

# THIS LITTLE PIGGY WENT TO MARKET

A VIEW OF  
HOG FARMING'S  
CHANGING  
LANDSCAPE—  
FROM SOMEONE  
WHO'S STOOD  
ON BOTH SIDES  
OF THE FENCE

BY JOHNNY CARROL SAIN | PHOTOGRAPHY BY LIZ CHRISMAN

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# ARKANSAS HIGHWAY 155 BRANCHES OFF ARKANSAS 7 JUST SOUTH OF DARDANELLE.

**THE FLAT TWO-LANE** features a couple of curves and long, straight stretches with cattle pasture and cropland on both sides. Just a couple of miles east of the intersection sits Balloun Farms. If the wind is right and your windows are down, you'll instantly know that Balloun Farms grows hogs, even though you can't see a hog anywhere.

There's no mistaking the distinct odor of hogs.

I couldn't have been more than 5 or 6 years old when I first encountered that salty, earthy, slightly sour smell. It wasn't unpleasant or overpowering—in fact, it was slightly reminiscent of bacon—as it filtered through the leafy hardwood hollow on my uncle's land in Bass, Arkansas, a minuscule community outside of tiny Mount Judea. I saw and heard the pigs shortly after smelling them. Soft grunts emanated from curious flexing snouts poking through wood slats of what was even then an old fence. I can't remember exactly how many pigs Uncle Ferris had, but it was likely a handful of sows and one boar. Pigs were only part of his farm, a small but reliable stream of revenue to supplement his main income from cattle.

The pungent power of swine in multitude is the only clue that there are pigs at Balloun Farms, though. From Arkansas 155's asphalt, the farm's long metal barns look like windowless warehouses. Surrounded by equipment and on a vibrant green and neatly clipped lawn, the buildings look like something you'd find in an industrial park, not like a farm at all, save the tractors. Occasionally, you'll hear a pig squeal from behind the climate-controlled curtains that block the sunshine. And during the calm of twilight, as breezes die on the river-bottom landscape, you can sometimes hear grunting from the 2,450 sows, five boars and thousands of piglets that live inside. But you won't see hide nor hair of anything porcine.

To call Balloun Farms a "farm" in the same sense as my uncle's farm seems a stretch. But Balloun Farms represents a form of animal agriculture in Arkansas that has nearly replaced the old ways.

"It smells like money." Hang around enough pig farmers for enough time,



and you're guaranteed to hear that phrase. There's a bit of self-deprecating awareness about the stink inherent to the job in those words, but there's also economic truth. Before corporations became involved in pork production in the '70s, pigs were often called "mortgage lifters" because of their quick turnaround and low cost of production. Pork was also a self-regulating market. An astute farmer could flip hogs quickly—when prices were up, producers would jump into hogs, and when prices were down, the producers would jump out. This free-market regulation kept the price at a point where, generally speaking, they would be paid fairly for their labor and the product.

But the pork industry changed dramatically with the advent of industrial pig farms. Corporations with deep pockets eliminated competition by keeping the cost of the product well below the cost of production over an extended period of time. For the small producers growing hogs only when the market was favorable, that meant no jumping back in,

driving those farmers out of the pig business for good.

The change in animal agriculture practices began right here in Arkansas with Tyson Foods' first chicken houses in the '50s. Pigs were added to the model in the '70s, and pig houses became the norm through the '80s and '90s.

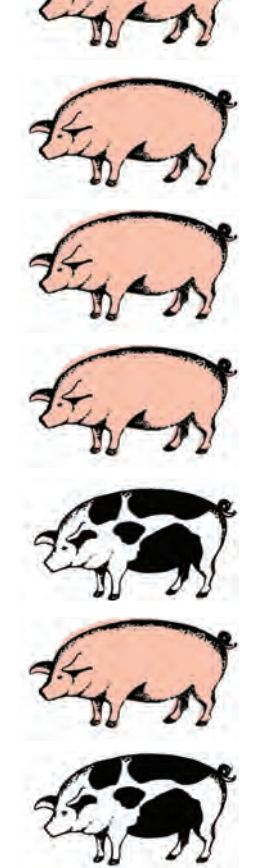
You can see this on the national level. The average number of hogs sold or removed per farm has grown from 945 head in 1992 to 8,389 head in 2009, while the number of hogs produced under contract has grown from 5 percent in 1992 to 71 percent in 2009.

