

JIMMYE HILLMAN

The Suddy Sow

The horses of Achilles are said to have wept when they saw Petroklos dead, their immortal natures outraged. So why can't a porcine sow lament her own heritage and destiny?

His eyes were sharply focused on the objects of a life-long avocation, which had, in the Great Depression, become a source of family subsistence and income. The hogs' wary eyes reciprocated his focus. Both sides, having made their calculations, appeared content with this moment of mutual accommodation.

His cracked and callused hands shelled corn, which he had shucked at the farm crib. He tossed the empty cobs into a bucket, so they could be used later in our outhouse as the next best substitute for the Sears and Roebuck catalogue. With one strap from his Big Ben overalls unbuttoned and the bib folded open, he shelled the corn, alternately with right hand and left, scattering it in a circular pattern. The hogs were gathering, some in the bush well away from us, others in front on a grassy knoll in the clearing.

The horn of our Ford Model-A had brought the hogs arunning. The honking always started, and continued intermittently, as we descended the hill through the blackjack oaks, dodging stumps and an occasional sinkhole. The horn had replaced his vocal chords as hog-caller, penetrating more effectively into the woods and the far reaches of hog habitat. It got the attention of every hog within ear-shot. *Sound equals food*, they soon learned, for hogs are the brightest of farm animals.

That day, a Sunday afternoon in September 1935, a large herd had sensed that a good feeding awaited them. It had been a long, hot, and dry summer in Greene County, Mississippi. Wild food was scarce. We could see that several sows had brought with them their late summer pigs and spring shoats, which dodged the aggressions of two young boars. The boars fought for turf and advantage. Hogs are very knowledgeable about power, and strictly respect its use. Being semi-wild, most were cautious about coming close to us. Occasionally, he would toss a whole ear into the bush to one of the

larger animals. One sow seemed to be his favorite, the one he called the “Suddy Sow.”

This is one of my most vivid images of Joseph Levi Jefferson Hillman, my father, known locally as “Bud” Hillman. (How those beautiful given names got exchanged for “Bud” I did not know and still don’t.) While feeding his hogs, he would appear almost transfixed, studying each animal, its size, shape, coloring, markings, including earmarks, even its eating habits and personality. Sunday afternoon hog feeding was part of a weekly routine that had evolved over the years for males in the clan of Charles Hillman, my grandfather. (Such feeding escaped the Victorian condemnation of Sabbath violation accorded to playing sports or shopping or going to the movies. Whenever we had to catch a hog on Sunday, my father would say, “The ox is in the ditch,” and we did it.) My father’s capacity for recording details about hogs was the keenest in the community. Each was an individual to him, often with a name, or a descriptive reference, and in many cases there developed a certain symbiosis between man and animal.

Hillman hog tales grew naturally out of particular animals and incidents. The Suddy Sow became a part of our hog lore-mosaic, along with others like “The Listed Shoat,” “The Spotted Gilt,” “Widow Smith’s Blue Boar,” and the “No-eared Barrow.” It was several years later in some idle conversation during my animal husbandry class at Mississippi State College that the Suddy Sow came to mind. I wanted to know what breed or type she was, other than a “Bear Branch” hog, but the professor couldn’t determine it from my description. I was confused about the word “Suddy.” It wasn’t in the dictionary, and only after I asked Father about it that Christmas did I get an explanation. “Aw! You remember!” he said. “She was that old gray-black sow that we fed for many years at the foot of the hill of Sand Ridge. The old Suddy Sow—a real rakestraw, not an easy-living swamp hog like the No-eared Barrow. No bloodline, but always dependable for a litter of pigs. Finally, she was about worn out and we spayed her, put her over in the potato patch and fattened her.” I surmised the rest. Her fate was the same as the Blue Boar and the No-eared Barrow. Then I said, “Oh yes, I now remember. So, that was she?” “Yeah,” he replied.

That was it: “Suddy” meant color, as in “sooty,” and had been transliterated into Mississippi-Hillman lingo used exclusively for hogs. Among them, the Suddy Sow, an ashen-charcoal breeder, stood out, even if she had “no blood,” meaning she was without pedigree characteristics. She ultimately took her place in the Hillman pantheon (and pantry) of swine, though possibly less conspicuously. Like them, she made the supreme sacrifice, after a few months of sumptuous living in a potato patch.

