

# Henry Gruber, Pork industry

**BY JACK HUBLEY**  
**NEW TRIPOLI** — It's been a long market hog show. The best part of three hours. Inside the showing a handful of nervous sweaty-palmed 4-H'ers prod their class winners in anticipation of the announcement.

Wading amid the sea of pork is a bull of a man who selects his champion and reserve with the practiced eye born of years spent in showings throughout the East and Midwest.

Following a few comments on the importance of a strong youth livestock program, the judge goes public with his decision, adding, "In my opinion this is the kind of a pig the industry's looking for."

And after spending a few minutes with Henry Gruber at the show's conclusion, it becomes obvious that this is the kind of man that the industry is looking for. In fact, Gruber's commitment to the livestock industry is as capacious as the man himself.

Gruber cultivated a love for the swine business early in life, growing up on the family potato and beef farm six miles from New Tripoli in Lehigh County. "When I was six years old my grandfather bought me a Poland China gilt, and that was my first endeavor in the hog business," he recalls. Evidently Henry's first pig made quite an impression.

In 1957 Gruber graduated from Penn State, and with animal husbandry degree in hand, went to

work for A&B Packing of Allentown the following year. Starting as a buyer, Henry rose through the company ranks to become head buyer as well as chief of the livestock services and farm divisions. But a happy ending was not to come to pass.

A&B first began running into financial problems during the mid-1970's as a result of the so-called Prompt Payment Law that required farmers selling their livestock to be paid by the close of the next business day.

"There's nothing at all wrong with that," emphasizes Gruber, "but the problem was that the packer couldn't require the same thing from the chain stores." With money going out faster than it was coming in, packing houses were forced to increase their credit lines, a strategy that only compounded their problems.

Adding to A&B's financial headaches was the company's inability to keep pace with wage hike demands in a traditionally low profit margin industry. The Prompt Payment Law, when combined with escalating wages and a lack of capital needed for updating equipment, created a financial burden too heavy for many packing houses to bear. And on May 3, of this year, A&B packing became one of those casualties.

But even if one of the state's largest packing firms had taken a

one-two punch, it wasn't down for the count. It wasn't long before PACMA, the marketing wing of the Pa. Farmers Association, approached Gruber about a restart and the wheels were in motion.

At this point, an offer has been submitted to A&B's owners from the newly formed producer co-op, and according to Gruber, a spring, 1985 start-up is a possibility. He does admit, though, that forming a corporation may be necessary, since it seems unlikely that enough farmer support will be enlisted to preserve co-op status.

"We do feel that there has to be some employee incentive, so we'll use a profit sharing structure," says Henry, vowing to give all employees a stake in their company.

"My concern is for the industry," Gruber emphasizes, "and right now the industry is in need of all the buying power it can get. Not only Pennsylvania, but the entire East is in real trouble as a result of the reduction in packing facilities."

One of the reasons that Gruber is working so hard to revitalize the derailed plant is the availability of water and sewage in Allentown.

"Water to the packing plant is like gasoline to an engine," Gruber asserts, adding that tighter environmental controls have made it virtually impossible to build new packing facilities in many parts of the East where the need may be greatest.

And with the restart of A&B on the horizon, Gruber hopes that his purebred Hampshire and Yorkshire operation, located 13 miles northwest of Allentown in the wavy Lehigh County hill country, will help to meet the demand for more pork products.

"The purebred industry has hurt itself in the last four or five years with a trend toward growthiness and production that has resulted in a slip in quality for the consumer," Henry says. Though Gruber feels that the ideal reproductive unit is the crossbred sow, he is confident that her value is greatly enhanced through crossing with a purebred boar.

"I think there's a great need for quality purebred boars in the industry," Gruber says.

If that be the case, then the Gruber's new farrowing and nursery facility may be just what the industry needs.

Designed with input from Penn State extension engineer Dan Myers, and swine consultant Matt Parsons, the new building in-

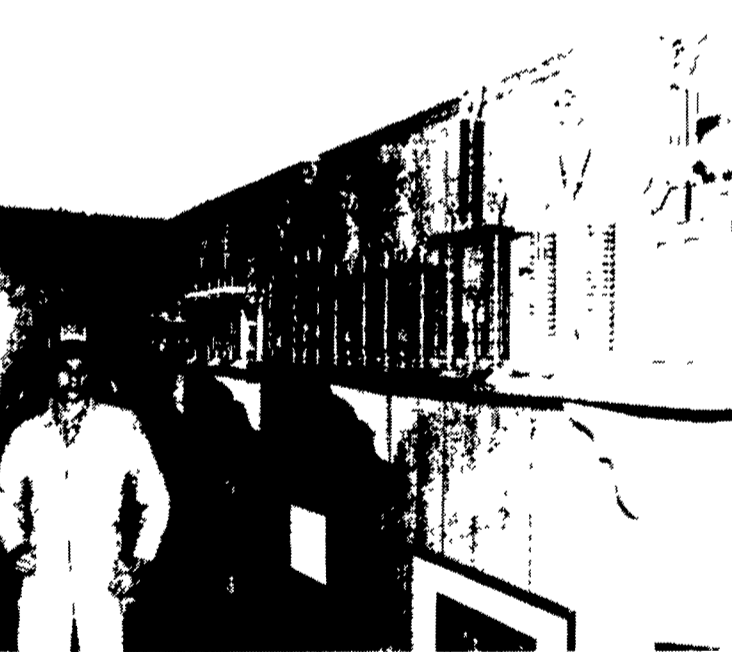
corporates plenty of state-of-the-art innovations including geothermal heating and cooling, wide-trough manure gutters, and a roofed manure pit designed to reduce odor and promote bacterial

## Pork — a family affair



Pork production at the Gruber farm is a family affair involving Henry, his wife Marsha, and 16-year-old son Seth.

## Seth in trophy room



With good coaching from home, Seth is off to a running start on the swine show circuit.

## Purebred boar goal



With the help of his 60-sow herd, Gruber plans to supply the industry with high quality purebred boars. Hampshire sow named Betsy was top-selling gilt at Ohio's Andrews and Baughn sale. York seedstock comes from Daryl Sheiss and Penn State boar.

## Geothermal climate control system



A total of six underground tubes (like the three shown) provide geothermal heating in winter and cooling in summer. Installed at a depth of seven feet, the six 166-foot tubes deliver 50° air in winter, and 70° air in summer to the new farrowing and nursery building in the background. Gas provides supplemental heating in winter.

## Snout coolers installed



Snout coolers keep sows cool and content during summer months. Comfortable sows have better appetites, produce more milk and faster gaining pigs, says Gruber.