Numbers specific to Arkansas are more difficult to come by. There are around 90 industrial hog farms, according to the Arkansas Department of Environmental Quality's list of Regulation 5 permit holders. Reg 5, as it's known, is the required permit for liquid-animal-waste facilities, though at least one industrial hog farm, C&H in Newton County, has been operating under a different permit. That's a situation now under intense scrutiny by the ADEQ. Neither it nor the Arkansas Department of Agriculture has a figure for how many pigs are in the state on industrial farms or otherwise.\* Of course, it's only been in the past few years that I learned about this timeline and dramatic change—long after I had owned an industrial hog farm of my own.

**M**Y NEXT INTERACTION with hogs came nearly two decades later on another uncle's operation contracted through Tyson Pork, a division of Tyson Foods. The farm sat just off Rock Hollow Road near Hector, Arkansas, in northern Pope County. Jimmy Morris wasn't really my uncle anymore. He and my aunt had divorced a long time ago, but their only son—Robert, my first cousin—was like a brother, and Jimmy tolerated me. So I tagged along to help with Robert's chores on the weekends on his dad's farrowing operation. It was there that Robert and I hatched a plan to build our own barns. I wasn't sure how, and I wasn't sure when, but I was going to own a hog farm like this.



\*The Arkansas Farm Bureau has conflicting numbers on its website of 1.8 million pigs and then 1.2 million pigs raised in Arkansas per year, but there is no distinction as to contract or noncontract operations.



## MEANWHILE, IN IOWA...

In 2017 the Des Moines, Iowa, water utility filed a notice of intent to sue farmers in three counties populated by 1.2 million pigs and a million turkeys. The suit was filed because water sourced to the municipality from two central Iowa rivers needed to be cleaned of excess nitrates—an expensive process—before regular water treatment could begin. High levels of nitrate can reduce the amount of oxygen carried in the blood of children younger than six.



Through my early 20s, in the first years of my marriage, I worked toward this goal with a very understanding wife. The reasons were many. Coming from a rural background, there was a sense of honor, a gritty salt-of-the-earth mystique, attached to being a farmer. I liked working with animals, and I liked even more being my own boss and not having to deal with people. But above all else, and cart before the horse as it may sound, I was young and poor and wanted acreage. Owning a farm was the only way I could see to make this happen.

During my 26th summer, July 1997, it all came together.

A real estate friend (and former employee of Cargill Pork) who specialized in selling industrial farms and acreage found an unfortunate fellow going bankrupt on a Cargill-contracted pig factory that nobody wanted. The lien holder was antsy, but with no other offers on the table, a 90-percent guarantee from the federal government and a gutsy can-do attitude with just the right amount of naiveté, my wife and I took over the \$300,000 debt on a hilltop 55 acres, complete with a single-wide mobile home and a 400-

foot hog barn designed to house 2,100 hogs.

I raised hogs under a group-to-group contract for Cargill Pork for four years as a Pork 3 operation in Cargill's "Pork 123" program. Pork 1 was a farrowing unit. This was where sows were bred and pigs were born. Pork 2 was the nursery sites. At three weeks, the pigs were shipped to these nurseries, where they would spend 12 to 13 weeks before being trucked to operations like mine, the last stop before a trip to the slaughter/packing house owned by Cargill. My pigs arrived at 60 pounds and stayed for about three months, when they averaged 280 pounds. They weren't my pigs, though. They were Cargill's pigs living in my barn rented by Cargill. I supplied the building, the utilities, the disposal of manure and carcasses, and the labor. Cargill supplied the pigs, feed and veterinary services. I never owned a pig.

