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Introduction

When I was young, my family and I would visit relatives in a corner of northeast Iowa known as the Driftless region. As we drove through green rolling hills, I'd stare out the window at pastures dotted with dairy cows and hogs. Corn was common, of course, but so were apple orchards and other crops. The landscape was alive.

I still go up to the Driftless; my parents park their camper up there to this day. But the land is now brown and barren, except during the few months of the year when corn and soybeans grow. These two commodities have spread like a prairie fire, and the apples and other crops that used to be grown all over the state are now sourced from well beyond its borders.

The road to the Driftless used to pass through vibrant small towns, but they've since been bypassed by multimillion-dollar highways that were built only so these commodities can leave the state a few minutes quicker. The local businesses have closed, replaced by national chains on the outskirts of town. A state that was once referred to as the "Middle Land"—both because of its geographic location right in the heart of the continental United States and because of its moderate politics and

strong middle class—is now defined by its reactionary political landscape and decaying towns.

The most jarring change is that the animals have disappeared from view. At some point, they started vanishing: first pigs, then cows. The red barns that used to house them sit abandoned or have been knocked down to plant more corn or beans. But even though you no longer see them, the hogs aren't gone. When you get a few miles outside town, you begin to sense—first smell, then see—clusters of massive windowless sheds. You would never guess that each one of them holds almost 2,500 pigs, until the thick stench of manure wafts in your direction. At this point, the countryside is so industrial that it no longer feels like countryside at all.

I initially set out to write this book as a way to figure out why my home state has changed so dramatically since my childhood. Agriculture is to Iowa what motion pictures are to Hollywood, the cornerstone of the state's economy and the root of its identity. The state is blessed with some of the world's best soil: "black gold," which, coupled with consistently good rainfall, makes for ideal farming conditions. I wanted to understand how this blessing has, over the past forty years, turned into a curse.

But as I dug into that question, it became clear to me that these impacts go far beyond the state's borders. Researching and writing this book has taken me across the country, from the Pajaro Valley in California to the remnants of the Grand Kankakee Marsh in Indiana and from the deserts of New Mexico to the booming towns of Northwest Arkansas. Though it's an American story at its heart, it's one that involves places as far-flung as Mexico, Germany, and Brazil.

The same forces that devastated my home state were unleashed by a series of fundamental changes to the American food system that have had profound consequences across the country and beyond. A set of legal and policy changes driven by a radical laissez-faire ideology

has resulted in a dramatic concentration of power in the American food industry.

This book is about how that transformation occurred and what it has meant for workers, families, and communities. I decided to tell this story through the rise of a series of powerful actors in the industry who have benefited from, and in some cases helped bring about, this shift. I refer to these people as "barons" to hearken back to Gilded Age robber barons such as John D. Rockefeller and J. P. Morgan because I believe that we are living in a parallel moment when a few titans have the power to shape industries.

Although monopolies are common across the economy, there are few sectors more consolidated than the American food system. The following profiles of seven food industry barons show how each one built an empire by taking advantage of deregulation to amass extreme wealth at the expense of everyone else.

I start the book close to my home in Iowa, where a couple named Jeff and Deb Hansen have built an empire of hog confinements in the face of public opposition by capturing the state's government. This relatively new model of production tends to destroy surrounding communities and environments, which is a big reason why 61 percent of Iowa's rivers and streams and 67 percent of its lakes and reservoirs do not meet basic water quality standards.

I then profile the Cargill-MacMillan family, the owners of Cargill, the largest private company in America. The fortunes of the family mirror the history of the American Farm Bill. In particular, Cargill has benefited from a new approach to the Farm Bill that functions to subsidize corn and soy above almost everything else, which has dramatically reshaped our diets.

In the third chapter, I spotlight the mysterious Reimanns, a reclusive German family with historical ties to the Third Reich. The Reimann family, through a venture called JAB Holding Company, first entered

the coffee industry in 2012 but now trails only Nestlé in the global market. The family accumulated this power through an aggressive acquisition spree that may have been permitted only because of a shift in antitrust and competition policy.

From there, I move to Northwest Indiana, where Mike and Sue McCloskey run a massive dairy operation that pumps more than four million school milk cartons' worth of milk per day. The rise of their empire, which came at a time when many family dairy farms were being run out of business, illustrates the importance of powerful agricultural entities called "checkoffs" that were established to help family farmers but now seemingly undermine them.

I then head west and dive into the rise of Driscoll's, the berry company built by the brothers J. Miles and Garland Reiter. Although their operation now employs over one hundred thousand people across every continent except Antarctica and the name has become synonymous with berries in American grocery stores, Driscoll's itself doesn't actually grow any berries. Rather, the company has accrued power through a production model that abdicates responsibility for labor and environmental issues by outsourcing the farming of its berries to independent contractors and, increasingly, out of the country entirely.

Next, I tell the story of Joesley and Wesley Batista. Their company, JBS Foods, butchers almost enough meat daily to give a four-ounce portion to every citizen of Australia, Canada, Poland, Spain, and Italy combined. Although they rose to power by skirting the law, they've faced minimal repercussions for their actions. Their ability to grow unchecked has come at the expense of workers, who often toil in conditions that give the slaughterhouses in Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle* a run for their money.

