

Rush County Bicentennial/Article #6
By John D. Wilson, Rush County Historian

The topic for this month's Rush County Bicentennial Article is Rush County Hogs!

The pioneers brought livestock with them when they settled in Rush County. Hogs were allowed to run "hog wild" in the woods. Those feral pigs fed on nuts and other forage on the forest floor called "mast". As long as there was a convenient water supply they were content.

In the fall the fat hogs were rounded up and driven on foot to Cincinnati. You could identify your hogs out of the "drove" by checking the notches cut in the ear(s). Notch marks were registered at the courthouse.

Feral hogs were beneficial in the county seat of Rushville. When you threw out your table scraps in the alley, the hogs roaming the town would "collect the garbage". The downside was there were hog wallows on Main Street, and some feral hogs were mean and nasty. There was a holding pen on the courthouse square for feral and unclaimed marked hogs that were a nuisance. Those animals were auctioned off with the money going to the county treasury.

Historian Dr. John Arnold described the hog drive to Cincinnati like this. "To drive 50 or 100 wild "elm peelers" 70 or 80 miles through an unfenced country was a heavy contract, for it implied the necessity of frequent races after those that would make a break for home, the tramping through deep mud, wading of rivers, and exposure to inclement weather."

A round trip to market usually took 20 days, and the men received 37 ½ cents per day. Hogs were sold for \$1.00 or \$1.50 net weight. A good drove would average 125 pounds. Often the weight of animals in a drove was "guessed off".

According to Sarah Newby (Rush County Sesquicentennial Edition History), the stories about hog drives were numerous. She wrote that Nathan Pearson related "the largest drove he ever accompanied from here was 2,270". In 1845 a sixteen year old named Henry Phelps made the first of 18 trips to Cincinnati during his lifetime.

Madison, Indiana later became a good market for Rush County hogs. The K and S Railroad ran from Knightstown and Carthage to Shelbyville. From there the line went on to Madison. Hogs were shipped in the fall and winter from Henry Newby's "hog lot" in Carthage. Each railroad car would carry 15-20 pigs.

One of the early court indictments in Rush County was against John Ray for illegal hog marking. He was acquitted because the offense occurred before the county officially organized in 1822. Another early case was Israel Cox vs. James Greer. Greer had accused Cox of hog stealing. So Cox was suing for slander. Oliver Smith was Greer's lawyer. At one point Greer yelled out: "Don't lie Smith. I did say he stole my hogs, and I stick to it."

Fast forward 100 years. Prior to WWII, Rush County ranked number one in hog population in Indiana with 78,545 hogs. At the end of the war in 1945, Rush County still ranked first with 110,407. Nationally Rush County ranked 12th in 1940 and 23rd in 1945.

When Wendell Willkie ran for President in 1940, his family's farms and hogs were featured in some national publications. He wanted to promote himself as a man of the soil.

When was the last time you saw a field of hogs fenced in by woven wire fence? In the first half of the twentieth century there were hundreds of miles of hog fences in Rush County. Farmers had purebred hogs: Duroc, Chester White, Tamworth, Poland China, Hampshire, and Berkshire were some of the more popular breeds. In my lifetime crossbred hogs have gained in favor, and today a more lean variety of crossbred hogs are raised in confinement facilities. The fences are gone.

Today there are 51 hog confinement facilities in Rush County: Six are farrowing operations, and 45 are finishing operations. Most of these facilities do business on contract and finish out 1,000 hogs in each building in four months. A recently constructed confinement barn holds 2,480 animals and maintains the feeding and ventilation on a computerized system. These hogs finish out in five to five and a half months.

There are still several pork production related businesses in Rush County. One of note is Laird's Premium Blend Genetics west of Arlington. They sell show pigs, semen, and seed stock based on highly sophisticated genetics. Laird's deals in purebred and crossbred hogs, and they do business coast to coast.

Please tolerate a personal story about feral hogs from 35 years ago. One of my neighbors had a vehicular incident. Several hogs escaped, but the owner thought they had most of the group accounted for. But, weeks later when I was checking my property along Little Blue River, I noticed what looked like numerous new deer trails in the woods. There they were, a half dozen liberated hogs. They were in "hog heaven". The owner brought a low-boy trailer down to the valley, baited the trailer with grain, and the pigs ambled right in for us. To this day I tease my neighbor about owing me a feed bill.

So remember the next time you want to be the "big hog at the trough", don't "pig out" too much. Don't be "pig headed". Vote for the candidate that offers the least amount of "pork barrel". If you play football, keep the "pigskin" dry. Above all else, don't be a "ball hog" on the hardwood. You can't win unless you are willing to "root hog or die." If your "piggy bank" is busted, "pigs in a blanket" is good comfort food. You can't make a "silk purse out of a sow's ear", but you can make a great sandwich from the "Que". And always remember it's not "hogwash", we are still "hog wild" in Rush County.

The Rush County inventory reported by the USDA on December of 2017 was 118,966. That ranked 131st out of 2,856 hog producing counties in the United States.

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Frank Oesterling and Wendell Willkie
(Picture – Rush County Historical Society)