



# Smokehouse trick and treats

BY LAURA HUNT ANGEL  
MESSENGER FOOD COLUMNIST

When I was a young girl, I enjoyed exploring nature, finding mystery in the most ordinary of places and objects. For one whole summer I occupied myself digging through a pile of river gravel that had been dumped in our driveway. It was loaded with fossils of fish, insects and many creatures that I'd never seen before. My father would often come home from work to find me covered with dust, busy with my "dig." Like him, I enjoyed the act of discovery and quickly became engrossed in my finds. Not having the heart to spread the gravel in the drive and thus spoil my fun, he left it as it was until school started up that fall. That summer, he told me lots of stories of his own childhood exploration, including this one of how he discovered an ancient Indian burial mound not far from his home, and spent a summer exploring the site.

### A Mysterious Hill

It was 1933 and the entire country was in the midst of a great economic collapse that folks had taken to calling the Depression. In the cities, people were lining up for bread, and a few had become so disheartened that they had taken their own lives by jumping off of high rise buildings. Out west, the country was experiencing a drought the likes of which no one living had ever experienced before, and great clouds of dust were choking crops, cattle and even people.

The hardships facing the nation had reached all the way to western Kentucky, too, where my father, Spencer Hunt was about to turn eleven years old. When he wasn't in school, and when his mother didn't need him around the home place, he was free to roam the woods and hillsides, busying himself with trapping, fishing, and gathering ginseng.

On this particular morning he did not have anything pressing to do. As usual, he awoke early, and while the autumn mist still lay low on the hillside he had piled enough wood for the day's cooking in the bin just outside the door. He had trained his little dog to carry wood, too, and together they made quick, fun work of the task.

While his mother made biscuits and tended to his baby sisters, my father fetched bacon from the smokehouse, an older sister drew water from the cistern and his little brother gathered eggs.

After breakfast, he grabbed an extra biscuit, poked a slice of bacon into its middle and headed out the door. It was Saturday, and with no school, no church and the chores done, the day was his. Making his way down the hill below the house, he crossed the old iron bridge where to his left and just off in the trees, a spring trickled by. Water from the spring flowed into a stone sink that his Uncle Tom had carved out years ago, and he stopped at the spring to scoop some of the icy cold water into his hands for a quick drink. He then headed down to Highway 41 and across the tracks that lay alongside it.

Aunt Vessie's farmhouse was on the hill in front of him. It seemed much bigger than his house, and he stood looking at it for a few minutes before turning to make his way down a long dirt trail. Walking along, he occupied himself identifying wildflowers along the trail, and was practicing bird calls when he noticed an odd looking hill not far off the trail.

He decided to do some exploring, and before long discovered that here and there were thin, flat stones poking through the soil: arrowheads. He had found an old Indian mound. His curiosity fired, he wondered what else he might find there. Throughout the summer



With the same rich flavor as that coveted last slice of glazed holiday ham, you'll be hard pressed to share this maple and brown sugar-candied bacon.



The sweet and smokey taste of Butter Brickle Bacon Bark will transport you to an old-fashioned country kitchen.

whenever he could, he'd pack a small lunch of salty ham, home cured bacon or even a chicken leg with a leftover biscuit and head back out to the mound. Over the weeks he found several more arrowheads and even some pottery shards, which he excitedly carried home to show his mother. He wanted to know more about the Indians that had lived there.

One morning, shortly after he began digging, his shovel pinged against something hard in the mound. Thinking it was a large stone, he squatted down and set about removing it so that he could continue his exploring. After a few handfuls of earth, he realized that his shovel had not hit a stone but rather, a skull. Overjoyed with his discovery, he tucked it in his sack and headed home.

Bringing his discovery into the house, his mother's eyes grew wide and she very

sternly told him that the skull undoubtedly belonged to an old Indian, and that he absolutely could not keep it. She ordered him to return it to the mound right away. Disappointed, he took the skull outside and nothing more was said on the matter.