My operation also included four waste ponds. A waste-water flush system "cleaned" the barn with a flush of waste pond water, which was pumped to holding tanks and then released about every hour. After washing through a trough

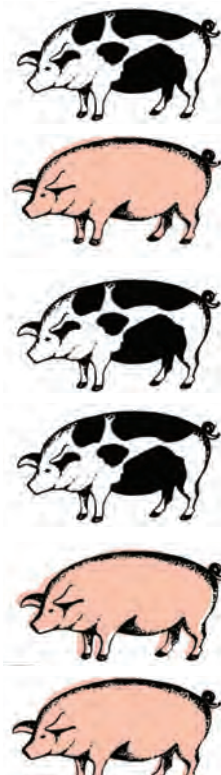
down the length of the barn, the waste water flowed back out to the ponds, where the mixture of feces, urine and water was stored until we spread it on hayfields during the growing season. The ponds smelled as bad as you imagine and were a constant source of stress. I was always worried about them being too full (growers were fined by the ADEQ for storage above regulated limits) or too empty (not enough water to flush the barn).

Not long after we closed on the barn and acreage, I learned that other folks were concerned about the animal waste on my operation as well. An upwelling of opposition to our industry was happening right in Pope County—state headquarters for both Cargill Pork and the organization I learned was defending us, the Arkansas Pork Producers Association.

I first met APPA President Jerry Masters a couple months after contracting with Cargill. I was a member of the APPA, and Jerry had called on all

## MEANWHILE. IN NORTH CAROLINA...

In August of this year, a North Carolina jury awarded \$50 million to neighbors of a 15,000-hog farm. This verdict is the first to come in a series of federal lawsuits filed against Murphy-Brown/Smithfield Foods, the world's largest pork producer. Neighbors contended that industrial-scale hog operations have known for decades that the open-air sewage pits on their properties were the source of noxious, sickening and overwhelming odors. The stench was so thick, the neighbors argued, that it was impossible to get it out of their clothes.



members to attend an ADEQ public hearing at the old junior high school building in Russellville. Apparently, there was concern among some "extreme environmentalists" that spreading nutrient-rich manure onto hay fields might lead to or was already causing problems in our waterways. My wife and I talked with Jerry before the hearing. We were shocked to learn that anyone thought we would purposely harm the environment. I was a hunter and angler. I treasured my land for its deer and wild turkey, for McCoy Creek running just across the fence on a friendly neighbor's land. We would never do anything to damage the natural beauty surrounding our home.

Jerry encouraged my wife, Christine, and I as young farmers to speak up, but we

pigs every day for what I now knew was low pay and high stress had lost its appeal.

At this time, I hadn't considered the cost of an industrial farm outside of my own financial interest. And there's a whole lot of that other cost that I never considered—not until years later when I read about what two British economists had coined "externalities."

Externalities are the price of doing business paid by those not in the business, who don't have a choice or a voice in the matter. Industrialized farming is rife with externalities. Air and water pollution are obvious externalities, while the erosion of public health, rural economies and communities extract a more inconspicuous cost. I've learned this as I've unraveled its complexities and gazed back on what I thought I wanted from a distance of 20 years.

That decision not to rebuild was one of the best of my life.

**N**OT THAT LONG ago, every pig farmer in Arkansas was truly independent. Hogs, with their fantastic fecundity, fast growth rates and opportunistic feeding habits, were perfect protein sources for the sustenance farmers who once populated the Ozark region. Turn the hogs loose, and they'd fatten up on their own. After the mast crop of acorns and chinquapins were gone from the forest floor, it was time for the butchering. It was a social affair for many, a chance to build community bonds through sale, barter and sometimes the gift of meat.

Early markets for hogs were local, and that market helped support

shied away from the offer. Jerry took the podium early on. His speech was rousing. He spoke of young farmers like us and had us stand up for recognition amid some applause. He spoke of feeding the world and old-fashioned family values. Inspired by Jerry and indignant that anyone would color her husband as an irresponsible polluter, even with the broadest of strokes, my wife decided to stand at the microphone and speak the righteous truth as we knew it at the time. I was so proud of her.