The Suddy Sow was a descendant of the hogs that accompanied European settlers across the North American continent: over the Appalachian Mountains, through the ports of Charleston, New Orleans, and Galveston, among other places. Polynesia, Australia—wherever colonizers went, they carried hogs, *Sus scrofa* (European) and *Sus cristatus* (Indian). This animal, which for millennia was considered a scavenger, the Chinese discovered 3,000 years ago to have edible flesh. Now, we have introduced it into a new environment with seemingly limitless resources.

The hogs that “jumped ship” escaped a domesticated farm life and took to the woods and river swamps of North America. These feral wanderers played a crucial role in the development of the South. Though their fate was the same as that of their “city cousins”—those dwellers in close-quarter fattening pens—their relationship with people was vastly different. They squealed in a different milieu. They were more than objects of hedonic pleasure, gluttonous enjoyment, and economic profit. They were often considered part of the rural culture, and backwoods family, even part of the *Other*, philosophically. So it was, as we shall see, with the Suddy Sow.

Another image I have of my father is that of being a repository for fat. All the bits of fat had been carefully carved from the lean meat by us children at meals. I see him yet at the table, after downing our greasy remnants, commenting, “There ain’t nothin’ like the taste of hog fat!” Perhaps all that fat had something to do with his perennial digestive problems, and with the colon cancer that killed him.

Fat came mostly from large “meat hogs,” as my father dubbed them, and the Suddy Sow had a disproportionate amount of it after we put her in the potato patch. We butchered such animals into hams, sides (pork bellies in market terms), shoulders, even jowls,

then salted and smoked them with hickory wood. Finally, we packed the meat in large crates or wooden barrels for long-term use. We singled out backbones for special treatment and, with the offal, exchanged them on a barter basis for day labor or special jobs my mother needed around our house. Fresh meat of any type came at a premium, so it was easy to get Earl or Felder to put in time raking, hoeing, chopping, or being at the behest of “Miz Agnes.” It was the Depression; labor was cheap. No price was agreed upon for the labor or the meat; everything was just a “deal.” When time came to kill a hog, Father would say, “Come over to the house, Felder, and get yourself a piece of backbone. You and Agnes can work out an arrangement.”

By the age of thirteen, I knew the anatomy of a hog like a practiced surgeon. I was adept at farm butchery. Disjointing legs and the head from hog torsos had become second nature. With my eyes closed, I could carve around cartilage without severing ligaments or crosscutting a muscle. Today, seventy years later, with severe osteoarthritis in my hips, knees and shoulders, I know exactly what is occurring in my joints, but the surgeons won’t follow my instructions as to a remedy!

I could also make sausage, tossing the small lean bits of meat into a hand-operated grinder. (We never put offal parts in sausage.) Then I would flavor the ground up meat with salt, black pepper, and a hint of sage (*salvia officinalis*), stuffing it in a casing of hog gut for the smokehouse. Less desirable, or fatty ground meat, we would fry and preserve in Mason or Kerr quart-size “fruit” jars. Why were they called fruit jars? Mother served Hillman sausage on Sundays and special occasions with eggs, homemade biscuits, sugar cane molasses, and that ubiquitous Southern dish, grits.

We rendered lard from excess fat that we diced up and dumped into a giant iron pot in the backyard, where heating separated the liquid from the rubbery mass. This so-called “wash pot” was the same vessel we used for boiling dirty farm clothes on Saturdays. It was well past World War II before any cooking fat, other than lard, entered at our house. Like many Southern families, we fried everything in lard.

Lard rendering left a residue called “cracklings,” which we would eat directly or mixed with cornbread. (A form of cracklings is pork rinds, or fried hog skin, a favorite of former President George

Herbert Walker Bush.) Crackling bread was a specialty of my grandmother, Ginny. She had her own secret recipe, which I remember as being a heavy and rich, corn-meal-based pone, and full of calories. We used to substitute “cracklin’” for “shortnin’” in the ditty “Shortnin’ Bread”:

I’m so glad the little dog’s dead
Mamma’s gonna make some cracklin’ bread

Although it was rarely on my mother’s menu, chitterlings was part of our local cuisine. Many times I assisted Mary A. Hestle, our maid live-in, to “rid guts,” inverting the hog’s small intestine and thoroughly cleaning it, including a final scalding. Lest this delicacy raise eyebrows, you can rest assured that fried “chittlins” are a delicacy with a distinct flavor. When I think about chicken gizzards, oysters, and goose livers, then chittlins appear absolutely respectable! Chitterlings and collard greens combine to make a special treat.

