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## How We Got The Pigs

One of my wildest childhood memories was the hogs that my grandparents had on their homestead. For a youngster of five or six the beasts were awesome, running around their pens snorting and barking. They seemed to have the power of a locomotive as they dug holes in the hard ground as if it were sand. I was amazed as I watched them eat the slop that had been collected in my grandmother's kitchen during the day - rinds, bones, feathers, and even dishwater.

I did not have to be told to stay out of the muddy pen. The feral behavior of the two hundred and fifty pound monsters was enough for me to realize that there were other activities that would be more fun. Like shooting bluejays with my BB gun, throwing my axe at the basement door, or even walking into town to buy a sodee pop.

But when my wife and I began our homesteading in 1991 it seemed only natural that a hog was required. It would provide meat, manure, and entertainment. And we had heard so much about how cute the little porkers were.

After checking out several books from the library on farm animals and reading-up on the subject we decided to bring home not one, but two pigs. This was thanks to Nancy's brother who had told her that a single pig would be lonely. The books informed us how smart the animals were and that they are the cleanest farm animals you can own - not.

One Saturday, February 23, we decided to take a trip over to the Walmart in Murphy for supplies and to stop by Wayne's Feed to inquire about geese. On the way we heard on the radio that National Pig Day was March first. I didn't think much of it at the time. After arriving at the feed store and learning that we might be able to order five geese at six dollars each, Nancy casually asked where we could find a couple of pigs. Wayne suggested Stile's Packing on Highway 64.

Since it was on the way home we pulled in and waited as the butcher loaded a large order of packaged meat for the man ahead of us. When he had finished with the other customer the butcher asked what we needed. I hemmed and hawed and finally managed to say that we were interested in getting a couple of baby pigs to raise. Nancy's mouth dropped when he said that they had a few available that had just been weaned the week before.

We had a short conversation about what type of shelter they would need. Typical to the mountain way of explaining, he simplified it beyond my comprehension. Something like "just a dog house with a wood floor". Nancy was grinning from ear to ear as the conversation ensued - she had found her little piggies. We said that we would be back next week to pick them up after we had built a "hog house".

Sunday morning was Nancy's long run day - 9.2 miles to Joyce Kilmer and back. I bet she was thinking about the piggies the whole way. It was afternoon by the time we got down to the business of constructing suitable quarters for the swinettes. Poplar trunks were used for vertical corner supports and the old shutters that we removed when we took out a window from the house became the floor. Rough sawn lumber left over from the famous chicken coop was nailed to the sides. We ran out of wood before the roof could be built, but decided that since the weather was going to be clear that we could hold off for a few days. We used chicken wire from an old compost pile to build a little yard for the tots to wander. Knowing that pigs can dig, we secured the fencing with tent stakes between each post.

We finished late in the afternoon. I asked Nancy if maybe we should wait until Tuesday to get the pigs so we could finish the pig house on Monday. No way Jose! Monday was the day after National Pig Day and we were going to get them come hell or whatever.

Bright and early Monday morning we headed off on another great homesteading adventure. After a quick stop at Walmart it was Wayne's feed for piggy supplies. Wormers, feeders, and feed set me back fifty big ones - no wonder pork is expensive. Nancy invited the sales lady to a barbecue in November.

On the way to the packing house we discussed names for our new babies. Knowing how easy it is for people to get attached to their animals, we decided to use names that would remind us of why we were raising hogs. Nancy came up with Barby and Q - perfect!

Pulling into Stile's you could smell the anticipation - well, it could have been the barnyard. We bought six pounds of ground beef at \$1.40 per pound before heading out to the barn to pick out two shoats (we were learning the proper terminology). Old man Stiles took over at this point asking which ones Nancy wanted. She embarrassed me by asking for two "polka dotted" ones instead of using the proper term "spots". I was taking pictures as they all had their heads stuck in the barn. Soon there were two "polka dotted" pigs messing in the back of our new pick-up, and boy can they mess.



*Nancy picks her pigs.  
Note the smile on her face.*

Old man Stiles then threw us a curve. He asked if we knew someone who could castrate the pigs. Nancy and I stared at each other with mouths agape. He must have seen the looks and asked if I had a sharp knife. Nancy swooned and I thought I was going to have to catch her. I handed him my new Gerber with a factory edge that would shave the hair off my arm, but after trying it he said he needed a sharper one. The butcher soon came up with one. Two of the farm hands were called over to hold the kicking shoats - I think the hands were named Nod and Bob because that's what they did as old man Stiles gave directions. A quick antiseptic (water from a garden hose) was applied to the area to be operated on and after some squealing, kicking, nodding and bobbing the two boars were barrows. An old Rotweiler laying next to the barn seemed to be drooling as he eye-balled the tasty morsels laying in the dirt. There was no added charge for the surgical procedure.