And finally, I dig into the Walton family and Walmart's grocery business. You might think you know all about Walmart's power, but the story frequently told about the company and its impacts is just the tip of

the iceberg. Although it sells a bit of everything in its physical stores and online, Walmart is, at its core, a grocery company. In fact, it dominates the American grocery market so thoroughly that it has about the same market share as the number two, three, four, five, six, seven, and eight grocery store companies *combined*. As Walmart has grown, its power has compounded, reshaping not just the grocery industry but the entire food system.

The purpose of this book isn't to gawk at these barons or to suggest that they are uniquely responsible for the corruption of the American food system. In fact, I have a whole series of "B-side barons" that unfortunately just missed the cut but could have been included to illustrate many of the same points.

Rather, I want to use the barons to facilitate an honest conversation about what we eat and how it gets to our plate. In that way, this book is less about the specific barons themselves than it is about the conditions that facilitated their rise to power. I hope these stories give you a better sense of how the American food system was corrupted and why it matters for all of us.

Our food system may not get a lot of attention in political debates, but it has a profound impact on who we are and the way we live. Millions of Americans work in the food industry—as waiters, cooks, grocery store clerks, and cashiers; as farmers and farmworkers; as beer salesmen and small business owners and slaughterhouse workers.

In fact, the food system accounts for more than one-tenth of all jobs in the United States, and agriculture is one piece of a bigger puzzle: only 12 percent of food workers are farmers.[1] These jobs have traditionally been one of the most direct pathways to the middle class. Generations of Americans, including many immigrants, have looked to the sector as a launching pad for upward mobility.

Whether you work in the food system or not, it unquestionably affects your life, often in unseen ways. The food we consume and the

way it is produced has enormous implications for our health and our environment. It affects the strength of our cities and towns, the cleanliness of our air and our water, and, in the face of global climate change, the livability of our planet.

On a more fundamental level, everyone eats. Food is incredibly important to our sense of identity and culture. It has a way of bringing people together and building community. As Anthony Bourdain once put it, "Food is everything we are. It's an extension of nationalist feeling, ethnic feeling, your personal history, your province, your region, your tribe, your grandma. It's inseparable from those from the get-go."[2] Local businesses in the food industry are an integral part of what makes a place a *place*.

As I wrote this book, it became clear to me how much the food system has influenced me and my family. I grew up helping my grandpa farm his plot and working with my mom in her bakery. My dad spent his entire career working in the food system, first as a beer truck driver and then at a corn processing plant. I've seen firsthand what the concentration of power in the American food system means for Iowa and for my hometown, Cedar Rapids. These experiences, and the institutions around me, shaped how I view food and local businesses.

But this story isn't specific to me; it could be told about any state and thousands of cities and towns across the country. I hope that reading this book will lead you to take a step back and realize just how much the corruption of the American food system has affected your family and community.

And though the issues raised here might seem overwhelming, I find them invigorating because history provides a road map for how to deal with unchecked concentrated power. In writing this book, I've had the honor of meeting so many people who are fighting to build a better food system. I'm confident that a bipartisan coalition can be mobilized to usher in what Alice Waters calls a "delicious revolution."

But to do so, we must first understand how we arrived where we are today. One point that's clear from the stories of these barons and from the history of the American food system is that power does not disperse organically. We have an opportunity to turn the corner and build a more balanced food system, but only if we challenge power directly.

CHAPTER 1

The Hog Barons

Julie Duhn remembers her first time kayaking mostly for its aftermath. When Duhn retired from her office job, she decided to start experimenting with the sport at Pine Lake State Park, near her home in Eldorado, Iowa. The collection of campgrounds and trails rings two small lakes that trickle into the Iowa River and is surrounded by rolling farmland. It was a hot afternoon in mid-August, just a few weeks after her first outing, when Duhn's arms began to itch, then grow red and raw. She consulted a doctor, who, after learning about her kayaking trip, blamed the rash on the lake water.

Indeed, the Iowa Department of Natural Resources has considered Pine Lake unsafe for human contact since 2012. It keeps a sign posted on the beach to discourage visitors from wading in. The problem is an overgrowth of algae, which feed on the phosphorus that continually flows into the lake from nearby farm fields spread with fertilizer and manure. A state report concluded that one clear contributor is the waste produced by the ten thousand hogs in the lake's watershed.[1]

Iowa has long been known for hog farming and was once dotted with idyllic barns to house the animals. But today, most of the state's hogs

spend their lives in massive metal sheds known as "confinements": warehouses that allow operators to breed thousands of pigs in one building. The sheds are long and thin, with huge exhaust fans on either end, and each group of buildings includes several silos for storing feed, as well as a dumpster to dispose of the roughly 10 percent of hogs that don't survive until slaughtering time.[2] After being weaned in these industrial facilities, the pigs are transferred to a finishing operation to fatten up and then to the slaughterhouse. These two trips in a packed semitrailer are the only times the pigs will see daylight.

