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Pork Packing Comes to Iowa

If the words of John R. Shaffer, secretary of the Iowa State Agricultural Society, were any criterion, the year, 1877, was hardly the one for an English-based firm to begin a pork slaughtering and packing operation in Iowa. In his annual report to Governor Joshua G. Newbold, Shaffer wrote on January 7, 1878:

There has never been a time in the history of the State when there was so great depression of business of all kinds, as at the date which this report is written. From Allamakee to Lee, and from Lyon to Fremont, there has been no winter. Rains have been nearly incessant; sunshine has been the rare exception for a month; the roads are impassable; the mud unfathomable, and these conditions have laid an embargo on all sorts of trade. There is the curious spectacle of an interstate railroad suspending its freight trains because no products could be hauled to its depots. There is the marvelous fact that the pork packing season which should be nearly ready to close, has hardly had a beginning, and reducing prices to a figure much below that of many previous years. . . In some localities strong men, brave men who had long fought the elements and had hope, were ready to despair; and those who depended upon hogs and

corn to meet obligations maturing in banks, saw their expectations vanish, and failure staring them in the face.

Despite such foreboding words, John Morrell & Co., Ltd., of Liverpool, England, killed its first hogs in a leased plant in Ottumwa on November 13, 1877.

Thus another pork packer joined an industry that has played a major role in the economic history of Iowa. Meat packing has been important to the State's industrial life since pioneer days and has been closely associated with Iowa's emergence as a top ranking state in the production of meat animals.

Hardy pioneers flowed across the Mississippi River with the exodus of the Indians in 1833 following the signing of the Black Hawk Purchase treaty which opened Iowa for settlement. Some staked out farms, others founded villages on the river's banks. The vast majority were farmers, and the rolling hills and rich farm land of Iowa represented the homestead they so eagerly sought. They came with axe and plow, a team of horses, a few hogs and cattle. The immediate tasks of building a home, clearing the land, planting and the actual growing of the first crop left little time for tending livestock. All animals were turned loose, hogs earmarked, horses and cattle branded.

The hog quickly proved to be the most desirable meat animal on the frontier. Turned loose, he roamed the timbered areas nearby, lived on roots

and nuts, defended himself against snakes and woodland animals, and reared a litter of pigs during the summer. In the fall it was a simple matter for the farmer to place a few ears of corn at the edge of the timber. The pigs were captured as they accepted the bait. Placed in an enclosure, they were fattened on corn, either for home slaughter or for the market.

The resulting razor-back hog was not the ideal meat animal. He was long legged and heavily muscled. Even so he represented the beginnings of the pork packing industry in Iowa.

The river towns provided the only important pork houses where animals could be slaughtered and held until the meat could be transported by river boats to St. Louis, New Orleans, and other southern cities. Iowa's pork packing centers in the 1850's, all on the Mississippi, were Dubuque, Davenport, Muscatine, Burlington, Fort Madison, and Keokuk.

As the westward migration continued, new country was occupied, new frontier villages established, and more land put under cultivation. Except for water transportation, these villages differed little from those along the Mississippi. Basically they were trading centers where farmers exchanged produce for needed merchandise. This produce, primarily hogs and grain, soon made the saw mill, flour mill, and pork house the village's leading industries. But one thing was needed be-

fore hog raising and pork packing could become important occupations in interior Iowa. That thing was the "iron horse."

The first railroad reached the Mississippi in 1854. The river was jumped and, just before and after the Civil War, rails mushroomed throughout the State, reaching to the Missouri. The coming of the railroads heralded the decline of pork packing along the eastern border and the upsurge of interior Iowa plants, all of them closer to a good supply of livestock. A beneficiary of this westward movement was Ottumwa, which was situated on the Des Moines River in southeastern Iowa.

Ottumwa was the first of Iowa's interior cities to rise to major importance in the pork packing industry. B. Ladd and Company reported a slaughter of 22,000 hogs during the 1860-1861 season. McCarty and Thompson in their book, *Meat Packing in Iowa*, state this was twice as many hogs as slaughtered by all other interior plants combined, and this placed Ottumwa in third place among all Iowa packing centers. Two years later the Ladd plant reached a peak slaughter of 45,000 hogs. Thereafter Ottumwa's importance declined as Cedar Rapids, Des Moines, Waterloo, Mason City, Council Bluffs, and Sioux City came to the front.

In 1874 Thomas Dove Foster, manager of Morrell facilities in the United States, toured the midwest seeking a location that would place his com-

pany closer to the country's choice hog producing areas. Two of his stops were in Iowa, at Burlington and Ottumwa. He found Ottumwa to be situated on the largest of Iowa's inland rivers, with superior railroad connections to the east, ample livestock supplies, a labor force accustomed to meat packing operations, and a business community ready to welcome the revival of pork packing in the city. While his decision to locate in Ottumwa was immediate, it was 1877 before instructions were received from England to make the move.

Proving the wisdom of his choice, the *Iowa Agricultural Report* shows that in three years beginning in 1874 the Burlington and Missouri River Railroad Company, running through Ottumwa, carried an annual average of better than half a million live hogs east over its lines. This was one-third the total number of live hogs carried east by Iowa's twelve major railroads. The Keokuk and Des Moines Railroad also passing through Ottumwa, stood fourth among the State's railroads, moving an annual average of 140,000 live hogs.

In 1877 Iowa's position in the hog belt seemed to insure a healthy growth in pork packing. In that year it led all other states in hog production with 3,263,200 head. Iowa's fourteen packing centers slaughtered 419,442 hogs, ranking fourth in the nation. Highest price paid for hogs was \$3.60 per hundred pounds and the average weight of animals sold was 250 pounds.

While Morrell made only a minor contribution to the 1877 totals, Secretary Shaffer's report covering 1879 showed that the Ottumwa plant had slaughtered 110,000 hogs, shipped 12,000,000 pounds of cured meat, processed 4,000,000 pounds of hams, and 4,400,000 pounds of lard. The 175 winter employees and 150 employed in the summer received \$50,000 in wages.