

FROM PORK TO PARLOR PIGS

(One Woman's Fascination with Pigs)

Written in 1995 by Nancy Shepherd



Nancy and Banjo

Nancy Shepherd has been involved with the porcine species since the mid-1970's. That's hard to believe since Nancy was born and raised in a large metropolitan city, was an art major in college, and yes ... was a Kansas City Chief's cheerleader! How in the world did she become so immersed in pigs?

It all happened quite innocently. Her partner, Brian, ran his own small contracting company, and Nancy was an executive secretary for a construction firm. She and Brian quit their city jobs. They packed up a few belongings and moved to Climax Springs, Missouri where they owned 365 acres on the Little Niangua River with three other couples. This was in the early 1970's when back-to-the-land endeavors were all the rage, and both these city slickers had a real desire to learn more about our good mother earth. Brian and Nancy were the only full-time quasi-farmers out of the eight some who owned the property. They learned from reading books and asking experienced neighbors, usually salt-of-the-earth, old-time farmers, about the best ways to get certain farm tasks accomplished. They tried their hand at raising chickens and turkeys, renting some of their ground for cattle grazing, putting up a hay crop, learning about farm machinery, gardening, and, of course, raising pigs.

One of Nancy's favorite stories is about their first garden. After pouring over the "*Encyclopedia of Organic Gardening*", studying all the seed catalogues, and preparing the ground for planting, a garden was in place. The only trouble was that when the little seedlings appeared, neither Brian nor Nancy knew what the vegetable plants were and what were the weeds. They implored Nancy's Aunt Leola to come take a look. As a veteran gardener, she patiently pointed out "weed", "carrot", "weed", "lettuce", "weed", "pea plant." I guess Nancy came by some of her ability and desire to work with her hands in the land honestly, for Aunt Leola was truly a pro.

Pigdom started much by mistake. A neighbor named Emmett had a new litter of piglets and the runt would not make it without special nurturing. Nancy could not bear to see the little one "done in" and, upon her suggestion, Emmett happily turned the day-old pig over to this very green farmer. Nancy grew up with lots of animals and had even entertained the idea of becoming a vet, so tending to a piglet (named Roto) was right up her alley. Roto was the apple of her eye, a totally special porcine pal. The idea was to raise Roto for the pork of it, but as she became closer and closer to butcher size, it became apparent that this would be impossible for Nancy to let happen.

So, on to Plan B ... breed Roto and raise a litter of piglets. Poor Roto had been on such an extravagant food regimen (as in all she could eat) that she was quite portly; so, the exercise program came to be. Nancy would take Roto on long walks. Over the hills and through the woods to the beautiful Niangua River they would go. Roto would snurdle around in the leaves and underbrush, collecting acorns and other delectable tidbits, as Nancy happily looked at the fauna and flora, always enjoying the surprises and beauty of nature.

Success was attained. Roto was fit for a suitor. Roger Ash, a master-farmer and pig producer, had a manly Hampshire boar that he was willing to haul to the Climax Springs one-pig farm. And after a majestic porcine interlude, the mating with Roto was successful. Three months, three weeks, and

three days later Roto delivered the most beautiful litter of eleven piglets, each perfect with their shiny black bodies and crisp, white belts about their shoulders. A truly exceptional litter! Nancy and Brian were so proud. Neither of them had ever seen ANY animal born, ever in their whole lives! This was quite the event. Nancy kept a journal, and every detail of the farrowing was recorded.



Roto Rooter with litter of eleven healthy, handsome, homestead piglets!)

And that's how this one woman began her incredible attachment to pigs. Nancy and Brian lived on their Climax Springs farm for four years and found that it suited them both to a tee. They decided, however, that they wanted to grow more than rocks, and sought a piece of property with better soil and closer to a city where they could pursue other interests and enjoy a little more culture than was available in their little, somewhat isolated corner of the Ozarks.

After many trips and lots of disappointments, they found their farm in Rocheport, Missouri just seventeen miles from the University of Missouri. Columbia was a not-too-big town with much to offer. The move was one to remember -- trailer after trailer of "stuff" from farm machinery to critters. One recollection Nancy has is of the trailer pulling over to gas up in the small rural town of Tipton. When the truck stopped, the rooster, LeDeaux, crowed, his red hen friend laid an egg that Nancy promptly handed to the filling station attendant, and the kitty cats meowed in hopes of being let out of their kennels. The pigs, yes, Roto and one of her first-born daughters, Tulip, seemed unaffected by the stop and sniffed around thinking the stop meant they might get a chocolate malt and a hamburger. What a crew. Back then Nancy wore her hair in two braids that reached nearly to her waist under her burgundy ball cap. Brian, big, burly and bearded, kept the caravan rolling. What a fun time to recall and conjure up in the mind's eye.

In Rocheport, with such an investment, farming in earnest was the order. Brian busied himself learning more about farm machinery, cropping, soils, federal programs and on and on. Nancy took a job in town as an administrative secretary at the University of Missouri Hospital and increased her pig herd. By the time four years passed, the farm was on its feet and Nancy was able to quit her city job and stay home and do what she most loved ... farming. She raised beautiful produce and learned how to can and freeze it. She increased the sow herd to twenty-four, kept many varieties of chickens and turkeys, and helped as much as possible with the cropping, haying, and farm upkeep. That meant learning to drive tractors, rake hay, buck bales, haul bales, build and mend fences ... you name it, she did it.

When the potbellied pigs came on the scene, Nancy felt this was perfect for her. She already knew practically all there was to know about pigs and the little ones would be so much more manageable -- they would stay small! So, in 1989 Nancy bought her first pair of potbellies, Yoda and Jitterbug. She bought them when potbellied pigs were still bringing incredible amounts of money, and it was pretty tough to commit a large amount of money to what was considered an "exotic" animal.

Well, the rest is history. Jitterbug and Yoda raised their first litter of piglets and Nancy recouped her initial investment and has never looked back. She loves her role in the potbellied pig world, both tending to her own stock, and helping others with problems, and just being available to "talk pig" with other enthusiasts. Her commercial herd is down to four sows now, but she says she will always have "big" pigs in her life, even if just a few. Nancy wants to concentrate on making the potbellied pigs her main focus. She truly has a special connection with them.

Nancy tells one story that says it all. A salesperson who supplies her with several pig products once told her, "When I die, I want to be reincarnated as a pig and live on YOUR farm."