



FROM RAZORBACKS TO POLAND CHINA

How Markets Made American Hogs By Robert Gioielli



ENGLISH LIVESTOCK WRITER WILLIAM YOUATT did not like American pigs. Writing in 1847, he commented that with their “long peaked snouts, coarse heads, thin chests, narrow shoulders, sharp backs, slab sides, meager diminutive hams, big legs, clumped feet,

the hide of a rhinoceros, the hair and bristles of a porcupine, and as thick and shaggy as a bear’s; they have no capacity for digesting and concocting their food in the stomach for nourishment; there is nothing but offal.” Youatt’s derision was common among English stockbreeders, who believed themselves to be the most advanced and sophisticated in the world, and who looked down their noses at the inferior breeds (and peoples) across the pond. But what Youatt did not realize was that at the time he was writing this, a revolution was occurring in Ohio’s Miami River Valley, that would transform the American pig and with it, the country’s entire agricultural system.

Pigs are not native to the Americas, but came to the Western Hemisphere in the 1490s, as part of the first wave of what became known as the “Columbian Exchange,” the great mixing of flora, fauna and microbes from the world’s two heretofore-isolated ecological zones. Swine took to their new surroundings quickly, since, unlike cattle, they could fend for themselves in the forests and jungles of the greater Caribbean basin. Along with European colonization they spread quickly throughout the Americas, and were a key part of English settlement in North America in the 1600s. In the early outposts of Massachusetts and Virginia, pigs were the perfect

protein source when labor was scarce, but land was plentiful. When not on the farm, pigs quickly regain features that help them survive in the wild, such as long legs and stout hooves to run, snouts to forage for food, and tusks to fend off predators. This was the American or “razorback” (so name for the bristly hair on their backs) hog that Youatt was describing above, and these features allowed a farmer to let the pigs loose in spring time to feed and fend for themselves for months at a time. Then, in the fall, the farmer would gather up his herd for slaughter, salting and smoking. For very little time and money, there was a year-round source of fat and protein.

“PORKOPOLIS” EMERGES

By the time of the American revolution, pigs were an integral part of the diverse mix of foods produced by every American farm family, and the region’s first white settlers brought them to the greater Ohio Valley in the late eighteenth century. Many of those farmers were not just interested in a yeoman’s humble subsistence. They wanted to harvest crops that could be sold in markets farther afield, down the Ohio River, the region’s great commercial highway. They faced one problem, however: Their primary grain, corn, was heavy and bulky, and prohibitively expensive to transport. So, around the turn of the century they began turning their corn into pigs. Instead of waiting until November to round up and slaughter their semi-feral hogs, they would gather them in September, and fatten them up on corn for a month or two before marching them down to the emerging burghs of Marietta, Maysville, and, most importantly, Cincinnati.

In 1800, Cincinnati was just another market town along the Ohio. But a combination of strong transportation connections, including a broad

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From the colonial period until the nineteenth century, most American pigs were semi-feral. Known as “razorbacks” for the bristly hairs along their spine, they were valuable because they could fend for themselves in the wild before being collected in the fall for slaughter.

COURTESY UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH FLORIDA. ORIGINALLY PUBLISHED IN JOHN MONTEITH, *FAMILIAR ANIMALS AND THEIR WILD KINDRED* (NEW YORK: AMERICAN BOOK COMPANY, 1887).

public landing and access to credit, would help it become the premier emporium of the trans-Appalachian West. By the 1820s, Cincinnati not only had economies of scale in butchering and packing hogs and pork, it was also pioneering the nascent byproducts industry. Butchers had always saved animal fat to render into candles and soap, but the amount of pigs flowing into Cincinnati (peaking at up to 500,000 a year in the late 1840s) allowed small shops to grow into large-scale factories, some of which, like Proctor and Gamble, would go on to become Cincinnati’s most important industries.

The emergence of Cincinnati as “Porkopolis,” the hog butchering capital of the world, would have a major impact on Ohio agriculture, especially the greater Miami River Valley. During the middle of the nineteenth century, the two developed a mutually reinforcing relationship. As markets for pork and pig byproducts from Cincinnati grew, the farmers in the region pioneered new types of hogs to match the demand. Their efforts would rapidly transform American pigs from the semi-feral razorback into fully domesticated, corn-processing behemoths.