The Suddy Sow also contributed a favorite of mine: hogshead cheese, or souse. In this I shared the palate of England’s Richard III, who loved boar’s head. Hestle made souse for us by thoroughly boiling the feet and head parts, not including the brain and eyes. She then picked out the bones and pulverized all meat and skin, seasoning it with minced onion and sage. Gelatin from the joints and cartilage allowed the mix to gel into a quivering mass, which we could slice and eat on bread. The hog’s brain often ended up mixed with scrambled eggs for supper.

I was unprepared for the recent, apparent commercial success of certain body parts of the Suddy Sow and her kind. On a recent trip to Greene County with my daughter Brenda, we entered a village market and discovered shelf after shelf of quart-size jars containing pig lips—pickled in water, vinegar, salt, cayenne peppers sauce, salt, and paprika. I paused and thought: *The old order changeth, yielding place to new . . . lest one good practice should corrupt the world.* Lord Tennyson brought to mind by pig lips.

The Suddy Sow lived in the branches surrounding Sand Ridge, yet another Hillman hog universe. Though less than ten miles from other hog landmarks such as Bald Hill, the Leaf River Swamp, and

the Hillman Dead River, Sand Ridge was a world apart as to geology and provenance. To approach Sand Ridge, we had to go to the rear of the farm fields and connect to the Old Mobile Road that ran parallel to the fence on the north side of the former Thaddeus Green homestead.

Now largely abandoned, the Old Mobile Road made it easier to get to the backcountry and woods that lay beyond the old homestead, what we called Thad Field. A half-mile to the west of the juncture of "Old Road" and Highway 24, a fork ran through the woods and ultimately wound down the Sand Ridge. Rough debris, road washouts, and trees choked the road and we always stopped the Model A near where Bear Branch joins Atkinson Creek. This route was the traditional approach to the habitat of what my father called "My Bear Branch hogs."

This was a very different hog habitat, with very different hogs. The relative scarcity of natural foods, a more open terrain, and their more frequent molestation by man and dogs, kept the hogs always on the move. They ranged wider for acorns and roots, and were more dependent on supplemental feed. To me they appeared not quite so wild, and I was never afraid when Father fed them.

Hogs in this area resembled what people commonly called razorbacks, though we never referred to them that way. To us, they were rakestraws, piney woods rooters and woods hogs, and in many years of associating with them I can't remember if a purebred animal, male or female, ever altered the mix. We traded boars with neighbors on occasion, but the Bear Branch breed remained an invariable homogeneous taxonomy. Once my father approached the vocational agriculture teacher at Neely, Mr. C.P. "Tub" Barker, about getting a purebred boar to improve the Bear Branch hogs. He said, "Ah, Mr. Bud. He'd probably starve to death out there."

Sand Ridge is part of the Atkinson Creek watershed, which originates near the community of Sand Hill at the northern border of Greene County. (One could walk into the woods at any point along Atkinson Creek and find the same general soil type: sandy loam.) In the days of early European settlement, the creek was a route for small canoes and exploration. Midpoint on the creek is Skull Fork, the place where my great grandfather, Pinckney George Hillman, settled in the 1840s.

From Sand Hill, the creek flows through Pleasant Hill, a church community, then, Skull Fork, and Harvison Bridge, on a narrow sandy road just west of Neely. The old wooden bridge was about a hundred yards upstream from the “baptizing hole” where all those who joined Old Washington Baptist Church during revival meetings were “ducked.”

Sand Ridge, a few miles south of Harvison Bridge, was a “secret world,” one the Suddy Sow shared with me. At the brink of the ridge, I would mount a large tree stump, or climb an oak, and look due west over Atkinson Creek valley toward De Soto National Forest in Perry County. A clear fall day gave me a magnificent vista of color: the greens of pine, magnolia, and live oak, mixed with variegated yellows, browns, and reds of oak, dogwood, poplar and gum. To the far horizon, this panoply spread itself before my eyes, which were born to fantasy and escape. All my forbears, the Chickasaws and Choctaws, and early white European settlers, no doubt, must have experienced the same emotion in this place.