Stiles then warned us about the "scours", commonly known as the runs to us city folk. He gave the pigs a shot and told us to get some "pencilum" at the feed store if the scours continued. I silently wondered if there might be a pill instead of an injection that I could administer. This was certainly turning out to be more complicated than I remembered from my grandmother's farm in Tennessee many years ago. All they did was slop the hogs with leftovers from the dinner table. There was no mention of shots, castration, or scours that I could recall.

We learned that the pigs were a cross between Yorkshires, Durocs, and Spots. The castration was necessary to keep the meat from having a strong taste. You have to ask questions if you want information up here, otherwise the conversation suddenly turns to old hunting or fishing tales. We also take notes because it is easy to forget with so much going on at once.

Now the back of the truck was a real mess. The barnyard smell would definitely follow us home. As we pulled away from Stile's Nancy said she was kind of numb - I well understood.

Things settled down as we headed for Robbinsville. After a quick stop at the library for reference material, we drove the winding road towards The Roost. Then we learned that pigs can get car sick. Maybe I could trade in the truck for a new one.

Finally we got home. By this time we were both wondering if we had taken too big a step at this early stage of homesteading. Nancy, the ever resilient campaigner, climbed into the truck grabbing one of the pigs by the ear. In a few minutes they were in their new "casa de porko".

After overhauling the bed of the pick-up we headed back down



*Barby and Q sleep off a bad day.*

All the other kids had to come over for a curious look at the new arrivals. Won Ton, our chow puppy, barked at a safe distance, the chickens wanted to taste the feed, and Nunu, our cat, watched from afar. The trout in the nearby pond could have cared less.

We were both relieved to see the pigs eating and drinking as dusk descended. At least they seemed to be getting back to the way we imagined normal pigs should act, but what do we really know about pigs?

After a week the little rascals were beginning to fatten up. Who wouldn't with the daily treats Nancy slops them with. They get an egg milkshake every afternoon and whatever scraps we have from the kitchen. It is strange how they will eat right off the ground, dirt, roots, leaves and all.

Nunu finally got curious enough to jump in the pen while the oinkers were sleeping. I woke them up to see what the cat would do. His eyes looked like silver dollars as the pigs lumbered out of their house. As soon as Nunu had an opening he leaped for the fence.

Now we have a daily ritual of spending an hour watching Barbie and Q. Won Ton, Nunu, and the chickens all come down to beg for treats. Nancy and I just sit there grinning.

## **The Big Move**

The first day of April dawned slowly with an overcast sky holding back the harsh morning light that usually streams into the bedroom window. The weather was cool, but my cocoon under the covers had been warmed to an ideal temperature. A perfect day to sleep in and enjoy the benefits of my early retirement.

Suddenly I was jolted awake by the back door slamming followed by my wife Nancy bellowing: "the pigs are out of their pen." I jumped from my cozy nest in a manner that I was used to after being a firefighter for twenty-two years. I was pulling on my jogging jacket as I cleared the back door. Nancy's prize pet pigs were of great importance in the scheme of things on the homestead, so this did fall under the classification of a true emergency.

A great deal of attention had been devoted to Barbie and Q. We had acquired them only a month before and fattened them up from twenty to nearly eighty pounds each. A daily ritual of spending time watching their antics in their temporary pen had evolved. We had planned to have more substantial quarters prepared before they had grown to this size, but other tasks had been a higher priority. The hogs had definitely outgrown the flimsy chicken wire pen. They had come close to pushing the fence down when we brought treats in the afternoon. Plans were to construct the new pen today, and now the suckers had escaped only hours before the scheduled move.

My mind was still foggy as I raced down the hill calling "here piggy, piggy, piggy". Scanning the area looking for a clue to their whereabouts, I suddenly noticed familiar shapes in the hog house. There was Barbie and Q sleeping late. Then I heard Nancy hollering, "April Fools". It was one of those rare occasions when she had got me good.

An hour and six cups of coffee later I was just beginning to function mentally. My uncle arrived to begin construction

of the new Hog Hilton. Nancy came down after awhile to help and my father Bright came to watch the show.

The posts and field fence were quickly raised. A covered shelter made of plywood offered protection from inclement weather. As soon as the entry gate been completed Nancy was ready to bring the porkers to their new estate.