Jeff Hansen and his wife, Deb, built an empire out of these confinement sheds. The Hansens' company, Iowa Select Farms, employs more than 7,400 people, including contractors, and brings about five million pigs to market annually.[3] As the owners of Iowa's largest hog operation, the Hansens have constructed hundreds of confinement sheds in more than fifty of Iowa's ninety-nine counties.[4]

The sheds have provoked controversy in Iowa ever since operators such as the Hansens began to build them during the 1990s. Many rural communities, including people such as Julie Duhn, have campaigned fiercely against them, citing damage to health, livelihoods, property values, the environment, and the farm economy.[5] Although their efforts have yielded small victories, they have lost the war.

The state's hog industry, led by the Hansens, has cultivated close relationships with state politicians on both sides of the aisle to roll back regulations. Even as California has passed animal welfare laws and North Carolina has tightened its permitting program for confinement operations, the hog industry in Iowa goes almost unchecked. Today, Iowa raises about one-third of the nation's hogs, about as many as the second-, third-, and fourth-ranking states combined.[6]

Since Iowa Select was founded in 1992, the state's pig population has increased by more than 50 percent while the number of hog farms has declined by over 80 percent. Over the past thirty years, twenty-six

thousand Iowa farms quit the long-standing tradition of raising pigs.[7] As confinements replaced farms, rural communities have continued to hollow out.

Pigs in Iowa now outnumber human residents by a ratio of more than seven to one, and they produce a volume of manure equivalent to the waste of nearly eighty-four million people, more than the populations of California, Texas, and Illinois combined.[8] One expert estimated that each confinement facility produces "the same amount of waste as a city of 90,000 to 150,000 people," spread over only 640 acres with no sewage system.[9]

The environment simply cannot handle so much pig shit. In theory, this manure, when spread on nearby crop fields, is a useful fertilizer. But residents and scientists alike point to evidence that this "Mt. Everest of waste," as one University of Iowa water researcher described it, is frequently mismanaged.[10] It filters through soil to underground pipes that discharge directly into rivers, and when manure is overapplied, rain and snowmelt can quickly channel it into waterways.

As a result, as confinement operations have come to dominate pork production, they've degraded Iowa's water quality. Watersheds that are dense with livestock have a higher nutrient overload. Most summers, the state closes two-thirds of its state park beaches to swimming for a week or more, citing the health risk of toxins or bacteria.[11]

Closer to the confinements, many rural residents say they've been plagued—and others pushed out—by the stench, the flies, and the health hazards that accompany the facilities. "We know what hog manure smells like, but this is like a sewer," one retired farmer who lived next to an industrial hog facility told the *Washington Post*.[12]

The Hansens likely can't see—or smell—any hog buildings from their seven-thousand-square-foot mansion, which is nestled inside a gated community in suburban Des Moines.[13] Their view is dominated by the golf course at the exclusive Glen Oaks Country Club, which

abuts their backyard. In 2020, the Hansens' company jet recorded over two hundred flights, including several trips to Naples, Florida, where until recently they owned multiple homes on the coast.[14]

When Americans think about farmers, they probably don't have jet-setting millionaires such as Jeff and Deb Hansen in mind. But businesses like theirs are increasingly the norm in farm country: huge, regional-scale corporations owned by just one or a few families who use their political connections to overpower both local democracy and local businesses.[15]

Iowa Select became a behemoth as the result of decades of deregulation that allowed power to concentrate in our food system. And it's not just smelly. It's a sad story of the corporate capture of my home state.

Metal Shed Farmer

Jeff and Deb Hansen grew up in Iowa Falls as typical farm kids. They graduated from the local high school in 1976 and soon married. Both went straight to work: Jeff helped on his father's farm while Deb worked in a local farm insurance office.[16]

During the Hansens' childhoods, Iowa's rich soils supported a constellation of diversified single-family operations. Farmers grew corn and soybeans, but many also raised a flock of chickens, milked a small dairy herd, or grazed beef on pasture. As with many long-term investment portfolios, diversity was a farm family's lifeline.

Many family farmers considered pigs to be a cornerstone of their farms. Farmers raised a variety of breeds in barns and in pens. Although many farmers kept hogs in every stage of the life cycle, others specialized in "farrowing"—breeding sows and raising the litters—or buying "feeder" pigs, fattening them to maturity, and then auctioning them at the sale barns spread in a grid across the Iowa countryside. These competitive markets ensured a fair price for farmers.

It was likely at just such a sale barn that newlywed Jeff Hansen bought

his first three sows, which he kept in a converted barn on his father's property.[17] As the herd grew, the couple found the work grueling, particularly Deb, who had quit her office job to manage the pigs. To lighten her load, the Hansens purchased labor-saving equipment such as "elevated farrowing crates with steel slats, a feed pan and automatic waterers," according to *National Hog Farmer*, a trade magazine.[18] Quickly grasping the potential of mechanized livestock equipment, Jeff Hansen founded his own business to build confinement systems.

Animal warehouses had already transformed the poultry industry in the South during the 1950s and 1960s, and the model soon spread to other sectors and regions.[19] They were first extensively used with hogs in the late 1980s in North Carolina, where a state legislator deregulated the industry for his personal benefit.[20] Dairy followed shortly thereafter, starting in California.[21]

A consistent theme in this warehouse animal model is that one state moves first, triggering others to follow suit. After confinements were deregulated in North Carolina, Iowa followed closely behind, desperate not to lose its status as the nation's top pork producer. As the race to the bottom sped up, the US Department of Agriculture failed to stop it.