On Oct. 11, 2001, a thunderstorm generating powerful straight-line winds blew my barn down. Actually, what the storm did was topple the beams, dropping the roof 6 feet and onto the top of the concrete walls separating each pig pen. Incredibly, not one pig was lost or hurt during the ordeal. Cargill offered another contract if I chose to rebuild, but my perspective had changed over those four years, and I already had the land. Going into debt for another \$400,000—the cost of the new barn I'd be building—and smelling like

Compared with pork in 1991, today's pork has **16 PERCENT** less fat and **27 PERCENT** less saturated fat. This followed an already substantial drop; in 1989, pork had **50 PERCENT** less fat than it had in the '50s.

Source: Environmental Protection Agency

other industries, such as feed-and-supply stores and meat packers. With the advent of grocery stores, a national and then global market, that local market mostly withered, but there are flickers of life here in north Arkansas.

A bright limestone-gravel road straightens the curve off Arkansas Highway 392 near Batavia and takes me across two low-water bridges before turning onto Carol and Sean Bansley's driveway. The Bansleys have lived on their secluded 300 acres for three years, but their pasture pig operation began in Iowa in 2009. They started the pig business after Sean had worked on an industrial pig operation for a few years. A more even-keeled climate and better scenery were behind the move to Arkansas.

As I round a gentle curve and the couple's home comes into view, a herd of low-slung black bodies gallops away from the fence. That rich and unique scent of pig greets me as I exit the truck.

It's 9 a.m. Sean is walking out to meet me, and he's clean as a whistle. He hasn't touched a pig (I'll soon learn that Sean considers touching the pigs part of his duties) or a feed bucket yet. This seems weird for a





farmer, but the Bansleys don't ever start chores until around 9 a.m. Everything is done around the pigs' schedule. "Why wake them up?" Carol says. "Sean used to be out there at 7 or 8, but the pigs wouldn't even be moving."

Raising pigs this new way that's really the old way seems like a subversive action, but it only seems subversive because of the spun narrative. In truth, it's a return to so many of the basic tenets that contribute to the noble image of farming: a thoughtfulness and concern for the quality of the product, but also for the land and the animals.

"Happy pig, happy plate," Carol says. "It lived. We cared for it. We know that they had a good life, and we're eating a cleaner, healthier product from an animal that had one bad day, only one bad day. Actually, just one bad minute. The rest of its life was outside, on the grass, in the fresh air and sun."

Carol's words remind me of a discussion with former Ozark Mountain pasture pig farmer Misty Langdon, who owns the now-pigless Our Green Acre Farm after an unexpected injury sidelined her hog growing for a while. Misty was a pioneer in Arkansas pasture pig farming's resurgence, raising large black hogs. Generic as it sounds,

**Between 1992 and 2009, U.S. hog farms declined in number by more than 70 PERCENT (from over 240,000 farms to about 71,000). Hog inventories remained stable.**

Source: U.S. Hog Production From 1992 to 2009: Technology, Restructuring, and Productivity Growth

that's the breed's official name. Misty caught flack from her Newton County neighbors for the effort because ... well, because no one else was doing it that way.

"When I started raising pigs outside, nobody was doing that around here. Everybody said, *You can't do that.* And I said, *Why can't I? That's how everyone used to raise them.* And they said, *That was then. Now, this is how you raise a pig.* I said, *Why?*" Many of the arguments dissolved when Misty took some pork to church. "People would say, *Wow, that's the best pork I've ever eaten in my life.* And I was like, *That's what sunshine will do. Those pigs are infused with grass and sunshine and spring water.*"

The Bansleys, too, have worked hard at educating consumers who've been pummeled with a marketing message promoting pork products that look and taste much different than pork is supposed to look and taste. "When Pork Checkoff [the marketing arm of the National Pork Board] came out with the 'other white meat' campaign [in 1987], it was simply propaganda," Carol says. "Pork isn't supposed to be white."

