## Starke County tidbit No. 50 Summer kitchen

Spring is here. Winter has left us, but summer is right around the corner. It is time to get the summer kitchen ready for cookouts. The summer kitchen I am thinking about is not the modern wonder of today --- a stainless steel cooking area costing \$5,000 on one wall and a four-foot stone fireplace on the opposite wall, with a six-foot round glass-top table in the middle, all of this overlooking a beautiful swimming pool.

No, no, no. I'm thinking about the summer kitchen of yesteryear.

During the winter, the summer kitchen would hold fire wood for the room stoves in our house. It kept the wood dry from the snow and rain. The summer kitchen was a small building, just a step or two from the back door, and was actually attached to the house by one wall. When needing sticks of wood for the stoves, we had to brave the cold for only a few feet. (That was better than the 50 or 60 feet to the outhouse, especially in the snow.)

When butchering time came around (usually in the fall) we butchered a beef, a hog or two and a few chickens. Mom and Dad would get the butcher knives out and heat the water on the stove in the summer kitchen. For the larger animals, a big bon-fire was made north of the building and a large 30-gallon kettle was used to boil the water. A white-topped porcelain table was used on which to cut up the meat. The meat was usually salted and stored for later use. Some people would put the meat in a smoke house. In later years, we would rent a locker or two from the locker plant in town. (That's the building just south of the community center in Knox which is being demolished for more parking.)

Now, why was a building called a summer kitchen? Ah --- the summer time was when it was used more extensively. Cooking in the summer kitchen helped to keep the main house cooler in summer. (There was no air conditioning.) Spring/Summer was the time for the corn-shelling crew to come around. Corn was stored in the ear, in corn cribs. The cribs were ventilated so the corn could dry out over winter. The shelling crew consisted of one or two of the owners of the stationary sheller and 8 or 10 other farmers who arranged for the sheller to shell their corn. We would all work together, dragging the corn out of the cribs into the long 50-foot conveyers that carried the corn into the sheller. This was often a long, hot and dusty day. By noon, the wives of the crew had prepared a wonderful "dinner" fit for a King, or in this case, a hard working crew. The next day we all would go to the farmer who was next on the list, and start again.

Threshing time was the next event for the summer kitchen, but usually a lot hotter time of the year – July or August. Small grains, like oats and wheat, were cut and bundled in the field. These bundles were then stacked into shocks to let the grain dry for a few days. When the threshing crew came – again with all the neighbors, the thresher would be set up and the men would take the horses and wagons to the field to pick up the shocks. They would then pull the wagon beside the thresher and toss the bundles into the feeder housing which separated the grain from the straw, creating the "straw stack", which children found to be so much fun. (Now, everything is done with combines.) The wives of the crew would again prepare a wonderful meal for the men. At noon the crew would come to the little breezeway between the summer kitchen and the back porch to "wash up". There was a hand pitcher pump and a wooden v – trough (sink) there which would carry the waste water outside. Mom provided a bar of soap and several towels hanging on hooks (no paper towels in those years). Probably not all of the dirt and grime was washed away, but the cold water was always refreshing.

Summer kitchens rarely survived as a useful building, with the introduction of air conditioning for homes, gas furnaces, and combines to harvest the crops.

Attached is a photo of our summer kitchen, which is preserved as a part of the history of our family farm.