My retreat to this part of the Hillman property depended at first on Father’s frequent hog-feeding sashays, but in the summers I would often venture there barefoot and alone. Those days gave me an exhilarated sense of pleasure and isolation. At an early age, I became rich by mining the ores of nature and of sentiment.

Like certain deserts of the world, Sand Ridge surprised you with its biological diversity. Bird life did not attract very much attention in our community, yet it was there in abundance. Bluebirds sang and hunted insects among the pines. Woodpeckers (downy, red-headed, yellow-bellied sapsuckers) noisily hammered dead oak limbs from dawn to dusk. Blue jays fed on acorns and ears of corn, often sitting on scarecrows in Thad Field. The yellow hammer, a local name for the flicker, competed with woodpeckers for nesting cavities in dead pine trunks. The ubiquitous mockingbird lived a life of luxury. Father forbade us shooting them with our slingshots. The mocker earned his keep by chasing off chicken hawks. Turkey vultures, what we called “buzzards,” were also sacred to us because they cleaned up our own farm animal slaughter.

Late evenings along Sand Ridge, lightning bugs glowed in beautiful phosphorescence. Although deer no longer stepped quietly through the pines because of over-hunting, rabbits, possums, skunks (pole-cats), gray fox, and both gray and red squirrel still foraged along the

creeks and hollows. Yellow jackets and ants constantly harassed us. Fire ants had spread across the South from their Argentine origins, and to counteract the plague, we imported armadillos from west Texas. Ultimately, the “cure” became worse than the “disease” as the armadillos would root up and tunnel through acres and acres of pasture and cropland.

Gopher tortoises also caused problems with their tunnels. When one appeared in a field, Father would yell, “Git that ‘dadgum’ gopher outta here. I don’t want him diggin’ up my potatoes.” “Hands” who came to the farm from McLain at cotton harvest would trap tortoises by digging a hole at the burrow entrance, place a large bucket in the hole, and mask it with grass. The tortoise would tumble in as it ventured forth. Father allowed the workers to believe that he was doing them a favor. There was a saying in the Depression that anything moving was in danger of being eaten.

Lest one think of Sand Ridge and its reaches of the Suddy Sow as a universe of agrestic repose, where a dreaming teenage lad wandered about, and where hogs ranged before joining us at the Hillman dining table, there was at least one other interesting activity. It escaped the attention of everyone except the most observant. Just behind Thad Field there was a spot on the Old Road where some giant oaks grew. A thick screen of pine saplings had sprung up under the oaks, which from within gave an illusion of privacy. For reasons mysterious to us, this spot had become a trysting place.

Lovers from both directions on Highway 24, sensing that they may have discovered *the spot*, would turn off at the Old Mobile Road, gear-down the engine, and quietly park. The favorite time seemed to be late Saturday afternoon and early evening. In any season couples might rendezvous, church-going adulterers from Neely or McLain. At one summer twilight, returning from Sand Ridge, I observed the lovemaking between two well-known Neely citizens: in the raw, fornicating in the brush. I was very surprised, but the *dramatis personae* remain my secret.

The story of the Suddy Sow begins with the European settlement of North America and ends with my childhood at Thad Hill. In all the lore and song of the new land—“Canaan’s Fair and Happy Land” to many an Irishman and Scot—little was said about the role of the hog. Much was made of cattle, horses, mules, mares, chickens,

roosters, even turkeys and ducklings in early American folk music, but hogs? “One spotted hog” in “Sweet Betsy from Pike” and a bit of “oink” in “Old McDonald Had a Farm” are all that come to my mind.

There were other sows among Bud Hillman’s Sand Ridge hogs—one black listed, another white, and several motleys—but the Suddy Sow was my father’s favorite. Why didn’t he treat her differently, show her preference and put her to pasture like horses are retired to stud, or to foal? Even in her final days, he didn’t show a sentimental gesture. It would have been sacrilegious for him to make any ceremony, such as an Arab blessing the camel before he eats the friend who has served him for so long and faithfully. Perhaps it was the perennial hard times that Father, like others, had inherited from frontier living and the Depression. No doubt, the daily scramble for survival had inured him to having compassion on the Suddy Sow.