Thanks to the low-fat craze that took hold in the '80s, pigs in industrial farming have been engineered to produce a product built to spec for U.S. Department of Agriculture nutritional health models. Pork you'll find in the grocery store today has 27 percent less saturated fat compared to pork of the early '90s. The industrial pig is a leaner animal with almost no intramuscular fat. The animal fits into nearly the same slot occupied by skinless chicken as a low-fat source of protein, hence the clever alias "other white meat." In culinary tradition, large mammal meat has never been designated as "white."

"Our pigs have fat on them," Carol says. "The meat is red; it's not pale. It's got marbling in it; it's got flavor. People are afraid of it



at first." Sean pulls some pork chops from their freezer, and they look nothing like you'll find in the meat cooler at your local grocer. The chops are a soft burgundy, laced throughout with white fat.

"So you have to teach people that it's good," Carol says.

Taste is only one indicator of a better product. Nutrient value is another. Just the notion of fat on a cut of meat sends many folks into a tizzy. But not all fat is created the same. While the Bansleys' pigs are fed non-GMO feed from a mill, they also feast on seasonal grasses and mast, which change the composition of cholesterol and omega acids into something much different and much better for you than what their industrial-farm cousins offer on the plate.

**"WHEN I STARTED RAISING PIGS OUTSIDE, NOBODY WAS DOING THAT AROUND HERE. EVERYBODY SAID, YOU CAN'T DO THAT. AND I SAID, WHY CAN'T I?"**





The Bansleys sell to restaurants and several health-food stores in Northwest Arkansas, along with a few individuals. And the couple is trying to supply a growing demand. “Bellies and pork loins, we can’t keep up with it,” Carol says. “The Hive in Bentonville is taking about eight pork loins a week.” Starting with one sow, the Bansleys are now up to 18 sows and three boars. “Our first year, we sold about 20 pigs,” Sean says. “This year, we’re going to sell about 350.”

Pasture pig farmers who are truly independent, like the Bansleys, must transport their pigs themselves to a USDA-certified processor. There are about 60 of these processors in Arkansas, but nearly all are a division of some giant food company that owns its own animals from genetics to the supermarket. And while these companies might cater to the small-scale farmer, it’s expensive.

The loss of smaller independent USDA processors—once a linchpin of rural economies—is directly attributable to the growth of industrial agriculture. Despite the claims of efficiency and consumer demand, it’s the main reason behind industrial agriculture’s surge over the past 30 years. This level of integration allowed corporations to lose money in growing pigs while covering that loss in another area. It’s like owning the entire board in a game of Monopoly.

Sending a pig to market for the pasture pig farmers I visited with is nothing like my experience as a producer. All I spoke with had stringent guidelines for humaneness—how pigs were handled, how much time was allowed to



C&H HOG FARM

unload pigs. Gentle handling brings a high quality of pork to the packer, and according to Misty, using the wrong butcher (Animal Welfare Certified is preferred) can ruin months of thoughtful care. “I’m not going to grow out a pig for 14 months to let some kid unload a pig with a Hot Shot and the last five minutes of that pig’s life to be filled with terror,” Misty says. “That’s part of quality control. It’s not that, *Oh my baby, I love you*, kind of thing. It’s about the quality of the meat, but it’s also about being humane.”

**The U.S. is the world’s THIRD-LARGEST producer and consumer of pork and pork products. In recent years, the U.S. has been either the world’s largest or second largest exporter of pork and pork products, with exports averaging over 20 PERCENT of commercial pork production in most years.**

Source: USDA Economic Research Service

**T**HE HEADLINE BRINGING industrial pork to every Arkansan’s attention is the industrialized pig operation built near Big Creek, a tributary of the Buffalo River, in 2013. C&H Farms, ironically, is co-owned by some of my distant kin, Richard and Phillip Campbell. I’ve met only Richard, and him just one time. It was at a February 2015 ADEQ public meeting in Jasper. And even claiming blood ties could not convince Richard to let me turn the recorder on.

During our conversation, Richard seemed genuinely perplexed about opposition to his facility. His concerns were that outsiders to Newton County were attempting to turn the county into a wilderness while oblivious to the residents trying to make a living in one of the poorest regions of Arkansas. The anxiety in Richard’s voice and on his face pulled at my empathy. I understood full well the weight of carrying tremendous debt on a precarious business. While my debt load was about one-tenth of his and I wasn’t under the constant scrutiny that 2.7 million gallons of pig manure spread on thin soils will impose, I’d been there.

By all accounts, Richard and Philip and co-owner Jason Henson are good people, exemplary caretakers of their facility and the waste it generates. Every ADEQ inspection has proven that C&H is doing everything right. The problem is that “what’s right” has narrow parameters, and the threat to the watershed is poorly understood. The danger isn’t in a waste-pond breach and pig shit floating down Big Creek. It’s something more insidious and specific to this region.

The Ozark Mountains are karst topography, formed as water-soluble minerals such as limestone, dolomite and gypsum are eroded away, leaving ridges, hollows, caves and sinkholes.



C&H HOG FARM

**SEVENTY YEARS AGO. IT WAS PIGS THAT OFTEN BROUGHT COMMUNITIES TOGETHER AT COUNTY FAIRS. IN THE LOCAL MARKETS AND WITH DEEP RURAL CONNECTIONS STRENGTHENED AT ANNUAL HOG BUTCHERINGS. TODAY. PIGS ARE DRIVING COMMUNITIES APART.**



It’s what makes the Ozarks the Ozarks. But it also means that any liquid applied to the soil funnels into groundwater and eventually into creeks. The best visual demonstration of karst dynamics in the region happened in April 2014, when the Arkansas Pollution Control and Ecology Commission injected dyed water into a well near C&H. Little more than a day later, the colored water showed up in Big Creek. The water flowed under the Buffalo and appeared on the other side. It flowed upstream into another tributary and even traveled under a ridge and into another watershed. Once inside the underground aquatic labyrinths of the Ozarks, there’s no telling where pollutants might show up. It’s not a matter of “if” excess nutrients will end up in the river, only “when.”

Nutrient overload is already affecting the river with increasing algal blooms in portions of the Buffalo,

powerful evidence that a delicate system is out of balance. It’s a smoking gun, but even with C&H upstream, no one is sure who pulled the trigger. Jessie Jean-Green, executive director of White River Waterkeepers, has been keeping an eye on the science. “Data [show] that groundwater nitrate levels monitored from a well on the farm [C&H] have been steadily increasing since monitoring began in 2014,” she says. The data also show nitrates that are significantly higher in Big Creek downstream of the farm, compared to upstream, and decreased levels of dissolved oxygen in Big Creek, likely caused by algal blooms. Still, a linear link to pig manure hasn’t been proven. “There is

no definitive ‘yes’ that C&H is responsible,” Jessie says. But excess nutrients inflicting small damage over time is the danger. If it continues, 20 years from now, the river will be unrecognizable.

I walked out of that 2015 ADEQ meeting with members of the Buffalo River Watershed Alliance, an organization formed by a core of Newton County residents and for the express purpose of opposing C&H or any other animal-confinement facility in the watershed. And I noticed something that struck me as weird amid all the small talk and chatter: a distinct lack of Southern mountain accents. Could part of the unbridgeable gap in the C&H debate be, like so many other divides in our nation, cultural? As we stepped into the winter night, I asked for a show of hands from the 15 or so Watershed Alliance members for how many moved to Newton County in the ’70s. Every hand was raised, including the hand of BRWA president Gordon Watkins.

Gordon is a semiretired organic blueberry farmer working and living on land west of Parthenon in Newton County. His biggest concern regarding C&H is the threat to Newton County’s only real industry: tourism. C&H contracts with JBS, the Brazilian conglomerate that is the world’s largest meat company. Together, they pay only about \$11,000 a year in property taxes to Newton County. By way of comparison, Gordon points to his one rental cabin, a property for which he says he pays about \$2,000. “The Buffalo National River tourism report says the river supports 911 jobs and over \$79 million in cumulative benefits through all the counties it runs through,” Gordon says. “This one operation is risking this irreplaceable economic stream in one of the poorest counties in the state.”

When you understand the

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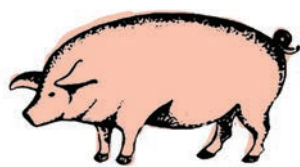
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risk and see numbers putting that risk into perspective, it's hard to understand why anyone in Newton County would support an industrial farm in their home county. But then you factor in that cultural divide. The split is largely between generations-old Newton County residents and those back-to-the-landers who moved there in the '70s. Though they weren't full-fledged Luddites, back-to-the-landers sought out a homestead life in the Ozarks all those years ago as a rejection of technology and the faster-paced life that often accompanies it. Industrialized farming is an embodiment of the dark abstractions they've always opposed. It's not just differing opinions on models of agriculture, though—it runs to religion (many back-to-the-landers are Buddhist, atheist, progressive Christian or something ill-defined—a stark contrast to the majority fundamentalist protestant residents who've been there for generations) and politics. Even now, five decades later, they are often considered outsiders. It's a classic case of tribalism, an "us versus the outsiders" dynamic. Engrained Ozark culture still has strong remnants of Scots-Irish attitudes: a general distrust of outsiders, and a strong predilection to not meddle in other's business if it has to do with a man's living, and especially if they are family. So it was an easier sell for some C&H proponents portraying anyone opposed to the farm as a radical, an extremist opposed to all farming and even to the economy of Newton County.

The contention has torn a once mostly harmonious community. I was advised to keep my mouth shut when C&H was being built, and I don't even live in Newton County. C&H opposition with blood ties similar to mine have largely avoided going on the record as opposed. Gordon told me he and C&H partner Jason Henson don't speak to each other now, though they once had a cordial relationship. The tension in that February 2015 ADEQ meeting was palpable. Even eye contact between opposing sides was rare. Seventy years ago, it was pigs that often brought communities together at county fairs, in the local markets and with deep rural connections strengthened at annual hog butcherings. Today, pigs are driving communities apart.

**C**AN I ASK you this before we start?" says Jerry Masters, still at the helm of the Arkansas Pork Producers Association, after we shake hands for the first time in many years. Jerry has finally agreed to talk on the record. This was after four emails from me. The first three went unanswered.

His body language reminds me of Richard Campbell at that Jasper ADEQ meeting. "You're calling it industrial pork, basically we're looking at contract farms, and that model has been here in Arkansas, probably was started in Arkansas through poultry production years and years ago. The pork model has done nothing but follow the poultry model. I'm in no way wanting to pick on my friends in the poultry industry. I'm just giving you facts."

Only a couple minutes in and contention is already wafting through the air.

I tell Jerry my experience is with hogs. And I say that this story is really an indictment of all industrial animal agriculture. Pigs are the best vehicle for me to tell the story. But Jerry is hung up on the terminology. He says calling it "industrial farming" is a play on words—that's it's simply contract farming and no different than any other contract employment. It's the evolution of the industry by direction of the meat packers, says Jerry.

In an effort to move the conversation, I tell him I agree. But the packers are owned by food corporations—JBS, Smithfield, Tyson—who flooded the market with pork and pushed the price down below the cost of production, driving the small producers out of business.

Jerry's rebuttal leaves me stunned.

"It's no different than the Walmart approach," says Jerry. "My gosh, we used to have

every little story downtown. And when Walmart came in, downtowns have shrunk haven't they?"

Using the Walmart model as a defense for your industry as you claim it's a good thing for rural economies and rural folks is incredibly bizarre, and I say so.

