

the appearance of a taboo on the consumption of pork. Bereft of trees, the common folk of Scotland and Ireland stopped raising pigs; they turned against pork and came close to abominating the animal itself in the Old Testament manner. Early in the eighteenth century the pig's reputation had sunk so low in Scotland and Ireland that the mere sight of one brought bad luck. Modern-day Scots find this hard to believe because pork once again ranks high among their preferred foods. What happened was that the pig regained its popularity when potatoes were introduced. Pigs became good to think again when they acquired a new ecological niche, rooting for leftovers in the potato fields. But remnants of the pig taboo show up along the Maine coast where descendants of the early Scotch-Irish immigrants still say that the sight of a pig brings bad luck to mariners.

The American aversion to mutton and lamb was likewise linked to the British woollens industry. English mercantile policy dictated that the American colonies, like Scotland, should grow wool but should not manufacture woollens for export. So raising sheep could not be as profitable as raising pork and beef, which, as I pointed out in the previous chapter, the English were eager to import in prodigious amounts. Gradually the taste of lamb and especially mutton became unfamiliar to the majority of Americans except in New England, where independence led to a surge in woollen manufacture and an increase in sheep grazing, centered in Vermont. Southerners, lacking a woollens industry and happy to wear cotton garments, experienced a more thorough extinction of the taste for lamb and mutton than northerners. In fact many southerners to this day do not distinguish between sheep and goat as a source of meat and regard the one with as much displeasure as the other.

Just before the Civil War, mutton and lamb accounted for about 10 percent of all the fresh meat slaughtered in New York. But as dairying replaced sheepherding throughout New England, the center of sheep production moved further west, and the cost of transportation made lamb and mutton less competitive. Finally, with the twentieth century and the development of synthetic

fabrics, wool lost much of its market. Sheepherding became confined to the most remote western rangelands, and despite the twentieth-century boom in meat eating, the consumption of lamb and mutton continues to dwindle.

The other side of America's diminishing interest in raising and eating goats and sheep (and abiding rejection of horsemeat) is the ready availability of pork, beef, and veal as substitutes for goats, mutton, and lamb. Under the ecological and demographic conditions which prevailed during Colonial times, the colonists found pigs and cattle to be more efficient sources of meat than goats or sheep, and this explains why pigs and cattle have until recently been the main contenders for America's most preferred meat (I will get to chickens later on).

The dense American forests provided an especially favorable habitat for raising pigs. All the colonists had to do was rid the woods of Indians and wolves, and thereafter the acorns, beech-nuts, hazelnuts, and the hardy breeds known as "wood pigs" did the rest themselves. In the northern colonies pigs rooted for their living during the spring, summer, and fall, but were put in pens for the winter. From Virginia south, farmers left them on their own throughout the year except for brief farrowing roundups when the sows were enticed into pens with bribes of corn. Before long, many farmers discovered that when pigs were fed on corn for a month or so before slaughter, their flesh firmed and they gained weight rapidly. By 1700 "finishing" hogs on corn had become an established commercial practice.

The wedding of pigs and corn was made in heaven. Pigs can convert corn to meat about five times more efficiently than cattle. Pigs, therefore, could be raised for most of their lives on free "pasture"—the bounty of the forest floor—and then brought to market weight by feeding on surplus corn, far more efficiently than cattle could be raised by similar methods. Although some colonists also let their cattle loose to roam in the woods, ruminants could not match pigs as a source of meat under such conditions. Lacking natural pasture, cattle were better used as a source of milk, butter, cheese, and traction, and much of the beef and veal