Farmers like my father avoided personalizing a relationship with slaughter animals, but there were occasional exceptions. When we moved to Thad Hill, we children adopted two orphaned lambs we named “Lambakin” and “Ramakin” and raised them to adulthood with bottle-feeding and loving care. The orphans became so much a part of the family that they lived out their lives, yielding only wool at the annual shearing. Then there was “Little Boy,” a bull calf with pinkeye (conjunctivitis) that my mother and father in their later years raised to an animal weighing nearly a ton. They cried when they could no longer care for him and had to give him away to a friend. His greatest sacrifice had been servicing heifers that strayed into his pasture.

Father had no such consideration for the Suddy Sow. Year after year, we methodically harvested her progeny in their semi-wild state among the other Bear Branch hogs. Then one day in late October the bell tolled for her as well.

Her capture began with a simple deception: the trap pen. My father’s routine feeding of the Bear Branch hogs, season after season, had been part of his design to add the Suddy Sow’s carcass to that great meat-hog parade into the Hillman smokehouse. Those Sunday afternoons shelling corn not only sustained the hogs but also baited them. (However, they always remained suspicious, wary of any human movement.) Noise from the Model A resonated down Sand Ridge, through trees and bushes, extending to the far reaches

of Atkinson Creek and brought them running, mouth agape, innocent, and believing.

Instead of removing her by rope or by a quick grab of an ear or leg, as he had with other hogs, Father decided to employ a special contrivance. "Son," his younger brother, had designed and perfected it to avoid injury to the animals. The trap was a simple thing to build. The basic material included panels of heavy wire fence, six to eight feet high, which Son and I stretched and wove and double-layered through a dense thicket of trees enclosing the feeding site. We then nailed the panels with heavy-duty staples to secure them against the impact of an excited two-hundred-pound hog. Father always insisted that we construct the trap *in situ* in a fashion that would not disturb the undergrowth. We added a camouflage of grass and gave the animals time to become accustomed to the structure.

For a few weeks, we gave the hogs free ingress and egress to the snare, lulling them into false security with corn scattered within and without the pen. We had built a strong jamb fitted with a heavy wooden door that would drop like a guillotine blade. But the success of the trap depended on the trigger, in this case, a latchstring of strong cord, tied at one end to a hook atop the trapdoor, pulled upward to a pulley on a tree limb and then to the rear of the enclosure to the "key" where an ear of corn was tied to the other end. Our key was a forked dogwood branch with its prongs driven into the ground. With the trap door pulled up, the cord stretched tightly to the ear of corn held by the key, the hog trap was set.

We took care to hide the bait under some oak leaves. We didn't want the key to release the corn too quickly because few hogs would have entered the enclosure. Experience had taught us that once the hogs began to attack the bait, the trigger would release the door too quickly. This was the only major hitch in Son's trap, assuming that all the mechanics worked perfectly. We could never be sure we would capture the desired hog. If an occasional stray fat shoat showed up in the trap, we'd take him home for pork. But sometimes we would have to release piglets and old and unfit hogs, which meant we had to start over at rebuilding the trust of the herd, giving the skittish animals time to forget the experience of the trap.

We caught the Suddy Sow on the first setting of the trigger. Father, my older brother Bill, and I discovered her and a couple of shoats in the pen on a September Saturday. It was a special catch,

fulfilling my father's plan. We left Bill with the hogs and hurried home, geared up the mules, hitched them to the wagon and put a hog box on it. Father put me in charge of slowly retracing our path down Sand Ridge with the wagon. He followed in his Model A. By dark, we had delivered her to the common hog pen beyond the corncrib in the pasture.