Big meatpackers, which purchase and slaughter pigs and package pork, were enthusiastic about the shift to this model. The meatpackers prefer to buy from confinement operations through production contracts because they offer a steady stream of pigs in predictable sizes that are ready for slaughter on a precise schedule. The model is vastly more profitable than buying from a patchwork of independent growers, who sell pigs of various breeds and sizes at local auctions. Today, two-thirds of Iowa hogs are grown on contract with big meatpackers.[22] Consequently, the sale barns that dotted the Iowa countryside slowly closed, and so did the competitive market for selling hogs.

Meanwhile, trade agreements that cut tariffs and sidelined import restrictions in places such as Asia and Mexico swung open the doors of

a world market for livestock products, particularly eggs and pork. Wall Street took notice; outside investors played a critical role in financing the expansion of confinement operations in Iowa.[23]

Hardin County, where the Hansens were raised, was the perfect place to take advantage of this hog boom. Although nearly 90 percent of Iowa's land area is devoted to agriculture, its north-central region, smoothed by glaciers, has the flattest, richest cropland, which means it can accommodate copious amounts of manure and produce huge quantities of cheap feed.[24] The region also has abundant groundwater (hogs are thirsty).[25]

"At that point, there were two things I knew for sure," Jeff Hansen told *National Hog Farmer*. "Iowa was best suited to build an integrated pork production system and, second, I knew I could figure out how to do it."[26] The Hansens carved out a niche by building the confinement sheds that would take over Iowa's hog industry. By the early 1990s, they were bringing in $90 million per year assembling these confinements, known as concentrated animal feeding operations, or CAFOs for short.[27]

But after steadily expanding their confinement-building business, the Hansens decided they could also make money by raising their own hogs. In 1992, Jeff Hansen incorporated a new company, Iowa Select Farms, signed a contract with a meatpacker, and launched operations with a herd of 10,000 sows. During its first four years, Iowa Select more than quintupled its herd to 62,000 sows, enough to rate among the top ten largest pork producers in the country.[28] By 1999, with 96,000 sows, it was selling 1.7 million pigs per year.[29] Today, Iowa Select Farms is the fourth-largest hog producer in the country.[30]

Dirty Water

As Iowa Select built its empire, the impacts of its warehouses on the environment and surrounding communities quickly became apparent.

On a very basic level, the stench produced by confinements can be overwhelming. Within the sheds, powerful exhaust fans are necessary to constantly suck out poisonous gases rising from the manure lagoons. If the fans are shut off, the hogs die within hours. This is exactly what happened during the spring of 2020, when the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted slaughterhouse operations and Iowa Select needed to quickly kill hundreds of thousands of animals.[31]

In Iowa, confinements are often as close as a quarter mile from homes, schools, and businesses. In interviews and in years of news coverage, Iowans living near confinements have complained about air quality too poor for their kids to play outside; about clouds of flies attracted to the giant manure pits and lagoons; about the exploding population of rats infesting homes, drawn by the vast stocks of animal feed; and about vultures that snatch carcasses from animal warehouse dumpsters and then drop pig parts in backyards.[32]

Scientists have also documented negative health effects among people who live near confinements. One study of North Carolina residents who lived within a few miles of clustered confinements found that they had a lower life expectancy and higher rates of infant deaths, asthma, kidney disease, tuberculosis, and blood poisoning than those who lived farther away.[33] Dangerous levels of ammonia, which causes burning in the eyes and respiratory tract as well as chronic lung disease, have been measured in the air near massive hog sites in Iowa since the early 2000s.[34] Communities near hog operations also report higher rates of headaches, sore throats, runny noses, coughs, and diarrhea than comparable areas without hog confinements. A 2012 study found higher rates of neurobehavioral and pulmonary impairment in people living within 1.9 miles of a massive hog facility and manure lagoon in Ohio than in a control group in Tennessee.[35]

As of 2023, the US Environmental Protection Agency still hadn't even estimated airborne emissions from confinements in order to

regulate them under the Clean Air Act, despite numerous instances of workers falling into manure pits and dying from the fumes.[36] Confinement applications sometimes promise to plant tree barriers to reduce air pollution, but the trees take several years to mature enough to be effective, if they are ever planted at all.[37]

The confinements have also caused economic devastation in surrounding communities. It's no secret that rural American economies have struggled for decades with high poverty rates and anemic job growth.[38] Confinement operators argue that the jobs they bring are beneficial to rural areas. Iowa Select might point to a 2017 study that it commissioned from Dermot Hayes, an Iowa State University economist with a long record of supporting agribusiness (and of business transactions with Jeff and Deb Hansen).[39] In the study, Hayes credited the company with "reversing economic decline" in rural communities where it built giant sow barns.

Yet economists such as Hayes often fail to disclose their corporate funding and support. Kate Conlow, an attorney and former journalist, has documented how extensive this problem is among economists working in agriculture. Although many universities have disclosure policies, Conlow noted that they are hardly ever enforced.[40] This failure warps the public debate.

