

Hogs to Heaven

From hog farm to country paradise, one couple helped resurrect a prime piece of land in western Kentucky.

By H. M. Murrell
Photos courtesy Michael Bobo

The land was played out and putrid. The bare ground resembled a moonscape--dotted with hog carcasses, broken machinery, and buildings just waiting for the right wind to bring them down. Years of accumulated hog waste filled enormous fetid lagoons.

Paradise it was not.

But Michael Bobo and his wife Sharon looked beyond the scarred surface and saw rolling hills that reminded them of their childhoods in central Tennessee.

See more before and after pictures; go to [More Web Exclusives](#).

They envisioned how the 415 acres, which had once reverberated under the squeals of 2,000 hogs, could be transformed into a peaceful sanctuary where their three young sons could grow up within the structured life of a working farm, unrestrained by the confines of city life.

Visit the Bobo's Web site at: www.deeplyrootedfarms.com

Just a few weeks earlier they were driving through Calloway County, Ky., on their quest to find some farmland where they could settle down. Michael had been raised tending the cattle and hogs on his grandfather's farm in Mt. Pleasant, Tenn.; although Sharon was a "city girl" from Nashville, she shared his love for open spaces, country living and animals. Was that too much to ask for--a piece of land with gentle contours and a bit of sky?

As they topped a hill, Sharon pointed to a shady glen in the valley below, complete with a tree-lined brook. "Why can't we find a place like that?" she asked.

Perhaps it's a good thing to wish out loud, because a few weeks later Michael drove her to look at yet another farm. When they topped the familiar hill, realization set in and Sharon asked excitedly, "Is it?"

Nodding, Michael pulled into the drive. However, there's an old adage: Be careful what you wish for. As the dust under their tires settled, they stared in amazement at the scene before them. The idyllic glade was merely a forgotten corner.

The body of the farm was a wasteland. Literally. Two lagoons filled to the brim burbled with the stench from years of thousands of hogs living in close quarters. There was no grass, only dust and mud. Nothing looked square. The buildings, the gates, even the equipment, all seemed to list to the side as if they were as weary as the land.

Taking it all in, Michael was surprised by what happened next. "When we drove up and saw what a mess it was--" "And the smell!" Sharon adds.

The Bobos officially hired Doug Sharp on as the farm manager and he is now a much-loved member of the family.

"I figured she wouldn't want it." Together they smile at the remembrance of the moment their lives changed forever. "But she did. We both did."

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[Silk From a Sow's Ear](#)

There was filth and decay everywhere. The Bobo's wondered if there was anything of substance on the place other than the land itself. Little did they know that one of the greatest fortunes to befall them was already there.

In times past, Doug Sharp had often forgone paychecks to aid the struggling hog operation. As the farm foreman, he had taken old equipment in lieu of pay, and even bought feed and medicine out of his own pocket. A graduate of California Polytechnic University, he wasn't a simpleton who couldn't do any better. He merely loved the animals and wanted to do what was best for them and right for him as a man. He stuck.

Tapping Into Government-Funded Resources

Want to know how you can locate government programs that may assist you with land reclamation, conservation and erosion control? Try these: NRCS - Natural Resources Conservation Service. A division of the USDA (United States Department of Agriculture), this organization was originally called the Soil Conservation Service. Their goal is to assist private landowners with the conservation of soil, water and other natural resources. CRP - Conservation Reserve Program. This program is designed to give soil a rest from row cropping and allow grasses to return. Often called the "set aside" program, farmers can receive cash payments per acre in exchange for not working the land. Contact your local NRCS office for more information. EQIP - Environmental Quality Incentive Program/NRCS. This program provides financial and technical help to install or implement structural and management practices on agricultural land. To promote conservation practices, they offer cost-share programs that cover up to 75 percent of the cost, and can provide as much as 90 percent for eligible limited-resource and beginning farmers and ranchers. Find out more at: www.nrcs.usda.gov/PROGRAMS/EQIP/ FLEP - Forestland Enhancement Program. This program offers assistance in restoring woodlands through providing and planting trees. To find out how they can help you, contact your State Forestry Agency or go to: www.stateforesters.org

Guys like Doug Sharp are getting hard to find. Cowboys say these men "ride for the brand." Their loyalty to a piece of ground and the guardianship of its livestock is unwavering. Flush or bust, they never fold. Even when the land changes ownership, they stay on--protective of what they love, hopeful that the change will be for the best. For Doug and the Bobos, it was a stroke of luck long overdue.

When the farm was sold, Doug wasn't at all sure what that meant for him. The Bobos instantly liked this Marlboro Man who seemingly came with the farm, but Doug watched them warily as he ascertained their intentions.

When he came to the realization that their vision for and dedication to the farm mirrored his own, he eagerly shared his knowledge and wisdom, which quickly became invaluable. They officially hired him on as the farm manager and he is now a much-loved member of the family.

