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Pork production then and now

NEWARK, Del. - "Feed your herd as regular as your wife feeds you."

That reminder from an 1895 issue of the Swine Breeders Journal, even assuming the unlikely possibility that all hog producers were husbands and well-fed, would surely be

out of place for today's hog production methods.

But, then, so would the hog of 1895. For in those 80-odd years, there has been a dramatic change in the looks of a market hog, according to Dr. Richard Fowler, Extension livestock specialist at the University

of Delaware. He says producers have gone from the thick, fat, heavy pig of the turn of the century to the lean, meaty hog of today. In that time, the versatility of the pig has also been dramatized by another change - it's gone from almost total outdoor living to

modern confinement production.

In 1895, hogs probably were driven to the nearest railroad collection point for shipment. Farmers received about \$5 per hundred pounds for their pigs. By comparison, the average price hog producers received in 1975 was about \$46 per hundred pounds.

The history of the introduction of swine in this country is quite interesting.

Early European explorers brought pigs to the Americas. Columbus, in 1493 on his second voyage, brought eight sows to Cuba and they soon populated the area. Cortez brought the first pigs to the North American mainland (Mexico) and in 1600 pigs were brought to present-day New Mexico. In 1539, DeSoto brought 13 sows from Cuba to Florida to provide "walking food" for his expedition.

The first British pigs came with colonists in 1585, but within a few months the settlers had eaten all of them and faced famine. In 1607, the Virginia Company sent the first pigs that survived - three sows. Colonizers continued to bring hogs to

America, and by the end of the 1600's, the typical farmer owned four or five hogs.

As settlers moved west in the 1800's, the pig went along. They were herded in droves until the coming of railroads. Hogs fed in the Midwest were driven 500 to 800 miles to markets in Philadelphia and other eastern cities, averaging five to ten miles a day.

The current U.S. swine breeds were imported from England or were developed in the United States, primarily in the 1800's. "Tailor-made" breeds began to be developed in the mid-1930's by experiment stations to emphasize certain characteristics felt desirable. They were developed by crossbreeding of purebreds, primarily with the Danish Landrace which was imported in 1934. Once developed, they were selected within their own population as purebreds.

After World War II, the demand for fat fell and the demand for lean meat increased, prompting the development of today's leaner hogs. Some things really haven't changed that much, however. Surprisingly, there were more than 45 million hogs marketed in the United States in 1895. The number has only grown to about 70 million annually today.

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