Meanwhile, a different economist at Iowa State found that the overall economy in these communities continues to degrade in spite of all the jobs that Iowa Select claims to provide. Rather than stemming the decline, "they're actually one of the key mechanisms for driving people out of rural areas, despite the claims to the contrary."[41]

Even putting aside their economic impact, jobs at confinements are tough. Employees at sow farms monitor food, water, and ventilation; castrate, euthanize, artificially inseminate, and perform pregnancy checks on the animals; remove dead hogs; power-wash facilities to

remove manure; and wean litters. One former Iowa Select driver told the *Guardian* in 2019 that he earned $23,000 per year working twelve-hour days with no overtime pay.[42] As Julie Duhn put it, "Is a job with Iowa Select what you want for your kids?" Given how difficult and poorly paid these jobs are, it's no surprise that Iowa Select has employed undocumented workers.[43]

Moreover, this production model depends on liberal use of antibiotics.[44] Overuse of these drugs is contributing to antibiotic resistance, not just in pigs but also among humans.[45] According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the United States now has a death every fifteen minutes from an antibiotic-resistant infection.[46] In response, public health officials have been ringing the alarm bell and calling for less use of these drugs in hogs.

But in Iowa, the most obvious impact of the confinements has been on the state's water. In a confinement facility, hog manure drops through a slatted floor and collects in a deep pool below. In some instances, that pool runs through a pipe to a manure pond or lagoon that holds the overflow. This waste can find its way into the watershed, adding to the pollution caused by fertilizer runoff. Gordon Garrison, a farmer in northwestern Iowa, told the *Guardian* that nitrate levels in the water on his property nearly doubled after a corporation built a shed housing up to 8,800 pigs in a neighboring field.[47]

Bob Havens, now in his seventies, learned to swim in Pine Lake and built his house near the lake twenty years ago. Now, he said, in the summertime, "the lake turns into this slimy green sludge" and billows of foam course through local culverts. Both are signs of a dangerous nutrient imbalance. As a result, Havens lamented, "you [can't] even canoe through it, let alone fish." Havens sees the pollution as a matter of equity. "A lot of folks in Hardin County can't afford a three-week vacation in the Bahamas," but they used to have Pine Lake for excellent

swimming, fishing, and boating. Now, he said ruefully, "they just can't do it."[48]

The problem is bad enough during normal times, particularly with older facilities, but it can become a crisis in the wake of the sorts of natural disasters that are becoming more common as the planet heats up. After recent catastrophic flooding in western Iowa, for example, some livestock lagoons spilled over into nearby creeks, a process that can cause environmental devastation and threaten human health and well-being.[49] North Carolina faced a similar issue when more than fifty livestock lagoons overflowed in the wake of Hurricane Florence, according to NPR reporting at the time.[50] A recent report noted a large expansion of industrial animal facilities in Iowa's hundred-year floodplains even in the face of these risks.[51]

These two intertwined factors—overapplication of synthetic fertilizers, mostly to grow industrial animal feed, and pig waste from corporate farms—have created a water crisis in Iowa. To make water safe for human consumption, the Des Moines Water Works pays as much as $10,000 per day to treat it.[52] This problem isn't limited to Iowa. The US Department of Agriculture estimates that Americans pay almost $1.7 billion per year, mainly through higher water bills, to deal with this pollution.[53] The cost can be overwhelming for communities, particularly smaller ones with lower budgets and poorer populations.

But even cities such as Des Moines can barely keep up. The Raccoon River runs past cropland and corporate hog operations in northern Iowa and meanders east to Des Moines, where it provides five hundred thousand people in and around Iowa's largest city with drinking water. Of course, it likely carries much of the pollution with it, including from the manure produced by the Hansens' hog operations. In 2015, Des Moines experienced 177 days of high nitrate levels.[54] In response, it sought to spend $80 million on a new nitrate removal facility to handle its growing needs.[55]

Neutering the Backlash

As confinement buildings and their manure ponds spread across the Iowa countryside during the 1990s, a passionate rural backlash emerged, sparking a prolonged battle over the future of farming in Iowa. Protesters packed gymnasiums and crowded hallways in the statehouse. Coalitions of family farmers threatened by this new model, environmentalists, and neighboring residents and communities held rallies—one demonstration drew 1,000 supporters in a small town with a population of only 2,700—and lobbied legislators to enact a state moratorium on new confinement construction.[56]

The pushback against confinements came from all directions. Right-wing commentator Pat Buchanan even made opposition to confinements a key part of his 1996 presidential campaign in Iowa. "Farmers talk about it everywhere I go," he told the *Los Angeles Times* after the Iowa caucuses. "Whenever I bring it up, the audience explodes."[57] Buchanan's surprising close-second finish in the Republican Iowa caucuses—to Kansas senator Bob Dole—elevated him from protest candidate to legitimate contender.[58]

Although most big corporate animal warehouse networks operate in multiple states, the Hansens staked their entire operation on Iowa. But you'd be hard-pressed to say they were welcomed.[59] The fierce debate over confinements made the front page of the *Des Moines Register* year after year in the mid-1990s.[60] National newspapers frequently covered the story.[61] Even the Hansens' home county proposed a moratorium on new confinements.[62]

The Hansens and other industry leaders likely knew that this opposition posed an existential threat to their booming businesses. Regulations and restrictions against expansion were already being put in place in North Carolina, the state that had first deregulated the industry and kicked off the hog boom. Although Iowa's cheap corn remained

attractive, its lax regulatory standards were—and remain—the Hog Barons' essential requirement for success.

