

# The times, they are a changing

## *Why it's been necessary for agriculture to get bigger*

Those who experienced the 1960s remember Bob Dylan's song "The times they are a changing." When we look at swine production then and compare it to today, we can certainly see things have changed. Today we have fewer producers with larger herds producing more pigs per sow than ever. Yes indeed, the times have changed in regard to knowledge, technology, economies, markets, culture, attitudes and production philosophy.

Regardless of the enterprise, those who adeptly adjust to changes succeed. In the early 1900s Henry Ford revolutionized manufacturing with the concept of assembly lines in automobile production. He created a way to provide a needed product to a growing country in an efficient, affordable and sustainable manner. His wisdom can be seen in the success of those industries who initiated assembly lines of their own.

### **Bigger farms**

Sometime after Dylan's song hit the airwaves, progressive agricultural producers, in crop and animal production, were coming to the realization that as unit margins on their products lowered, their operations would have to change or be lost. Those with foresight and adeptness realized operations would need to grow to capture the economies of scale needed for future survival in the changing industry environment. Through foresight, they expanded operations in crop and animal production to levels that had yet to be seen. And, by being adept and adopting new technologies and production philosophies, they continued their success.

The change has not been without pain and controversy. Tough choices were made. Whether to increase capital investment, leave the family farm entirely, or continue as-is while finding supplemental income are some dilemmas that were addressed. Many who were raised in a family farming lifestyle have had, at some point, to face the stark reality that changes were needed. As a result, a substantial number of good



people have left agriculture.

As modern agriculture evolved, some resisted, remembering a less complicated time. They see modern climate controlled facilities that protect our pigs through strict biosecurity measures, feed specialized rations, and are staffed with personnel trained for specific phases of production. They wonder, from the outside looking in, how those animals can be cared for properly while housed inside buildings.

### **The dreaded 'f' word**

Because our pigs can't be seen by passersby driving down the highway, it's easy for consumers to believe stories of horrific conditions and mistreatment. Those who are opposed to modern swine production hear the term "factory farms" in a derogatory manner and use the term "family farm" as an acceptable form of production. Media fuel claims of environmental pollution and mistreatment of animals on these factory farms. And worst yet, an undercover video of a "bad apple" employee doing something wrong implies industry-wide low standards.

The fact is, we have adopted some of Henry Ford's assembly line production in our farms to provide a more wholesome environment and method of care to our animals; the animals in return have rewarded us with continued success in production.

If you were to blindfold a person

and take them into a modern production facility, their ability to indicate whether they were in a farm owned by a company or a farm owned by a family would be null. The fact of the matter is in modern swine production systems we produce and care for our pigs in generally the same way regardless of the type of ownership. You won't find sows in dirty mud holes trying to keep cool and prevent sunburn, piglets trying in vain to find warmth in the winter, table scraps and slop being thrown into the feed troughs, and you won't see our pigs drinking dirty water. But then again, you won't find a talking, three segmented spider name Charlotte spinning words into her web either!

### **Get into the game!**

All pork producers must be ready to stand shoulder to shoulder to battle fantasy and innuendo with truth and reality. Today's challenge is real. As modern swine producers, we must be willing to learn what resources are available and how we can educate the consumers that we are dedicated to producing pork that is wholesome, while caring for natural resources and providing proper care and environment for the animals we love to work with: Pigs! •

  
Bill Barnes  
OPC president