

Swine Song

Wherein one learns that pigs require tender loving care and that it is the sympathetic Country Woman who can soothe a troubled sow.

Excerpt by Gwen Petersen

Pigs are those fabled, peculiar-looking creatures credited with a variety of weird habits. Mostly, the fables are exaggerations of the truth by frightened or uninformed persons. As with people, there are chauvinist pigs and there are swine.

The lord and master of the family-size ranch or farm usually ignores pigs. He does not form attachments or become emotionally involved. The Country Woman, on the other hand, can't think of anything cuter than a piglet.

Pigs actually do have "little piggy eyes" and "eat like hogs." Their manners are atrocious. The "boss" sow will steal food from the smaller pigs and they, in turn, chew out the younger ones. There's no such thing as concern or fair play in the heart of a sow. Still, she's a friendly creature that loves to have you scratch her back, rub her stomach or oil her itchy places. She'll come a-running when she hears you or sees you approaching. She'll hang around and talk to you when you are cleaning the sheds. She will also run over the top of you to get at a kernel of grain.

A Country Woman can recite a good deal of blank verse about pigs. Your "swine song," as your husband puts it, couples admiration with large doses of exasperation. When your favorite sow produces 14 healthy babies, it's a fine feeling. When she mashes all her 500 pounds on your instep and jams her head into the bucket you're carrying, almost separating your arm from your shoulder, a different sort of feeling prevails.

But the Country Woman has the touch with pigs. Women can talk pig. Communications on the deepest levels exist between woman and sow. Between man and pig, only suspicion and cold tolerance exist.

On a family farm, sows run loose in the pasture that parallels the river. All swine love to wallow in mud. Some enjoy swimming. They can't do the crawl or the backstroke; they merely dog paddle (pig paddle?). When farrowing time arrives (three months, three weeks and three days after their weekend with Beaugard, the boar), the sows are shut up in

their individual apartments in the pig shed.

As you start for the shed, begin calling the pigs. There are several popular styles of pig calling. Choose one or make up your own. Pigs don't care. A favorite of the Country Woman is "Come pig!" announced in a coaxing soprano. The Country Husband generally favors the deep-throated roar of no particular enunciation, immensely effective. Out of the brush will come galloping pigs, cattle, horses, and all flavors of farm animals. One feels sure elephants would also respond.

It is best to arm yourself with a stout stick when carrying the grain. The stick is employed as a deterrent to enthusiastic swine. Twelve sows jostling you can lead to a loss of dignity. Screams and threats make no impression. But a stout clout on the snout with a stick will cause her to back away with an indignant squeal.

As you march rapidly from granary to feed stalls, wave the stick behind you, giving the effect of a temporary tail. **WARNING:** Do not stop your forward progression! To pause is to be inundated by a dozen squealing sows, all of which will try to dive into your grain bucket at once.

Each pig will choose her own stall, charge in, squeal, rear up on hind legs, and hang over the front edge of the stall, snorting and snuffling and generally raising an awful din. As you go down the row of stalls dropping scoops into troughs, a lovely, peaceful quiet ensues, except for the unmannerly slurp slurping. Lock the boss sow in her feed stall. Otherwise she gulps down her grain, scoots out backwards, and tries to ram her way into the neighboring stall already occupied with a swine. If the occupant doesn't instantly scramble out, the boss sow bites her on the rump, sending the poor thing into twitching hysterics.

As soon as the pigs finish their meals, they will beg and plead noisily for one more nibble. Never listen to a seductive sow. If she gets too fat, she does not do well at farrowing time.

Everything you've heard about "slopping hogs" is true. In a bucket handy to the sink, save all table scraps, peelings, apple cores, onion skins, carrot tops—anything except coffee grounds and peach pits. Once a day, haul this goulash to the pigs. Or dump it into the separated milk your husband puts in the milk can out by the back door and haul both milk and scraps at once. This divine mixture is called slop and the pigs adore it.

Farrowing time is an important event. In December and in June, Beaugard has done his duty. In spring and in fall, it's time for the

ladies' confinements. You've cleaned the pens in the farrowing shed, sprayed and disinfected everything in sight, and strewn fresh oat straw in the beds and creep feeders. Keep a watchful eye on the pregnant ladies. Two or three days before the sow or gilt is due, shut her in the pen. You hope she will decide she likes her pen and wants to have her babies there. Caution: Don't wait too long to shut her up! A sow that decides to nest out in the timber can be highly resistant to alternate suggestions. That's if you can find her at all.