“BIG CHINA” COMES TO OHIO

Ohio Valley hog breeding has its origins in a series of Shaker communities in Warren County, which in the 1800s began crossing traditional European pigs breeds with “Big

Prize Medal at the World's Fair.

“QUEEN CITY” HAMS,

CURED BY

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CINCINNATI, O.

THESE celebrated Hams received the ROYAL COMMISSIONERS' PRIZE MEDAL at the great Industrial Exhibition of all Nations, held in London, England, 1851. They came into competition with the curing of both Europe and America, and were served up for, and partaken of by, the members of the Juries, by the Hon. ABBOT LAWRENCE, Minister from the United States to the Court of St. James, by his Royal Highness PRINCE ALBERT, and VICTORIA, Queen of England; and were pronounced by the honorable Judges equal, if not superior, to any of the medalists on exhibition. The process used in curing these superior Hams is something similar to the curing of the far-famed “Westphalia,” and has been improved upon and so far perfected by Mr. JOHN C. SCHOOLEY, the senior member of the firm, who in all cases superintends the practical part in person.

Messrs. SCHOOLEY and HOUGH devote themselves exclusively to the curing of Hams expressly for family use; and in doing so, they use the greatest care, so as to have each Ham uniform and palatable; and to convince the public of the reputation of the “Queen City” Hams at home, we have only to state that they have been presented for competition at the different exhibitions, alongside of other celebrated brands, and in all cases have received the FIRST PREMIUM, viz:

Ohio State Agricultural Fair,	1850.
Ohio Mechanics' Institute,	1850.
Do. Do. Do.	1851.

Setting aside all of the above Credentials, we only ask the Public to test our curing, to be convinced of its superiority. Always keeping in view that our success depends entirely on the quality of our article, we sincerely hope we may continue to please all who patronise us.

All orders forwarded to us at Cincinnati will be attended to without delay.

SCHOOLEY & HOUGH,

CINCINNATI, OHIO.

JANUARY 24th, 1852.

Various products from hogs packed in Cincinnati were shipped around the world, and many of the salted and cured hams were particularly famous. This advertisement from the Cincinnati firm of Schooley and Hough boasted of the multiple prizes their hams had won.

FROM A CONDENSED HISTORY OF THE ORIGIN, RISE, PROGRESS AND COMPLETION OF THE “GREAT EXHIBITION OF THE INDUSTRY OF ALL NATIONS,” HELD IN THE CRYSTAL PALACE, LONDON, DURING THE SUMMER OF THE YEAR 1851 BY D. ELDON HALL, 1852.

Chinas,” hogs that had originated from Asia. By the 1830s, a belt of farms in northern Hamilton and southern Butler and Warren counties were the center of American hog breeding. Farmers here continued to experiment, crossing Chinese pigs with various European imports, including prized English Berkshires, to then sell to other smaller farms throughout the region. Whereas the razorback had evolved to fend for itself in the wild, these Miami Valley hogs were bred for a specific set of domestic market conditions. They were larger, averaging 200 pounds, and although their legs were not nearly as powerful as the feral swine, they were built stoutly so as to withstand marching “on the hoof” from the

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farm to Cincinnati. Most importantly, the hogs were bred for their ability to put on weight as efficiently as possible. The calculus was simple: pounds per bushel per day. Cincinnati packers might have been paying top dollar for every pound of hog, but unless their pigs digested corn efficiently, farmers might not break even, much less make money, on the most prized porker.