It's easy to see why communities across the state revolted—and many continue to revolt—against the confinements.[63] In fact, a recent poll found that nearly two-thirds of respondents favored a moratorium on new corporate hog facilities.[64] But despite the popular resistance to animal warehouses, legislators faced pressure from business leaders to invite in even more of them. Agricultural economists sympathetic to large operators such as the Hansens argued that if the state were friendlier to hog operations, the growth potential would be enormous.[65]

In the summer of 1993, a report called "Project 21" was presented to the Des Moines business leaders who had commissioned it. The 111-page paper, authored by a Virginia-based consulting firm, chided Iowa's politicians and business leaders for "complacency" with the state's relative economic health and its low rate of unemployment. The report concluded that Iowa needed to do more to boost growth, which meant that the family farm needed to die. "Although it is politically popular to defend and protect the concept of family farms," the report proclaimed, "legislation limiting corporate investment is economic folly."[66]

The sentiment touched a nerve. "We're really tired of this type of nonsense," a leading organizer for an anti-confinement group called Prairiefire told the *Des Moines Register* in response to the plan. "And if they want a fight in the Legislature, we'll show them a fight they'd never imagined." One Iowa farmer asked, "Why are they trying to promote something that will both hurt the environment and sell our young people into lives of indentured servitude?"[67]

Forced to address the heated controversy, confinement operations marshaled their political power to fend off regulation. In 1994, the newly formed Iowa Pork Alliance enlisted Robert Ray, a Republican

former governor, to remind Iowans of hogs' economic importance in statewide television ads.[68] Iowa Select Farms, for its part, emphasized repeatedly in the press that any efforts to stifle the growth of hog confinements would send production and jobs out of state.[69] Iowa Select and its employees also donated $41,000 to the campaign of Terry Branstad, the state's Republican governor at the time, and hired his former chief of staff, Doug Gross, as a lobbyist.[70] Branstad even appeared in an Iowa Select television promotion that year.[71]

The cozy relationship seemed to pay off. In 1995, Branstad signed a law that would prove to be pivotal for the Hansens, neutering local democracy to clear the way for his industry's development. The law, known as H.F. 519, offered token protections to neighbors of confinements: new buildings had to be sited at least a quarter mile from residences, and owners had to write plans—which had to be approved by the state—for disposing of their manure.

But the law also handed animal warehouse operators a huge victory by stripping counties of their long-standing authority to deny construction permits to confinement operators. Jeff Hansen described the law as a "fair compromise" and judged it sufficient to keep the Hansens' business in the state. "We're going to keep growing in Iowa," he told the *Des Moines Register*.[72]

The issue later became a prominent topic in the 2002 governor's race between Doug Gross, the Iowa Select lobbyist, and Democrat Tom Vilsack. While campaigning, Vilsack—who would later serve as secretary of agriculture for Presidents Barack Obama and Joe Biden—derided Gross as a champion of corporate hog lots. But as state senator, Vilsack had voted for H.F. 519.

Vilsack ended up winning the race. His second term, from 2002 through 2006, coincided with the largest confinement-building boom in Iowa's history.[73]

The Sacrifice State

After her rash cleared up—it took a month of topical treatments—Julie Duhn started attending meetings of the county board of supervisors and organizing people to oppose permits for proposed hog buildings. It frustrated and hurt Duhn to know that she could never take her grandkids swimming at Pine Lake. In all her activism, though, Duhn thinks she managed to stop only one confinement from being built. After a zealous campaign in 2017 and 2018 over a particular confinement, Iowa Select Farms withdrew its application.[74]

When Julie Duhn joined the fight against animal warehouses in 2016, activists and politicians had been campaigning—unsuccessfully—against them for more than twenty years. In Iowa, because of H.F. 519, counties have virtually no policy avenue for blocking confinements as long as the facilities meet the state's requirements.

Meanwhile, the Iowa Department of Natural Resources rubberstamps permits for medium and large animal warehouses and levies only paltry fines for manure spills. The department's leadership is appointed by the state's governor. A recent state audit report determined that the Iowa DNR was "mismanaging a multimillion-dollar fund set up to help oversee Iowa livestock farms and their manure," but nothing has come of it.[75]

The department is also so critically underfunded that rigorous enforcement of management plans is all but impossible.[76] Implementation of state-sanctioned "best management practices" to reduce manure runoff is voluntary, and such efforts have not stopped the problem from worsening. In fact, 61 percent of Iowa's rivers and streams and 67 percent of its lakes and reservoirs do not meet basic water quality standards, according to a 2020 assessment by the Iowa DNR.[77]

In January 2018, Thomas Burkhead learned that Iowa Select Farms had applied for a permit to build its largest-ever sow complex a mile from

his family's farm near Rockwell City, in Calhoun County. The proposal was for a hog mother ship: a three-shed breeding complex covering an area larger than four football fields and housing 7,498 pigs—5,200 of them gestating sows. Combined, the manure pits underlying the sheds would hold enough waste to fill three Olympic-size swimming pools.

