

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 Mehmens' 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 Phyllis Carlin