### The Smokehouse

A week or so later, my father heard a scream outside and he hurried out to see what had happened. He found mother leaning against the smokehouse, her face drained and clutching her chest. Immediately he knew he was in trouble. As his mother had reached up to unhook a slab of bacon, her hand brushed against something unfamiliar that was resting on the ledge above the bacon. The smokehouse was dark, so she grabbed hold of the object and took it from the ledge to get a better look. To her horror, she was holding the very skull in her



The sweet and smokey taste of Butter Brickle Bacon Bark will transport you to an old-fashioned country kitchen.

hands.

My father had never seen his mother that frightened before, and was somewhat proud that he had been the one to administer such a good scare. But no amount of explaining could convince her took let him keep the skull, so right then he took back to the mound and buried it as his mother had told him to.

He never did learn for certain who the Indians were that lived near the mound, so close to his home and yet so far away in time.

### The Recipes

Here are some smokehouse treats that you can make for yourself, including an old recipe for the same country bacon that would have hung in my grandmother's smokehouse.

#### Dry Cured Country Bacon

This recipe makes enough dry cure for 6 pounds of pork belly. Before the days of refrigeration, folks usually cured pork in the colder months, but modern curing under refrigeration ensures a safe product and improved overall quality. Double or triple the amount of cure according to the weight of the meat you intend to cure. It is not essential to use curing salt to cure meat, but it will help prevent mold and keep the meat fresh longer. You may add other seasoning such as pepper or use maple sugar in place of the brown sugar, but be sure to keep the ratio of salt to meat or the bacon will not cure properly.

- 1 6-pound piece fresh, unsliced pork belly
- 1 1/2 cups kosher salt (not table salt)
- 3/4 cup brown sugar
- 3 teaspoons pink curing salt (like Morton Tenderquick)

Lay the pork belly on a wooden cutting board large enough to fit the whole slab. Mix together remaining ingredients and thoroughly rub the mixture on the meat. Place the meat in a large food storage bag or set it on a rack in a large sealable container. Allow the meat to cure for 1 week,

turning it daily. After the week of curing, remove the bacon, rinse off the cure and dry it well. Smoke the bacon at 200 degrees for 2 hours. Alternatively, you can cook the bacon in the oven at 200 for 1 1/2-2 hours. Afterwards refrigerate the bacon; slice and fry as needed. NOTE: Don't forget to remove the rind (skin) from the bacon before frying.

#### Maple And Brown Sugar Candied Bacon

This is a delicious way to serve bacon as a party appetizer or to wrap and give as a fancy homemade gift. You can eat it as is or break it into pieces as a topping for anything from a simple tossed salad to ice cream (think butter pecan).

- 12 ounces thick sliced bacon
- 1/4 cup brown sugar
- 2 tablespoons real maple syrup
- 1/2 teaspoon Dijon mustard

Spray a large cookie sheet (or 2) with non-stick spray. Mix together the brown sugar, maple syrup and Dijon mustard. Rub the mixture onto both sides of the bacon. Lay the bacon flat on the cookie sheet and bake at 350 degrees for about 20 minutes, checking occasionally as some slices may cook faster than others. The bacon should be dark brown and crisp but not burned. Serve warm, room temperature or cold. Makes about 12 appetizer servings. Refrigerate leftovers.

#### Butter Brickle Bacon Bark

This super quick and easy recipe makes an unusual candy for snacking, gift giving or as a buffet dessert item. I chose milk chocolate but feel free to use dark or white or a combination.

- 8 ounces milk chocolate discs for melting
- 8 slices cooked bacon, crumbled
- 1/8 cup toffee bits

Spread a sheet of plastic wrap on a large cookie sheet. Melt the chocolate in the microwave or in a double boiler until it can be easily spread; don't over heat. Spread the chocolate onto the cookie sheet into a rectangle measuring roughly 10"x8". Evenly top the chocolate with the crumbled bacon, then sprinkle on the toffee bits. Let the chocolate cool completely before breaking into pieces. Makes about 20 pieces of candy.