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We're From the Government and We're Here to Help

Buying the farm was the easy part. But years of concentrated hog farming had rubbed out the topsoil and what lay underneath was washing away rapidly. The Bobos would have to act quickly and remain dedicated to their vision if they ever hoped to bring their dreams to fruition. Michael inquired at the local Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) office about programs that could assist in restoring the land and he also turned to his technological ally—the Internet. Persistence and determination paid off, and funds were located through grants and cost-share programs to aid in the reclamation of the land. The lagoons were drained and much of the liquid was used to fertilize the barren fields.

Once they were emptied and all that remained was sludge, the pits were filled in. Trackhoes and bulldozers traversed the land, taking away diseased ground and restoring the natural contours.

A conservation program was implemented that led to the development of grassed waterways, grade stabilization structures and construction of a one-acre pond for watering cattle. However, erosion and water control are pointless without roots to hold the soil in place.

Native grasses were reintroduced to the small pastures, large fields were sown with fescue or orchard grass, and multiple species of pine, poplar and ash trees--approximately 20,000 of them--were planted. Operation Land Reclamation was complete.

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Build It and They Will Come

Now it was time to let the wilting hog barns go to the pigsty in the sky and replace them with something fabulous. A 60' x 84'-foot gambrel-style barn was built that incorporated four 12' x 12' stalls, a feed room, tack room, spacious office and a large workshop on the bottom floor. The loft "apartment," grand as any house, sports granite countertops, beautiful woodwork, and 1,200 square feet of living space with three bedrooms, a kitchen, full bath and lots of room for the boys to romp. Antiques and western décor provide a warm, cozy ambiance and the 1940s black-and-white photography of western artist Harvey Caplin showcased throughout the home adds to the rustic feel. Enjoying crisp, fall days and summer nights is easy--just step onto the balcony that runs the width of the barn and look across the rolling hills, or wander down to the patio and toast some marshmallows over the stone fire pit.

Lording over the front corner of the land is an enormous 35-foot tall windmill. Trucked in from Texas, it sports 10-foot blades and an antique pump at its base.

Although it's not functional yet, someday it will provide water for a broodmare field that is being sewn in orchard grass. Miles of black, wooden, post-and-plank fencing now encircles the farm and divides the fields. But what good is a fence without something to contain? For a farm to thrive, it must be utilized; if row cropping is not your dream, that means bringing in livestock.

Michael's first choice was easy. A herd of 20 black Angus cattle was established, but the family also wanted to try something different. Perhaps it was the refrigerator magnet that jogged their memory ...

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Back to the Future

The lush, windswept terrain of Scotland was the perfect place for Michael to perform his two years of residency. After obtaining dual degrees in dentistry and medicine, he would soon become an oral/maxillofacial surgeon.

Scotland was engagingly unique and yet familiar. There was no language barrier, and the emerald swales reminded Michael and Sharon of home. While traveling through the countryside, they happened upon herds of long-horned, tousel-haired Scottish Highland cattle roaming freely about the landscape. Before heading back to the States, Sharon bought a refrigerator magnet in the shape of their beloved Scottish Highlands as a remembrance.

Fast-forward to 2003, barely a year after the Bobos had purchased their farm. The last vestiges of the hog farm were gone and Angus cattle were grazing on the hillsides, yet a few things were missing. Having studied heavily about diversified farming, Michael was eager to introduce something unique to Western Kentucky.

In a burst of inspiration, Sharon pointed at the magnet and wondered, "What about some of these cattle?" Intrigued by the possibilities, Michael researched the breed, liked what he discovered, then set about locating herds in the United States.

It took some doing, but with serendipity--being what it is--he located some near Murfreesboro, Tenn., not far from their roots near Nashville. Six cows were brought home, a bull was later added and this past year, two calves were born.

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A Name With Some Bite

A farm has to have a name. It's not a law per se, but anything requiring as much work and dedication as a farm needs an identity all its own. You'd better choose wisely because that name will identify your property for everyone from the vet to the co-op; and if your operation is successful, it will remain with the land long after you're gone. It's a weighty proposition. That's why the Bobos chose "Deeply Rooted Farms" as their moniker.

Gentle Giants

Most folks might be shocked to learn that the Clydesdale horse, revered mascot of the Anheuser-Busch Budweiser Brand, is actually a rare breed. Originally bred around the early 1800s near the Clyde River region in Scotland, every purebred Clydesdale in existence today can be traced back to two sires: Lord Darney and Prince of Wales.

This breed was created by crossing local "sabino" mares with black Flemish stallions. "Sabino" refers to a pinto coloration pattern that produces legs that are generally white from the knees down, excessive white on the face, and splashes of white on the belly.