Once weaned, the offspring of the sows would need to be fattened, and that meant even more confinements would soon need to be built. Calhoun County already had more than 150 facilities housing north of three hundred thousand pigs, and residents say the smell of their manure was already making the area unlivable. "There are a lot of days where I don't go outside, because it stinks enough to make you vomit," Burkhead said. "I mean, it will knock you on your knees."[78]

Burkhead launched into action. He rallied neighbors and community groups to fend off the industrial hog building. Although Burkhead figured they had almost no chance, the opponents persisted, eventually finding a mistake in Iowa Select's application. The group rallied people to a special supervisor's meeting and convinced the board to decline to recommend the proposal to the Iowa DNR. But the agency kicked the proposal to the Environmental Protection Commission, an oversight board appointed by the state's governor, which waved the company's application through.

With regulatory action blocked, activists have resorted to leaning on public scandal to shame companies into withdrawal. They create Facebook pages, write op-eds and letters to local officials and newspapers, crowd hearings held by county supervisors, and testify for hours. Anything to chip away at animal warehouse operators' standing with political leadership.

Bill Stowe, chief executive officer and general manager of the Des Moines Water Works, understood the need for drastic action. He had been warning elected officials for years that nitrate levels in the Raccoon River were getting dangerously high.[79] In response to waterway pollution

concerns, the State of Iowa created a toothless plan called the Iowa Nutrient Reduction Strategy, which did not address the core issue. The plan had no specific goals, no deadlines, and no consequences for failure to address the issue. And consequently, the problem only got worse. Between 2003 and 2019, average pollution levels doubled across the state.[80]

The state's inaction forced Bill Stowe and the Des Moines Water Works to take matters into their own hands. In March 2015, the Des Moines Water Works filed a lawsuit against government entities called drainage districts in northern Iowa for their failure to control nitrate pollution in the Raccoon River.[81] "Iowa has become a sacrifice state," Stowe told reporters. "We and our land are collateral damage for [Big Ag]."[82]

Stowe faced immense opposition for taking such a drastic step. Rather than agreeing to regulate the pollution, the defendant counties dug in, incurring legal costs estimated at more than $1 million. Republican governor Terry Branstad called the lawsuit the equivalent of "declar[ing] war on rural Iowa." Republicans in the state legislature even proposed dismantling the Des Moines Water Works.[83]

But the truth of the matter was a lot more complicated than a war between rural and urban Iowa. Folks in rural Iowa—people like Julie Dohn and Thomas Burkhead—are just as threatened by water pollution as their counterparts in Des Moines. In fact, a 2018 national water quality study published in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* reported that "violation incidence in rural areas is substantially higher than in urbanized areas."[84]

Besides, Branstad's solution to the problem involved raiding a fund that was established to finance new school construction with a sales tax.[85] This money would have been particularly meaningful for rural Iowa, which was in desperate need of an update to its decaying education infrastructure.

Polling by the *Des Moines Register* showed that over 60 percent of Iowans agreed with the Des Moines Water Works, including significant majorities of residents of small towns.[86] Another poll found that 73 percent of voters in the state supported limits on manure pollution runoff.[87] As Art Cullen, a local newspaperman, put it, "Anyone with eyes and a nose knows in his gut that Iowa has the dirtiest surface water in America."[88]

The Des Moines Water Works' court fight quickly became bitter. The agency indicated that it would settle the case if the parties agreed to higher water quality standards, but the counties swore off any settlement talks.[89]

At first, it was not entirely clear where the counties got the money to pay their massive legal bills, estimated to be upward of $1.4 million.[90] But an investigation conducted by the *Storm Lake Times* eventually revealed that the case was being financed by a secret fund created by the Agribusiness Association of Iowa.[91] As it typically does, Big Ag filtered money to the counties through front groups. When a newspaper and a local advocate for transparency sought to make the funding public, the counties fought them tooth and nail.[92]

Perhaps fearing that the lawsuit would lead to water quality regulations that would cut into its profits, the industry quickly mobilized to fight it. In addition to contributing to the defense fund, industry and its allies created another dark money group called the Iowa Partnership for Clean Water, which ran attack ads against the Des Moines Water Works, according to reporting by the *Des Moines Register*.[93] It's unknown whether Jeff and Deb Hansen contributed to this effort because membership of both the Iowa Partnership for Clean Water and the Agribusiness Association of Iowa is kept secret.

The lawsuit brought by Bill Stowe and the Des Moines Water Works was ultimately dismissed. But even though it wasn't successful, Stowe's

efforts brought the issue and the corruption surrounding it into the light of day.