The new pen was some hundred yards farther back in Poplar Cove than the temporary pen. We had debated for some time what method we would use to get the pigs into their new home. There had been four suggestions. My uncle had come up with the idea of tying a rope around the rear legs and dragging them. Nancy quickly rejected this as being too inhumane. I had made two suggestions. The first was to put the pigs in a large cloth sack and use the large garden cart for transport. The second was to manhandle the critters into the back of the pick-up truck and take them for a short Sunday drive. Both of these options received considerable attention, but as usual, Nancy's idea was the winner. She would lure the two eighty pound beasts down the cove with a bowl of egg shake, their favorite treat.

We had some reservations about letting the pigs out of their pen to roam free, but after seeing how wild they went for an egg shake treat we thought there would be no problem. A few minutes after the pen had been completed Nancy appeared with a large bowl of piggy shake and the camera - I definitely wanted this on film. She set the bowl on a bench to hand me the camera. As we turned we found our dog Won Ton lapping up the last of the egg shake. A slow drizzle began to fall from the sky. We should have recognized these as warning signs.

A new batch of slop was prepared, this time a whole gallon milk jug full. Nancy began calling, "piggy treats" as I held the dog and opened the gate to the temporary pen. Barbie raced out and headed for the familiar sound, but Q stayed in the pen running in circles. Won Ton squirmed free and a melee began. Barbie, who realized that his brother Q was not following and a dog was yapping at his heels, suddenly wanted back in the pen. He ran full speed into the fencing - things were quickly getting out of control. My father, smoke billowing from his cigar, seemed to be enjoying the action.

Finally I coaxed Q out of the pen. The two pigs suddenly had absolutely no interest in their special treat now that a multitude of natural treats were available. They raced into the small brook and began rooting for moss nibbles or something of the sort. Then they dashed for the wooded hillside to chomp on acorns, pine cones, and anything they could grab as they dodged our attempts to chase them back down. Nancy was in a virtual panic - her babies were headed for the hills. For me it was de-je-vue - three months earlier we were chasing escaped chickens on the same hillside.

My uncle finally scared the pigs back down with a stick and Nancy began to think straight again. She had locked Won Ton in the pick-up and brought the piggy feed bowl and scoop, making the familiar sounds of chow time. I now had the egg shake. Everyone was calling "here piggy, piggy, piggy". It was no wonder the swine were confused - all at once they had freedom, food was everywhere, and crazy humans were running in all directions yelling "here piggy".

Now there were four of us trying to round up the escapees. My dad, at seventy-nine years of age, couldn't resist the excitement and had joined in the chase calling "soo-eee", cigar in one hand and a glass of straight vodka in the other. We made slow headway, but the pigs now seemed to be interested in the feed and shake treat. After ten minutes of careful coaxing they were lured into the new Hog Hilton. Nancy slammed the gate shut with an audible sigh of relief.

We all stood back for a few minutes of rest, recounting the experience. Nancy said she had the thought of having to put an ad in the local newspaper for "two polka dotted pigs lost in the vicinity of Blue Boar Lodge, call the City Folks at .....". I had had fleeting thoughts of having to tackle the porkers and wrestle them into the pen. Dad just laughed as he blew smoke from the same cigar. My uncle was wondering why he had even volunteered to help. He had been smart enough to go home before the great chicken chase had begun a few months earlier

### **Another Chase**

I will have to admit that Barby and Q were cute, but that lasted for only a few weeks. One thing that we had not expected was how much they eat and how fast they grow. Our intentions had been to slaughter the hogs ourselves in November the old fashion way. We had purchased the five week old pigs on March 2nd when they weighed in at about twenty pounds each. By July first they both weighed a good two hundred and forty pounds, the proper slaughter

weight. The cold weather of November necessary for cooling the meat overnight before butchering was still four months off. The porkers were now consuming a fifty pound bag of feed every two days at six dollars a bag. They were getting expensive but that wasn't even the main problem.

What really bothered us was the barnyard aroma that drifted down Poplar Cove to our house when the weather heated up. We also wondered how anyone could consider pigs clean animals. True, they used one corner of their pen to do their business, but by June their business was two feet deep. A rain would make the potty corner a steaming cess pool that swarmed with flies. The pigs would sink into the mess up to their bodies and sometimes they would even lay down in it. We covered the area with wood chips, leaves, straw, and whatever we could find, but it remained a disgusting bog of hog sog.

