

Hogs & the Meaning of Life in Iowa

Richard Horwitz

In the spring of 1995, the President of the United States visited Iowa. The occasion was a conference on rural life, the sort of event that might be used to wax quotably about the heartland, rugged individuals, and other pastoral pieties. Orators have done so since the days of Thomas Jefferson and have continued well after most Americans — among them, most Iowans — moved to town and took jobs behind a counter or a desk. But there was reason to worry that the President's photo opportunity might get uncomfortable. He would be met by citizens rallying to protect family farmers from "vertical integrators," the large, high-tech, multinational operations that already dominate poultry and have set their sights on pigs. With statutes that are perennially reconsidered, the state of Iowa has long been hospitable to family farms, which diversify by raising hogs, and relatively inhospitable to factory farms, which diversify by trading grain futures, patents, and packing plants. Clichés about yeomen or imagery drawn from "Little House" would hardly calm passions. Iowa senator Tom Harkin did his best, introducing the President with a joke: "No one should be allowed to be president, if they don't understand hogs." Most everyone laughed, though likely for varied reasons.

Iowans are used to kidding about the state's most infamous products, corn and its four-legged incarnation, hogs. In tourist shops, next to the joke postcard with a thirty-foot ear of corn on a flat-bed, you can see ample evidence of self-deprecating Iowa humor. There are "hogs 'n' kisses" T-shirts, coffee mugs, and hand towels, sow pin-up calendars, and other swine-laden memorabilia with "Greetings from Iowa." Iowans, including people with a serious stake in "pork production," are as amused by swinalia as anyone else.

One way to explain the fascination would be to recognize that Iowa and hogs simply do have a special relationship. Since World War II, Iowa has been the center of the "Swine Belt." About two-thirds of all the pigs in the United States are raised on family farms within 200 miles of the state capital. Des Moines is also home to the National Pork Producers Council, which financed the ad campaign that slid the expression "the other white meat" onto America's common tongue. They could bury you in statistics showing that Iowa hogs help balance the U.S. trade deficit, boost employment, and feed the world.

Swine are, among other things, miraculously efficient converters of grain to meat. Hence, too, they help farmers hold grain off the market — "add to its value" by eating it — until the price improves. Then, as the saying goes, "the corn walks itself to market." Since grains seldom fetch their production cost, that fatal walk up a loading chute onto a jerry-rigged pickup or a fleet of multi-tiered semis helps keep food affordable and agriculture solvent.

Hog carriers bounce across a vast grid of farm-to-market roads, headed for meat-packing plants "in town" that hitch farms through pork to the wider world. For most of the past century, "town" could be just about any place with a decent water supply. Iowa is the only state with excess capacity, meaning that large packers still maintain little buying stations off on gravel roads. They signal an open market for the occasional goose-necked-trailer load when the price is right or cash is short.

Under current circumstances raising pigs is one of the very few ways left for a young person to start farming. You do not need much more than a small piece of ground, a couple of modular buildings, a tractor, and a grinder to tow behind. With thorough planning, six digits of credit, and hard work, you might be able to make a go of it. Not surprisingly, given the nurturing that sows and their pigs require, women have been especially prized around the farrowing house. You still



might be able to schedule chores around carpooling the kids and other part-time jobs. Pieties aside, raising pigs in this part of the world remains close to a democratic art.

So, Iowa hogs are an essential part of family farming, small towns, the pricing and transportation systems, and the landscape. They also show up on the dinner table. Nearly everywhere you go, you can grab a “brat” or a tenderloin sandwich the size of a competition Frisbee. And many a pie- or pastry-maker still claim that the key to flaky crust is lard. Of course, observant Muslims, Hindus, Jews, and vegans disagree, but there is no denying the material significance of hogs in Iowa.

Much the same could be said about their material significance in other places that seem



to embrace hog culture less closely. For example, the ratio of pigs to people and their concentration on the land is actually a lot higher in the Netherlands, and Denmark is the world’s leading pork exporter. But you could easily travel those countries without noticing. Their joke T-shirts sport clogs and Kierkegaard rather than pigs.

There probably is no simple explanation for the difference.

Traditions are like that, composted from garden-variety realities, hard and soft, silly and sad, new and changeless over the years. Probably farmers, the folks who share daily life with hogs, know that culture best. Lessons about birth and death, tenderness, impatience, and the value of a dollar are apt to have been first gained working for a ribbon with a 4-H litter. Tales are swapped about the infuriating ability of at least one sow in every group to bark and jump at the most inopportune moments. Some herders develop a bias for belted Hamps or Durocs, but nearly everyone has learned to spot a good market hog. Learning requires a mixture of sculpture appreciation and market prediction that has made celebrities out of the best stock-show judges. And nearly everyone knows the fear that comes in hearing about a pathogen outbreak in the neighborhood. Nights are spent in sleepless worry or taking turns with a

Pig farrowing, above, is demonstrated at the 1995 Iowa State Fair. Photo by Rachelle H. Saltzman

Jayne Berglund, left, holds a baby pig in the farrowing house at her family’s farm near Kalona.

Photo by Richard Horwitz

Iowa—Community Style

spouse on hourly trudges to the farrowing house through drifting snow. Amidst the scares, the tedium, the ups and downs, there is always the clang of lids on steel self-feeders telling you that you are home.

Of course, Iowans who work less directly with pigs — buyers, butchers, feed dealers, equipment manufacturers, employees and kin — like those who work in office towers and bed in urban apartments, have fewer pig tales to tell. But they, too, know about a distinctly porcine cultural surround that will certainly change. The specific way that hogs have been raised, the taste of consumers, and the demands of companies that link one to the

other have been extremely dynamic, possibly no more so than they are today. At stake are hard decisions about economy, ecology, and quality of life, about the edge between adaptation and loss. A measure of understanding, respect, and maybe good humor will be useful on all sides.

It might not be wise to insist that presidents understand hogs. But it is worth encouraging.

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Iowa Women on the Farm

Phyllis Carlin

On July 22, 1995, a hailstorm severely damaged 960 acres of corn and soybeans on the Mehmen's northeast Iowa farm. Three days later Karmen Mehmen surveyed the damage.

"... The debt we have on this, I don't know if I can handle [it]. How am I going to live until the end of the year? They can't continue to borrow me money on a crop I don't have."

Crisis on the family farm sets in motion rituals that communicate the strong presence of community within an agricultural neighborhood. Seventy people visited Karmen, Stanley, and the three children the day after the storm. Friends, neighbors, clergy, hunters, former employees, and members of their card club came to offer encouragement, bring food, help repair a grain bin, and express concern. Karmen sees the community



response as similar to support given at the time of a funeral: "A church lady brought a cake. Our minister's been here twice. And you know when people are around, then you get to talking about other stuff, and you kind of get off of it a little bit."

In subsequent months Karmen, as the farm's accountant, pursued a disaster emergency loan (for which the family ultimately did not qualify), switched banks, refinanced operating loans, waited for the actual losses to be tallied at harvest time, and tried to

cope with the uncertainty of economic recovery. Her response to the hailstorm expresses the voice of the farming culture: "This is what we do. We risk it. And sometimes you lose."

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Karmen Mehmen surveys the family's corn crop after a hailstorm hit their farm near Waverly.

Photo by
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