



Pigging Out at Ross Mill Farm

Susan and Richard Magidson have been committed to the cause of
pet pigs since they bought their historic farm in 1982

by Michele Malinchak

Another summer passed without a vacation for Susan and Richard Magidson, owners of Ross Mill Farm in Rushland, PA. Asking someone to sit for your cat or dog while you're away is one thing, but finding someone to care for one hundred or more pigs is another. Married twenty-six years, they share a common commitment to potbellied pigs as household companion pets. "Vacations are not something we think about," Susan said. "We did a lot of traveling before, and being on the farm is like having your own little universe."

Anything labeled "before," Richard explained, is referred to as BP or Before Pigs. Since they purchased the farm in 1982, pigs have become their passion and their livelihood.

The Magidsons' emotional connection with the animals and their mission to maintain the well-being of the breed sets them apart. While other potbellied pig sanctuaries have some type of adoption program, it is not to rehab and place them. Pigs usually live out their lives there with only a minority being adopted.

Ross Mill Farm is unique in its rescue, rehab and re-home program. Since the farm's inception, some five

Above, ready for the costume contest, this pig donned a festive pink tulle and floral neck-piece. Opposite, pigs are led into the judging area for various competitions at the PigFest.



Randi Bye



hundred pigs have been adopted. Susan works closely with the Pig Placement Network, a non-profit organization she co-founded, to find them suitable homes. She not only takes great care to return the pigs to like environments, but she also has the knack for creating perfect matches. The rescue end goes hand in hand with the business, since every pig that's placed generates a new customer. People are always looking to replace pigs and buy products, either at the farm's general store or online.

"Many Bucks County farms are struggling to survive," Susan said. "We've maintained the farm by being diverse, not in the traditional sense, but still enabling us to earn a living."

Established in 1740 as a grist and sawmill, the historic farm once played a role in the Revolutionary War. In 1777, George Washington sent his lieutenants there to

acquire provisions. At first the owners refused to comply or accept colonial money, since they were British sympathizers. However, refusing meant their home would be confiscated, and eventually they gave in.

Featured in the Summer 2002 edition of this magazine, the farm has undergone significant changes since then. The greatest of these was the preservation of the thirty-plus acres in early 2005. Under the conservation easement, funded through Warwick Township and administered by the Heritage Conservancy, the land will remain undeveloped for generations to come.

Also in 2005, the lodge was completed by Amish workers in six months. The heated and air-conditioned building is 5,000 square feet, housing Lula's Piggy Spa and a spacious boarding area. Before the lodge was built, pigs were kept in the house or barn. Now, blankets and

Above, the main farmhouse, established in 1740, provides a place for pigs to become socialized household pets. Opposite top left, a visitor at the festival sports a patriotic pig tee. Opposite top right, Susan Magidson, co-owner of Ross Mill Farm. Opposite bottom left, pigtician Brenda Koller gets ready to groom a pig on the special hydraulic lift. Opposite bottom right, a pig is walked by his owner using a special safety harness available at the farm's store.







pillows fill the comfortable stalls and boarders have access to a secure area surrounding the building. Guests stay here while their owners go on vacation or are unable to take care of them at home. Typical stays are two to three months and longer during the winter months when caring for them is more difficult.

“Our dedication and involvement increased due to the lodge,” Susan said, “and we couldn’t have continued without it. It was a recommitment to what we were doing.” As their involvement increased, so did their customer base. The lodge can accommodate sixty-five to seventy pigs, and the farm has the total capacity to house one hundred fifty. “Spacewise, timewise and financially we would like to get down to one hundred,” Susan said.

Mounted on the roof of the lodge is a Webcam that lets you view live everyday activities on the farm. It also

enables people to visit their pigs on camera. Susan’s sister is able to view her pigs, Porgy and Henry, without leaving her high rise in Philadelphia. The Piggy Cam is accessible by logging onto the farm’s Website: (www.rossmillfarm.com).

Susan’s own pigs, numbering thirty-five to forty, free-range on the lawn and live in the barn. “You can’t herd them like sheep,” she said, “but they will always come home at dusk.” Then, there are the rescued pigs up for adoption, which live in their own village with a secure yard. Volunteers have built huts for them and they share a common area. They are kept separate from Susan’s pigs since, being territorial, they will fight.