The Miami Valley region reached its apex for hog breeding in the 1850s with the emergence of the Poland China breed. The origins of the breed, and even the name, were much debated in local agricultural circles. It seems to have emerged in Warren County in the 1840s, tracing its origins to those original Shaker breeds from the 1810s that were then crossbred with a number of local and imported stock over the next three

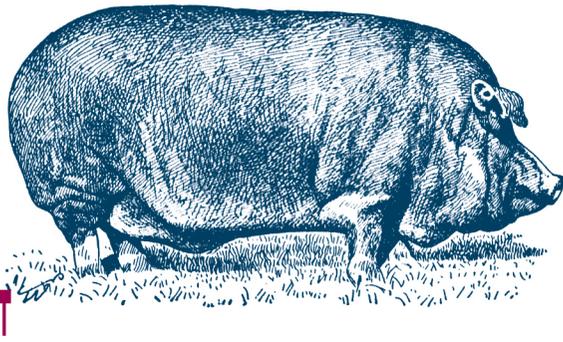
decades. Several farms laid claim to breeding the first pure Poland Chinas, including David Magie, one of the most well known farmers in the region in the mid-nineteenth century. The name comes from the breed’s lineage in Big China hogs, as well as the belief that one of its early breeders was supposedly a Polish emigrant.

Despite this controversy, the breed’s origins in the Miami Valley are uncontested, which shows the importance of the region to the emergence of American commercial agriculture in the middle of the nineteenth century. Despite our visions of a quaint and pastoral America during this period, what Magie and other breeders had been able to achieve was in many ways a feat of organic engineering. The pig had originally been adopted in order to metabolize the corn grown on local farms into muscle and fat, a condensed and more easily transportable form of caloric energy. Breeders’ efforts thus focused on improving that metabolic process, turning the hog into a more efficient machine. What farmers did not realize at the time is that in all of the crossing of breeds to improve their ability to put on weight, they were actually engineering one specific component of the hog: the intestine. The most efficient fatteners had the longest intestines, which allowed them to squeeze every ounce of nutrients from every kernel of corn.

Although feeding efficiency was paramount, Miami Valley farmers were also breeding for a variety of other characteristics, that generally broke down into whether they were prioritizing the pork or the byproduct market — a “meat-type” or “lard-type” hog. Although what made hogs so valuable in the days before refrigeration was their fattiness, it was possible for pigs to have too much fat. Pigs that weighed more than 250 pounds had meat that was overwhelmed with fat, and the fat itself was flavorless, making bacon that was bland and lard that was often inedible. But if this was the case, why were farmers breeding 400-pound pigs? Because the fat was often more valuable than the meat.

THE VALUE OF FAT

Cincinnati’s byproduct industry had sprung up as soon as the first major slaughterhouses had opened in the 1820s. In fact, many houses actually slaughtered the pigs for free in return for the right to sell the valuable blood and bristles. But in the late 1830s, local companies pioneered new forms of steam rendering that made pig fat a tremendously valuable commodity. Traditionally, animal fat candles, although effective, were smoky and smelly. But by rendering the fat with high-pressure steam, many of the impurities were removed and produced clean burning lard oil, which quickly became a desirable replacement for sperm oil. Cincinnati’s production



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of lard oil peaked at around one million gallons a year in the late 1840s and 1850s, making it one of the country's most popular lighting oils. The value of the fat for lard oil, soap, candles and chemicals meant that in the 1840s, farmers would often debate whether or not to have their hogs butchered for meat, or rendered for byproducts, with only the hams being saved for salting and curing.

Lard oil production peaked in Cincinnati in the middle of the 1850s, but then began to decline

precipitously. With the discovery of oil in Western Pennsylvania and the production of kerosene, Americans had a new, cheaper and even cleaner burning heating oil. This shift presaged the slow decline of the pig farming in the greater Miami River Valley. After the Civil War, the rise of the railroad caused Chicago to overtake Cincinnati as the "hog butcher to the world." The nexus of the "corn-hog complex," as it became known by economic geographers, moved west as well, first to Indiana, and then to the vast cornfields of the plowed under Great Plains in Illinois and Iowa. To this day, Iowa is America's largest hog producer, slaughtering more than 30 million swine a year. But this agricultural system, where corn is grown almost exclusively to be fed to pigs bound for sale in distant markets, has its origins in southwestern Ohio, where American pigs were first bred, shaped and engineered for large-scale commercial production. ♥

Robert Gioielli was the curator of "Rethinking Porkopolis," an Ohio Humanities-funded exhibit that explored Southwest Ohio's nineteenth century environmental history through pigs and pork packing. He is an Assistant Professor of History at the University of Cincinnati.

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