We knew that pigs liked to wallow in mud, so we constructed the pen next to a small branch that ran through the cove. A pipe directed water into one corner of the pen. In a few weeks the corner had become a three foot deep mud hole. As a matter of fact the entire pen would have made a good truck and tractor pull course. The large depression had threatened the integrity of the field fence. We piled five large poplar tree trunks along the fence to keep the animals from escaping, but after a few days several of the logs had been rolled down into the swamp by the rooting of the hogs. It became a daily ritual to check the fence and pile more logs to seal escape routes.

We had left several large stumps in the pen when we built it to give the pigs scratching posts. They seemed to prefer the fence, leaning their full weight of two hundred pounds against the wire to soothe the itching of thousands of mites that covered their bodies. The fence did hold, but we always feared the worst. I rubbed them down several times with used motor oil but in a day or two the mites were as thick as before. Who said pigs are clean animals? By June we had had enough. There was no way these beasts could become pets for us. They belonged in the freezer and the sooner the better.



*Ron gives the pigs an oil bath.*

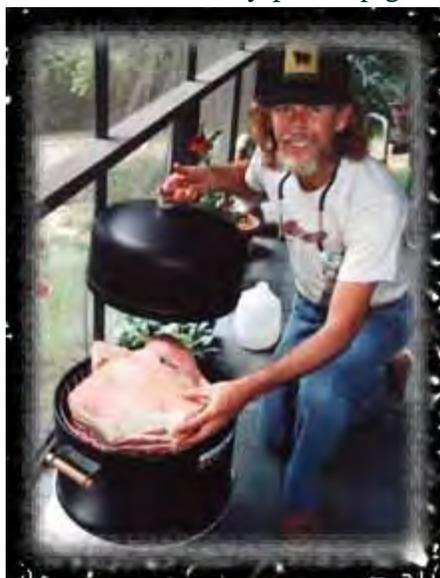
We called the meat packing house to see if they would come to pick the pigs up, but they advised us to find someone in the area to drive them over. The local Co-Op gave us the telephone number of a man who had a trailer. He was busy at the moment baling hay in the sunny weather. A week later we lucked out with a few days of rain and the transport was arranged.

Neither Nancy or I could sleep the night before in anticipation of loading the pigs and getting them off to market. Nolan arrived forty-five minutes late as rain fell from the gray overcast sky. After backing the trailer up to the gate we attempted to coax the pigs in with feed. They seemed to know that getting into the trailer would be a mistake. They came close, but would not take the first step up. The great pig chase then began. There was grunting, snorting, and barking by all participants. There were calls of "here piggy" and "get up there big-un" and "sooy, pig, pig, pig", but they had made up their minds not to get in the strange box that now loomed at the gate. We resorted to using plywood as cutting boards to squeeze them into an ever smaller area where they would have to get in the trailer. The pigs then saw a small opening between the gate post and the trailer. A second later they were once again running free in Poplar Cove.

Time was now getting short. The packing house wanted them delivered by ten o'clock. It was now nine-thirty and the drive would take forty-five minutes. We considered shooting the pigs, cutting their throats, and then loading them into the trailer. I ran to the house and called to see if we could be a little late. The packing house said they could only take them alive. It would be okay if we were a little late.

After twenty minutes of chasing they were back in the pen. We let the hogs calm down for a few minutes and then slowly worked them to the back of the trailer using the cutting boards. We had repositioned the trailer to cut off any escape routes and used some plywood to make a small ramp. When the pigs were at the rear of the trailer we closed the pen gate as much as we could behind them and used the cutting boards to keep them from backing up. Having nowhere to go except into the trailer they finally got their front legs up and then sat ponderously, refusing to budge

any further. Nancy, who was in the trailer, reached over Q and grabbed it's tail. With a mighty pull she manhandled the two hundred and forty pound pig into the trailer. Barby followed as Nolan and I slapped the hindquarters and yelled.



*A ham goes on the smoker.*

Nancy has never ceased to amaze me since we moved to the homestead. This city gal was covered with mud and pig sog after chasing two filthy 250 pound hogs around the putrid pen in a driving rain for an hour - and she was actually having a good time! As I started to give-up, she had proclaimed that the pigs were going to market today one way or another. Her commitment was total, giving her more strength for the final pull on Q's tail that led to our success.

We watched the process of cutting-up our meat at Stiles Meat Packing where we had bought the pigs only four months before. we ate "high on the hog" for the next year and had plenty to share with family and friends. Raising our own hogs was a great experience, but we will never do it again.