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Making Federal Case Out of Barbecue

WHEN is barbecue not barbecue? The U.S. Department of Agriculture faces this vital issue along with what to do about grain surpluses.

During 36 years as a farm magazine editor this writer ate barbecue all across Oklahoma and Texas. We even wrote a book about the USDA bureaucracy. But not until last week did we learn that USDA had adopted a definition of barbecue back in the early 1900s.

The matter got into the news when USDA undertook to stop Maurice Lee II, president of Smokarama Inc., the only factory in Boley, OK, from selling an electric device as a "barbecuer." It doesn't seem to fit the Washington definition of barbecue.

Lee's cooker injects smoke from hickory chips into a closed vessel. It is said to cook 45 pounds of meat in 45 minutes which looks, smells and tastes like barbecue, with practically no shrinkage.

The USDA definition says meat isn't barbecue unless it is "cooked by the dry heat resulting from the burning of hard wood or the coals

thereof." Cooked weight must not exceed 70 percent of raw meat.

According to The Wall Street Journal, Lee's \$3,600 cooker ran afoul of California's "truth in menu" law. Barbecue outfits using Lee's "Smokaroma" were told to change their cooking methods or quit calling the meat cooked in it "barbecue."

We could not find a history of barbecue in the encyclopedia but our desk dictionary defines barbecue as "a large animal (hog or steer) roasted or broiled whole or split over an open fire or barbecue pit." It also defines a barbecue as a social gathering.

Those definitions hark back to Old Testament times when God's people made burnt offerings of animals. After the ceremonies the priests got first slices, their aides second and the people ate what was left. These religious gatherings weren't called barbecues but they certainly qualified as major social events.

Not all social barbecues would qualify as religious occasions. Most are just meals. We have eaten barbecue from boyhood, remembering

popular barbecue cafes in Ada, Perry and other localities.

We recall country barbecues, too, like those neighbors used to hold at Saddle Mountain northwest of Lawton. They started the fire in a big pit about dark, kept it going all night and put the meat on a grid over the coals about daybreak. By noon the result was irresistible.

When purebred cattle tours were at their height of popularity ranchers in northwestern Oklahoma tried to see who could concoct the hottest barbecue sauce. Guests usually said it was good, even if it was so hot that the natural taste of the meat was utterly submerged.

Oklahoma's premier barbecue chef was the late great Clay Potts, OSU professor who became famous for serving barbecues at agricultural events. He probably never heard of the USDA definition.

With hickory firewood scarce and costly, perhaps USDA ought to modify its notions about barbecue instead of making it a federal case. After all, Uncle Sam has redefined "a farm" several times.