The hallmark of the breed is the long, fluffy hair known as "feather" that hangs from below the horse's knees and hocks to the tops of the hooves. They can be bay, brown, black and occasionally black. The rarest blacks have four white stockings.

The Clydesdale is a bit leaner than other large draft breeds, usually weighing between 1,600 and 2,200 pounds and maturing around 16 to 18 hands high (approximately 5 1/2 to 6 feet at the withers). Popping into the world at between 110 and 180 pounds, Clydesdale foals can gain as much as 4.5 pounds a day--which is easy since Mama Clydesdale can churn out an average of 55 pounds of milk per day. No wonder racehorse breeders have been known to raise Thoroughbred foals on draft horse mothers!

The name has multiple meanings for them--here is the land on which they plan to remain, entrenched in the soil where they and their sons will always be "deeply rooted." Family time is important to the Bobos; since Michael's profession keeps him away from home quite a bit, both he and Sharon hope that working together on the farm will keep the family close.

It also offers a wink and nod to Michael's profession as an oral surgeon. Much of his work involves removing "deeply rooted" teeth; it is this profession that provides the income to make their vision a reality. Of course, his work isn't just about digging out impacted wisdom teeth. There are a few times each year when Michael knows he can't leave town. Sure, holiday car crashes and motorcycle races produce their share of broken teeth and smashed jaws, but it's when the rodeo comes to town that Dr. Michael Bobo can be certain he'll get a call.

Hosted by Murray State University's rodeo team, there are several collegiate level competitions each year, and sprinkled in-between are Bull Busts and small rodeos put on by area stock contractors. Without fail, he'll be called upon to repair the damage that results when man and large, hooved animals collide. Recently he was leaving the emergency room when an ambulance roared up with a badly injured cowboy. A bull had stepped on the man's neck, not only crushing his jaw, but severing the arteries. He had nearly bled to death. Quickly, Michael went to work assisting the ER doctor, and because of his expertise in all things neck- and jaw-related, he was able to quickly tie off the arteries and save the young man's life. Being in the right place at the right time appears to be a recurring theme in his life.

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All Creatures Great and Small

During a springtime visit to Busch Gardens, Michael's interest was piqued when he saw Clydesdale foals cavorting beside graceful mares; the proud geldings on the hitch team, resplendent in their gleaming harnesses, evoked his admiration for attention to detail. Michael's soul was stirred and he could not shake them from his mind. Shortly thereafter, Sharon approached her husband to see what he was so intently researching on his computer. It was Clydesdales. They'd gotten into his head and wouldn't leave him alone.

Michael devoured every bit of information he could locate, surfing the Internet and telephoning people all over the country who shared his newfound enthusiasm. As his interest grew, Michael realized what was missing from his farm. Horses. He also became intrigued by the sport of driving, in which teams of horses are hitched together and driven through obstacle courses.

Hitch Competitions

Hitch competitions aren't confined to pairs of horses pulling side-by-side. Here are some of the variations incorporated into the sport:

Tandem--Two horses are hitched nose-to-tail. Unicorn--three horses are hitched with one in front and a pair behind hitched side-by-side, forming a triangle. Other groupings are pairs of four, six or eight.

Traditionally only mares and geldings are used in teams. Stallions are primarily shown in halter competitions.

Soon Black Jack and Major, a pair of rare black Clydesdale geldings, were bought, followed by Chavez, a bay. Reasoning that hitching and driving aren't something you can learn from a book, Michael arranged for he and Sharon to take a "vacation" at the Indiana farm of Cathy Zahm, a renowned draft horse trainer who offers clinics in working with draft horses. Under the tutelage of the savvy horsewoman, their interest blossomed and the Bobos now send their Clydesdales to driving competitions around the country; they hope to drive them in local parades in the future.

Although the boys love their parents' Clydesdales, the horses are too large for the kids to really enjoy them. The Bobos want their sons to be comfortable around livestock, so they sought out two ponies on which the boys could learn about the hard knocks involved with handling horses. Dreamer and Foxy fit right in, running the huge Clydesdale geldings around like two old biddy aunts marshalling errant nephews. Now Christian, 6, and Clayton, 5, are learning to ride, and baby brother Carson, 3, won't be far behind.

Besides Fred, the large rooster who guards the equipment sheds, the Bobos have also added a few burros. A standard gelding donkey helps keep coyotes at bay in the Scottish Highland's pasture; to keep him company the Bobos got two miniature white jennies. After all, what is a farm without the sound of a cock crowing at dawn and the braying of "donkey song" at dusk? The wildlife has returned--deer bop in and out of the pastures, the resonant thrum of bullfrogs emanates from the pond, and large coveys of quail take wing when the family walks through the fields. For the Bobos of Deeply Rooted Farms in Calloway County, Ky., paradise lost is now found.

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