You have already prepared a medicine box containing clean rags, scissors, iodine, alcohol, and a magazine to while away the time. Be sure it's light reading, as concentration is difficult under a single hanging bulb while sitting beside a farrowing sow. She won't care if you read to her.

It will usually be late when the sow pigs. One a.m. is a favorite hour. However, several hours before she lies down for her grand opening, a sow will "make her nest," which means she chews all the straw into little pieces, eats great chunks of wood from the sides of her pen, and, several times, tries to climb out. She paces up and down in her pen, pausing to rip the trough off the wall where you thought you had it securely wired. Or else she grabs her food pan and flips it to the far side of the shed. It is not a good idea to be in the pen with her at this stage. She hurts, she's feverish, and she may inadvertently bite you in passing. But she doesn't mean it.

When finally her pacing and chewing cease and her contractions begin, she will lie down quietly in her straw bed. That's when you climb into the pen with her, rub her tummy and tell her what a fine pig she is. After awhile, a contraction occurs and, with a whoosh, out slips a little piglet. From the second it hits the deck, it's on its own unless you're there. The new baby immediately begins to struggle and stagger from mamma's



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Sow (“I should have danced all night!”) with babies. Piglets are cute. Grown-up pigs will root through your fence. They’ll eat your garden. They will run amuck in the cornfield, chomping ears and tromping stalks. In fact, pigs force their way into or out of anywhere they want. It takes understanding to really love swine.

back end towards that long row of faucets. Mamma conveniently draws her top leg up and forward so junior can crawl over the bottom leg to reach his nourishment. Very quickly, the piglet dries off and begins his life of eating. You, of course, have helped him by toweling him dry and clipping and iodining his navel cord.

For the next two to six hours, you will sit with mamma sow. Your thoughtful husband will bring you a thermos of coffee—sometimes spiked—and an egg sandwich on a paper plate. This egg will be runny, the fresh bread soft and crumbly and covered with a half inch of mayonnaise. However, you will feign gratefulness and eat the blobby thing, standing up in the farrowing pen, your hands scruffy and covered with iodine drizzle. At the first opportunity, try to toss some of the sandwich surreptitiously into the next pen. Save the spiked coffee till last. If you are still in the pig parlor at regular mealtime, your dear husband will obligingly feed the human offspring.

Finally the sow finishes. Ten or more lovely babies vie frantically for room at the lunch counter. Eventually each piglet will settle for

one teat and will always come back to that same one.

Make sure the sow has plenty of water, clean up her afterbirth (pitchfork it up and carry outside to the manure pile), and spread fresh straw where needed. Deposit the little ones under the heat lamp in the creep a time or two. They’ll usually crawl right back to mamma, but from then on they’ll return to the heat when cold.

Sometimes, the sow will have more babies than teats or a runt gets pushed off completely. Make sure the extra baby or the runt has swallowed a good slug of that first colostrum milk from mamma. Then, as you leave the shed, pick up the runt and stick her inside your shirt. She’ll ride there while you drive back to the house where you’ll fix up a lidded-box house for her. Spread a large piece of plastic on the floor next to the heater stove. Put a towel-wrapped heat pad and some straw into the box. Cut a “door” in one end. Find another box, a tad larger than the house box. Cut the end out of the second box, giving a connected patio effect. The little pig, which by this time you’ve named Portia, will snuggle down in her house and occasionally pop out

to wee-wee on the newspaper (which you need to change often) and drink milk from the dish. The first night it’s best if you hand-feed her every couple of hours. Use a tablespoon to feed warmed cow’s milk, or you can use a regular baby bottle if you wish. Some piglets take to the bottle instantly and others hate it. Within a day, the piglet will be drinking nicely from her dish. Help her once or twice by stuffing her nose into the milk till she catches on.

A baby pig makes a fine temporary pet. She’ll adapt to anything. She likes to be scratched on her tummy and loves to be rocked. Unlike a human offspring, a baby pig will wiggle and squeal if it wants to go potty.

*There was an old sow in the barn
Had twenty-three piglets by darn.
“I curse that old boar”
Said she with a roar,
“Oh, when will ever I larn!” ■*

Excerpted from “How to Shovel Manure and Other Life Lessons for the Country Woman” by Gwen Petersen. Available from www.voyageurpress.com and bookstores everywhere for \$17.95.