About sixty pigs a year come to the farm for rescue, almost a pig a week. Some of them come directly from their owners to her, while others are non-owned and non-

Opposite top, children enjoying a fun craft activity at the PigFest.

Opposite bottom, one of the inhabitants of Piggy Village where pigs await adoption. Shelters like the one pictured are built by volunteers. Above, the consignment table featured a variety of pig and non-pig items for sale. Proceeds went directly to the Pig Placement Network.

socialized. Because of potential disease, the latter are quarantined for thirty days. Blood tests and vet work are run on the pigs before they enter the farm.

To some degree, the potbellied pig craze of the late 1980s has tapered off, however, today's indiscriminate online sales is troubling. Sellers motivated by profit misrepresent the pigs and the expectations of raising them. Customers are often told apartments are okay because the pigs will stay small, or that they are good with children. Unfortunately, pigs end up with irresponsible owners because not enough time was spent doing the homework.

Descended from European wild boars, potbellied pigs made their way to Southeast Asia. There, six basic breeds interbred and adapted to their new environment by staying smaller. Potbellied pigs are not a breed, but rather a breed type that shares certain characteristics. These are small, straight, erect ears, straight tails and moderate length snouts. The pigs were imported from Canada into the U.S. around 1988 and became popular because of their gentle disposition and ability to bond with their owners. Body size varies, but weights are usually eighty to one hundred fifty pounds.

After humans, primates and dolphins/whales, pigs rank fourth on the intelligence scale. This makes them a challenge to manage as they can easily become bored and engage in destructive behavior. While sweet natured and sensitive, pigs are also self-centered and manipulative. Because they are food-driven, they must constantly be monitored to prevent weight gain. If pigs become too obese, they have difficulty walking and fat deposits around their eyes hinders their sight.

Problem pigs are often brought to Susan for obedience training and behavior modification. She identifies their personalities and changes the way they react to their owners, but said people must change too. "You can't give a pig everything or it will become spoiled and manipulative," she cautioned.

Other behavior problems might be caused by physical conditions. For example, an eyelash growing in the eye can cause the lid to close improperly, making the pig skittish when approached by people. Obesity will make a pig more worried because it can't run, and the type of nose also affects behavior. Longer nosed pigs tend to have better vision, while shorter nosed ones have more sunken eyes, making them more cautious.

Arthritis, as well, can pose a problem for pigs. They tend to want to be lazy, and often owners give in to their couch potato lifestyle. Pigs that are kept outside have much better mobility and health compared to those kept indoors. Currently, the Magidsons are working with an

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acupuncture vet who uses pulsating water to relieve stiff joints. They are constantly looking for new therapies and products that will benefit the animals.

If taking on the care of these exotic pets sounds daunting, chances are they aren't for you. Pigs are more human than pet-like, and according to Susan, more people shouldn't have them than should. For that reason, she never pushes them as pets. People who really want them will seek them out, and those that do often have life-altering episodes that change the way they interact with others.

One example of how pigs have enhanced someone's life is Rose Strong. She and Joanne Graziano, who live in Springfield Township, care for three potbellied pigs, a horse,

six cats, three dogs and chickens. Both women have become involved with the Pig Placement Network and serve on their board.

Rose bought her first pig at an animal auction in Gilbertsville, PA. Hooked ever since, she explained, "Pigs touch my heart like no other animal. They make me giggle, but they're very smart. They exhibit a sense of intelligence you don't get with dogs, but that also makes them needier. You have to take the time with them."

After her first pig died, Rose sought Susan's help in adopting another. She affectionately calls Susan the "pig goddess" because of her knowledge and expertise. Over the years she has adopted three pigs from Ross Mill Farm, two of which are now living. The two males, Tim and Bear, each weigh eighty to ninety pounds and will come when she calls them. They are social, but cautious as they sniff their way slowly around the yard. Bear rediscovered a mulberry tree he visited last year, and soon his mouth sports a purple grin. The pigs live outdoors year round and sleep inside the barn amidst piles of well-worn blankets. The 'boys' sit for treats and also enjoy an occasional beer to calm them down during travel or vet visits. Rose keeps a small refrigerator in the barn with brews handy.

In addition, a third female pig, Helen, is being fostered by Rose while awaiting adoption. