

PEACEFUL PIG

by James Wanless

This Thanksgiving, as multitudes of families around North America happily munch on a ham steak, it's likely not many of them will have thought of the travels of the pig took in becoming the guest of honour at their dinner table. Perhaps a small examination of their situation will shed some light on how these creatures spend their lives.

Pigs have received a bad rap. They are often perceived as smelly or sloppy. All you have to do is think about pigs and the words 'stinky', 'messy' or 'filthy' inevitably come to mind. When not making the negative connotations associated with pigs, we tend to think of sausage, bacon, chops or wallets. Unfortunately we have come to view pigs, like many other non-human animals, as inanimate objects. We value them for the self-serving, exploitative purposes we have for their body parts, rather than seeing the intelligent, highly social animals that they really are.

A LITTLE HISTORY

Pigs were first domesticated in China about 4900 B.C. They are mentioned in Biblical writings as early as 1500 B.C. Before the establishment of farms and settlements hogs were not common livestock, because they were not easily moved by nomadic peoples as were goats, sheep and cattle.

It is rumored that Columbus brought the first swine to America on his second voyage. Within 15 years of their arrival they were so abundant that they were killing the livestock of the settlers, who started hunting them with dogs. By the 1630's swine were fully integrated as livestock herds in the colonies. Unfortunately, from this point forward the pig has suffered a similar fate to other animals which we have bred, genetically improved, imprisoned and tortured for our own gain.¹

BEFORE FARROWING

To ensure the 'quality' of pigs, over the years the industry has bred in traits that will produce the type of muscle structure, fat content and taste which makes the product the most profitable. There was a time when hogs had to breed naturally because, unlike cattle, their semen could not be frozen and it was difficult to transport fresh. Sure, once in a while a boar is let loose with the tethered sows at the rape rack, but more often now the industry thrives on the latest technology and even door to door delivery of fresh hog semen to ensure superior breeding traits. In Minnesota a

company called TruAI Inc. uses just such a system, employing complex computers, isolation barns and a whole fleet of refrigerated trucks. When they get their load, the animal factories are only too happy to artificially inseminate their sows. This way they have reduced the risks of bad traits in their pork with superior semen to that which their boars might have and the sows can be impregnated more often.² If you ever doubted how much the industry values the breeding of superior pork, just listen to what one Fletcher's executive said when speaking of the company's massive expansion to help serve new markets overseas. "New products must be replaced with even newer products at a faster pace today. We have to continue to develop products that stay abreast of trends, such as health issues like... low fat and... flavour trends."³

Through this whole process, the 'inferior' boars are usually simply slaughtered. With most of the males castrated early in life, the ones that are left as breeding stock but don't measure up will meet one of two fates. They'll either just be slaughtered for by-products or they will live out their days as estrus detectors or 'sidewinders'. These unfortunate males are allowed to keep their maleness in a truly unique way. When it is determined that they don't have the goods for breeding, their penises are surgically re-routed to come out the side of their flank.

This way they can detect or speed up estrus in the females, but when they mount to finish the deed, they simply give up in frustration. The farm then completes the transaction with some of the superior stock delivered fresh to their door earlier that day.⁴

What is good for the gander is also good for the goose, it would seem. In addition to selecting and breeding boars for their traits and removing the goods, this industry also stimulates the ovaries of superior sows to release large numbers of eggs. In this extra twist to 'super sperm', the batch of embryos are artificially fertilized with some of the good stuff from the guys and later surgically removed. This overly productive sow must endure several operations a year to remove the continual batches of fertilized eggs. The piglet embryos will then be implanted into yet another animal in some other location.

The 16 week pregnancy, unfortunately, gets no better.

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Sows are chained in a 2' X 6' steel-barred cage called a gestation crate. The floors are typically slats or steel mesh with no straw or bedding provided. This process denies the sow her most basic instincts. With no interaction with other pigs, no ability to forage and root and no ability to even move forward, backward or sideways, these three and a half months are the epitome of monotony. This system does not even meet the basic need of the sow to sleep and defecate in separate areas. As you might guess, this experience can have devastating effects on the sows' mental health. Once the natural resistance and fighting of the confinement dies down (sometimes after several days and many sores and injuries), the poor animal is reduced to swaying back and forth all day vacantly gnawing and licking the bars. This type of reaction is produced by the same mental reaction to captivity that causes the pacing sometimes observed in zoo animals.

LIVES AND TIMES

Pigs have intelligence comparable with and, some would say, even greater than that of the domesticated dog. They have the capacity to be trained to respond to simple vocal commands and make, by all accounts, excellent pets. It is not uncommon for pig farmers to become attached to members of their herds and keep them as family companions. In nature they have complex social structures and build family circles, likely making them the most intelligent and sensitive creatures we exploit for human consumption. When you examine how they are bred and treated in meeting our uses, it raises a great many questions.⁵

In experiments where commercial pigs have been released into semi-natural conditions, they show consistent patterns of behaviour. They form stable social groups, build communal nests, use dunging areas (potties) away from the nest and busy themselves rooting, foraging and socializing their days away. When sows are ready to give birth, they build separate farrowing nests by digging a hole and lining it with leaves and straw. After giving birth, they live there with their litter for one to two weeks until all are ready to rejoin the group. Factory farming wipes out this natural behaviour and substitutes it with controlled, dangerous and often filthy living conditions designed for speed, efficiency and maximum profit.⁶

When the sow is ready to give birth or 'farrow', she is moved from the gestation crate to, you guessed it, the farrowing crate. Again with no bedding, straw, or room to move, the birthing process is only a continuation of the previous 16 weeks. Sows in intense confinement systems seem

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to be devoid of their mothering skills. Once the piglets are born the sow is strapped or tethered to the floor so that her teats are constantly exposed, encouraging the most suckling possible for the all-too-short period before weaning occurs. In a constant state of confusion, panic and stress and with her mothering skills in tatters, sows sometimes eat their young or roll over on them. Piglet mortality is a real problem in the industry. In both the pre and post-weaning stages some herds will lose 20 - 25% of their numbers.⁷

Piglets don't naturally wean themselves for eight to twelve weeks, but in the modern farm the piglets are force-weaned from their mothers at about three weeks of age. Like baby chicks, piglets are then placed into

stacked 4' X 4' battery cages - eight to a cage - and nourished with automated feed and watering systems. They will then spend most of their 24-week lives in these conditions. As their body weight increases, the number per cage decreases, but the system remains largely unchanged. Most of them will not even see the light of day until the trip to the slaughterhouse.^{8,9}

PROBLEMS? . . . WHAT PROBLEMS?

Stress. Intense confinement systems such as exist in the vast majority of cases today, bring with them a whole host of issues. As was stated earlier, in their natural state pigs love to root around in the soil, forage and socialize. When cramped together for long periods of time that socializing becomes chaotic and insane. Tail-biting and in-fighting is the order of the day. Some pigs have even been eaten to death by their fellow inmates. To fight these problems the industry employs near universal methods of aggression control. At about weaning age, males are usually castrated and all pigs have their tails docked — without anesthetic. However, it is these very kinds of procedures which lead to something called PSS or Porcine Stress Syndrome. In addition to surgical procedures, lack of space, new roommates, transport, excessive litters and many other procedures contribute to this condition which sees pigs apparently just wear out and drop dead.

Lameness. Living most of their lives on meshed steel floors causes all kinds of problems, as well. The cloved hooves do not function well without solid ground. Much like chickens, their feet are not designed for this kind of surface and as a result, lameness and crippling can occur. As many as 50% of pigs suffer some form of lameness at the time of slaughter.¹⁰ But, since the industry doesn't see pork prices affected by

this problem, it is one that goes largely unaddressed.

Pests. Fleas, lice, screwworm, ticks, house flies, stable flies and mange are the main pests in the hog industry. However, there are no less than 17 common pesticides which the pigs are sprayed with, dusted with or dipped in, in order to combat these problems. The intense crowding, with its moist air and manure is the ideal breeding ground for infestation. If the pigs were still rooting around the barnyard and not penned up thousands to a shed, the pests would not pose nearly as much of a threat to the industry's bottom line.

Waste. As you might have guessed, animal waste brings with it some rather problematic conditions. Of all livestock industries, the pork industry is said to have the most wicked odour problem. The most common gases in large farm buildings that pose respiratory threats are carbon monoxide, ammonia, methane and hydrogen sulphide. The large quantities of manure and urine create a foul stench which, when combined with the total lack of exercise, result in respiratory problems in over 35% of pigs at slaughter time. Picture, if you will, the pigs on the bottom of the stacks of battery cages. With all the waste falling from above, the conditions for them must be truly pathetic.

And just how much waste are we talking about? A typical pig can produce about nine pounds of waste a day.¹¹ It doesn't sound like much until you realize that this actually means that the approximately 12 million herd of swine, in Canada alone, will produce in the neighbourhood of 20 million tons of excrement per year. If you'd like a snapshot of North America, just add another 120 million tons or so and you'll get the idea.¹² Most of this waste will unfortunately go into holding pits. It is simply buried in the ground.

Research. Agriculture Canada, and many other governmental, educational institutions and industry groups around the world conduct a wide variety of research into the causes of PSS, vocal behaviour and welfare of swine, behavioural problems of confined pigs, air quality in confinement operations, causes of preweaning piglet mortality, pollution control in modern farming operations and a myriad of other problems. If there ever was strong evidence that the industry and government are aware of their own issues and that animal rights groups are generally not alarmist or sensational, it is these kinds of studies. It's not a concern for the animal's welfare that has agri-business types, universities and governments all over the world conducting all this research, but the effect on economies. It's all about money. Greatest yield

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for the least number of dollars spent. The fact that the industry, by its very nature, causes unspeakable suffering, disease, insanity and death is not enough to justify this research. However, when money is involved, they all rally to the cause. In most cases this research produces a new drug or different system of confinement or a new hormone or feed additive. You might ask why systems are not just made more humane or less intensive. This would make sense, except for the fact that more and more of the operations are owned by large multi-nationals. As you might guess, they also have strong, vested interests in pharmaceutical corporations. It's not too hard to make the connections and do the math. In the United States,

as herd inventories have risen from about 50 to 60 million head over the past five years, the number of hog operations has actually decreased from about 250,000 to about 190,000.¹³ If the number of hogs are rising and the number of farms are decreasing, then larger, more intense confinement systems are the culprit.

A FINAL WORD

There are other issues that have not been explored here, such as feed additives and transport. The problems occurring as a result of transporting pigs from the farm to the slaughterhouse are too many and complex to simply 'highlight' in one paragraph. Many issues that apply to pigs, in areas like transport, apply to all the animals we raise for our consumption.

When we sit down to our Thanksgiving dinner, we need to remember that we are, in fact, giving thanks for many things. In many households, the meal of choice will be a big, juicy ham. One wonders if, at any point in its short life, the pig on your plate was able to truly give thanks for anything that happened to it in the all too short journey it took to get to your dinner table.

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