be eaten. When I asked Dan Speelman to recount the steps they used to butcher hogs, the steps were more or less identical. The biggest difference is, of course, the tools used. In the early

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1800s, a scraping knife would have been used to scrape the animal (the process of removing hair from the skin) but by the time Jim was helping out at a meat plant, it was more common to have a de-hairing machine the freshly scalded hogs went into. When Joe began mobile butchering for Alpine, the scraping process became problematic due to time. The kill truck travels to multiple farms a day to slaughter animals on site, so it became common practice to skin the animals rather than scald and scrape them. Even taking these changes in technology into account, the Speelmans butchered nearly the same way people had centuries before them.

I suggest that this accounts for Ben-Amos' concept of antiquity. The knowledge is not really passed down as a survivalism, but more like a truth, a nearly perfectly preserved slice of antiquity. The Speelman family is almost unaware of their preservation efforts. They certainly feel their techniques involve skill and with pride speak about the quality of their work, but their craft was honed and shared not under the desire to preserve an old tradition, but with the belief that custom/home butchering was the way it should be done.

Environmental Leanings in Custom Butchering

One of the more fascinating things I observed when conducting my interviews, was the tendency for the Speelmans' beliefs about the USDA and locally sourced food and the interconnectedness they see lacking in people's relationship with their food to be in concert with environmentalist movements like bioregionalism, and others that support a more locally minded, subsistence based food economy. The Speelmans themselves (at least those who do not refuse to talk politics) identify most strongly with conservative republicans, and speak of animal rights activists with the same ire they reserve for USDA inspectors. Dan Speelman

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seemed to feel misunderstood and demonized by such movements. Which is certainly not without reason.

Caring for animals in the Speelman family is an important part of what they do. Animals are named, fed, cared for and respected even though they will someday become food. The misconception that people who slaughter animals do not form attachments to their livestock because of the reality of the animal's purpose is wildly unfounded in the case of the Speelmans. Dan even bemoans the amount of waste the industrial butchering plants accrue. He explains, "years ago a lot of people used to eat liver and heart, and tongue...and I remember that, when I was a kid running around the meat plant they made lard...and that's a lot different than opening up a little bottle of corn oil or canola oil...they're totally disconnected from the process of what it takes to prepare their food."

Here we have a strange and rare intersection of interests and beliefs between the far left and the far right. For a moment, both the conservative and the liberal are bemoaning the loss of a locally sourced food economy. Their rhetoric is similar right down to their mutual distaste for the government bodies tasked with monitoring and inspecting the farms and slaughter houses.

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