The following week, we moved her to a patch of ground from which we had dug most of the sweet potatoes. There she gleaned potatoes until we returned her to a corn diet in the fattening pen. During the Suddy Sow's last days, I spent lots of time feeding her and her companion meat hogs. On those quiet occasions, I'm certain I knew what she was thinking:

They think that I don't think, and don't know. But I sense it all, the Before and the After. Here I await my fate, not so much in a state of anger but in disappointment. Disappointment at the faulty philosophy and hypocrisy of Homo sapiens and his "double speak." Even disappointment at the inability of my own master and caretaker during my life's service to him to express his feelings to me. Rather it was corn and more corn, automobile horn-honking, his pleasant but penetrating stare during those weekly visits through the years—deceptions all—until the trap door fell. He is such a gentleman!

I came into existence as a piglet there in the Bear Branch, and in short order was singled out for breeding rather than eating. Master took a liking to me, and I to him, though from the beginning there was always mutual suspicion. Cunning man, vigilant beast. He knew who he was, but I also knew who he was, and who I was.

Year in and year out, I produced shoats to be harvested. Why, in my motherhood, did I permit myself the illusion of being any different, a special hog, the master's favorite? Why did I dream of immortality?

Now, here comes the master, axe in one hand, his butcher's knife to draw my blood. His expression aglow, and his countenance strange—you might surmise that he thinks he is doing me a favor.

The night my father decided to kill the Suddy Sow, I became engulfed with apprehension and foreboding. In a state of disquietude, I tossed in bed trying to think of reasons and excuses to single her out for exclusion. For me, she had been a diversion and pleasure and, I presumed, for Father as well. I considered briefly a prayer, but animals don't have souls and aren't Christians. Morpheus soon assuaged my conscience.

That was more than seventy years ago. No one had yet heard of "animal rights." And, even so, the humane treatment of animals probably wouldn't have applied to wild savages such as the Suddy Sow who had abandoned her domesticated life and turned feral. As Father had so often said, she was a rakestraw, a piney-woods rooter, implying she deserved no consideration.

I arose from bed that January day, cold, but more composed. Father had preceded me at breakfast, so I gulped down some grits-and-eggs, took one of mother's large biscuits, punched a hole in it, poured it full of sugar cane molasses, and dashed toward the big red oak. Already, Father, Son, and Felder had killed and scalded two hogs, which hung naked and steaming from the tree's limbs. Seeing this, I rushed to where we had penned the Suddy Sow and looked down at her. She grunted as if to say, "It's okay."

My father hurried toward the pen, axe in one hand, knife in the other, to stun, stick, and bleed her. He seemed agitated, uncontrolled emotionally. Our eyes met, and as he was yet some distance away, I sensed a miracle. Suddenly his face brightened, and I imagined Moses descending Mt. Sinai carrying the tablets of God's commandments. He mumbled something unintelligible and then ran to the pen and looked at her. She looked up and grunted in the same manner she had for me.

"Jim," he said in a calm voice, turning toward me. "I ain't gonna do it. We ain't that bad off for meat. Run, and tell Son I said come 'ere, quickly."

Son, who implicitly obeyed his older brother, was almost reverential in his walk. Father's command left no doubt about his wishes: "Son, load this sow and take her over to Bill Lambert's widow. She and her hungry children need meat and they need this hog more than we do. Anyway, I don't ever want to see or hear tell of this Suddy bastahd again!"

My father, Joseph Levi Jefferson Hillman, master to the Suddy Sow, had read Greek as a young man and, no doubt, at one time was familiar with Heraclitus. Thus, he was aware that *change* is the essence of the universe in which he lived. A thing *is*, and it is always *becoming*. But culture and life moved slowly in his post-Civil War world of Greene County, Mississippi. His was a closed society. He could not disregard custom, lest he be branded as “different.” Father could not have flung open the pen gate and liberated the Suddy Sow back to the wilds of Bear Branch for fear his neighbors would have said, “Bud’s crackin’ up in his old age.”

At the same time, my father could do what he was noted for in his community: helping a needy human being. Platitudes like “It is more blessed to give than to receive” and “Inasmuch as ye did it unto the least of these . . .” dominated his thinking. Taking care of widows and orphans was as important to my father as feeding his own children.

It was a natural act for my father to relieve his conscience from the guilt of killing the Suddy Sow, to dissolve the long relationship between the two, by doing a good deed and allowing someone else to be her executioner. Feeding the Lambert family was sufficient balm for his conscience. But for his son, Jim, many questions remain about the kinship between hog and man.