Bill Stowe passed away from pancreatic cancer in April 2019.[94] Not long before Stowe died, Art Cullen wrote a column in the *Des Moines Register* honoring him for accelerating "a conversation that had been taking place in quiet corners. . . . It took courage for him to challenge the chemical cabal that controls Iowa agriculture and politics." Art continued, "Not everyone would have had the steel."[95]

Sadly, Iowa's water crisis has not improved since Stowe spoke truth to power. In fact, the state has only added more confinement buildings. Every year since 2018, Iowa politicians, cheered on by activists, have introduced a bill in the state's legislature to halt animal warehouse expansions, and they've worked with Democratic senator Cory Booker of New Jersey to introduce a bill in the US Senate that includes a long-term phaseout of large animal warehouses nationwide. But so far, neither has had enough votes to pass.[96]

Coming up on its thirtieth anniversary, Iowa Select Farms is still expanding, along with the rest of the hog industry in Iowa.[97] The state is now home to at least thirteen thousand confinements, and applications for new ones hit the Iowa Department of Natural Resources at a steady clip.[98]

In the face of opposition, the Hansens have employed a number of tactics to maintain control over the political levers in the state. The Deb and Jeff Hansen Foundation has a long and well-publicized history of charitable giving. It donates thousands of pork chops to food banks, gives vouchers for hams to dozens of schools, and organizes Operation Christmas Meal, a series of drive-through pork handouts. It then posts photos of smiling employees, occasionally joined by a governor or US senator, on social media.[99]

It's not unusual for a sitting governor to attend a charity gala thrown by the Hansens. The 2016 spring gala for the Deb and Jeff Hansen

Foundation was a glittering event, packed with smiling faces and powerful personalities. Iowa's governor at the time, Terry Branstad, was in attendance, as was the president of Iowa State University.[100] The university, following a $2 million Hansen family donation, had dedicated the Jeff and Deb Hansen Agriculture Student Learning Center less than two years earlier.[101]

In 2019, Iowa's Republican governor, Kim Reynolds, contributed a tour of the state capitol and the governor's mansion, led by Reynolds herself, to the gala's auction. Iowa Select Farms requested her presence at the gala the day after Reynolds won election, likely aided by the Hansens' six-figure campaign contribution.[102]

The Hansen family's charitable efforts have seemingly solidified its power. During the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, Governor Reynolds fought to keep packing plants open, prioritizing the interests of confinement operators such as the Hansens, who stood to lose millions as these sheds became overloaded with market-ready animals.[103]

And in July 2020, when Iowa Select's administrative headquarters in suburban Des Moines had an outbreak scare, the company reached out directly to the governor's office, which sent a rapid-response team to test thirty-two office employees.[104] Although Reynolds argued that the state offered testing to dozens of other businesses, the governor's rapid allocation of testing resources to political donors such as the Hansens stirred controversy, prompting an investigation from the state auditor.

In December 2020, Governor Reynolds spent a frigid day handing out Iowa Select pork packages at an Operation Christmas Meal drive-through event in Osceola, Iowa. But the Hansens weren't there to help. Their jet had landed a few days earlier in sunny Naples, Florida.[105]

CHAPTER 2

The Grain Barons

There is a template for the all-American business success story. An immigrant family comes to the United States with little more than two pennies to their name, opens a small business, and works hard year after year. As the family members slowly build the business, successive generations take on the responsibility of running and growing it. The business prospers, and its leaders become prominent citizens, giving back to the community that helped them succeed. Museums, schools, and hospital wings soon bear their names.

The Cargill-MacMillan family, which owns Cargill, Inc., has told this story about its centuries-old business for decades now. William Duncan MacMillan, who served on the company's board of directors for over thirty years, published three books chronicling its saga, and the family even hired an Ivy League professor to write a three-volume version that spans over 1,800 pages.[1]

One aspect of Cargill's all-American narrative rings true: the corporation remains a family-owned business. In fact, for its size and age, Cargill has kept its ownership remarkably close. Today, nearly one hundred

members of the Cargill-MacMillan family control about 90 percent of the company's shares.[2]

But Cargill is no ordinary success story. The company has grown and grown and grown, well beyond the bounds of the humble-family-business-made-good narrative. It is now the largest private company in America, larger even than the infamous Koch Industries.[3] For perspective, Cargill's annual revenue is equivalent to the *combined* annual state tax revenues of South Dakota, New Hampshire, Montana, North Dakota, Vermont, Rhode Island, Delaware, Maine, West Virginia, Idaho, Nebraska, New Mexico, Hawaii, Mississippi, Nevada, Oklahoma, Kansas, Arkansas, and Iowa.[4]

It's hard to pin down exactly how big Cargill is because, as a private company, it is not required to disclose its finances. In fact, Cargill produced public figures for the first time in 1969 only because Harvard Business School required it for an award it gave the company.[5] Nor is it easy to grasp the scope of Cargill's empire. The company employs over 160,000 people worldwide and operates in a seemingly endless list of industries, from salt to cocoa.[6] There's a good chance that some, perhaps most, of the ingredients of an average American meal were processed and sold by Cargill. The company likely transported most of the ingredients, too, via its massive shipping network.

To get a sense of how Cargill touches most aspects of the American food system, take it from one of the company's own brochures:

> We are the flour in your bread, the wheat in your noodles, the salt on your fries. We are the corn in your tortillas, the chocolate in your dessert, the sweetener in your soft drink. We are the oil in your salad dressing and the beef, pork or chicken you eat for dinner. We are the cotton in your clothing, the backing on your carpet and the fertilizer in your field.[7]

(continued...)

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