"I'm not saying it's good," Jerry says. "I'm just saying that's the approach that's happened."

I ask him if he's now saying that industrial farming is bad.

"Is it bad? No, it's not bad," Jerry says. "It's the way we've evolved to feed the world."

"To feed the world" sounds noble, but it's not accurate. Pork isn't shipped as nourishment aid to impoverished people. Globally, meat is available only to people of a certain affluence. As citizens of countries became wealthier, food corporations saw an opportunity to stack the deck and make a lot of money while extracting all that they can and leaving the mess—those externalities—behind in rural America. It's a story as old as our country.

I tell Jerry this arrangement isn't working for anyone except the packers and the integrators. What about everyone else?

Jerry doesn't answer this question. Instead, he steers the conversation toward the debt incurred by contract growers, that they're raising their families (as we all are), that

their children come back and farm (a dubious claim as farmer numbers dwindle across the country even as pig numbers grow).

The remaining eight minutes of the interview sink even further—I'm gobsmacked by Jerry's refusal to answer questions or accept facts in black and white. Jerry says I'm living in a bubble. I ask if it's a bubble of global awareness? Environmental worries? Concern for rural communities? Jerry just says it's a bubble. But conversation breaks down completely when I ask Jerry if he realizes portraying anyone opposed to C&H as an environmental extremist has created a rift in Newton County.

"They are," says Jerry. "They've got nothing to base their facts on. Show me one place that C&H hog farm has polluted the creek."

So I offer to show Jerry data about the algal blooms and lowered oxygen levels. I offer to show him the dye test and video about karst topography. But Jerry says he's done and gets up from the table.

I wanted to ask Jerry if the citizens of Hartman, Arkansas, who held a town meeting overwhelmingly opposing another proposed C&H operation right outside their town were environmental extremists. I wanted to ask Jerry if former Farm Bureau state board member and 84-year-old Hartman Bottoms row-crop farmer Richard Plugge was an environmental extremist when he stood up in that town meeting and railed against the industrial hog operation planning to build on a floodplain in his community. But Jerry is gone.

**T**HE DIM HALO of orange surrounding ashen briquettes tells me the coals are just about there as I grind coarse black pepper and sprinkle sea salt on two fat-marbled red chops. The cost might be prohibitive to some—it's \$10 per pound—but cheap meat isn't really cheap. Remember those externalities: environmental issues, loss of rural economies, loss of nutrient value, corporate consolidation of our food sources. Someone—all of us, actually—pays for the luxury of \$3-per-pound pork in other ways.

This is a problem we as a society will have to confront in the name of sustainability, a healthy environment and public health. Americans spend less on food, as a percentage of their incomes, than any country in the world. Cheap food has become part of our identity, even as it extracts value from our lives in the form of poor health and dollars from our wallets in the form of health care costs and pollution mitigation. Are we willing to pay more now for benefits down the road?

I tuck a piece of soaked hickory bark into the coals and put the lid back on the grill, waiting for a waft of spicy smoke from the vent. It happens only moments later, and the thick-cut chops hit hot stainless steel with a hiss. Proteins change shape, becoming easier to digest. I turn the chops, turning the side fat to the flames until it lightly browns. It only takes a few minutes, and they are done.

In the past, I've said store-bought turkey breast doesn't deserve to be called turkey compared to wild turkey breast. I say the same thing about industrial pork compared to pasture-raised pigs. There's a lightness, a freshness, an incredibly irresistible texture, thanks to fat running throughout, an aspect of palatability often overlooked. Frankly, if you've never eaten pork from a pasture-raised pig, then you've never truly had pork.

And it came to my plate with minimal impact on the environment and a positive impact on a rural Arkansas economy and community. It came from an animal that lived as it should in the fresh air and sunshine—rooting in soft brown earth, wallowing in gray mud—that lived as a pig should live and died a quiet respectful death. I know how this pig lived. I know how this pig died. I can taste all of this in the meat. I know where this pork chop came from.

It was a good place. ♡

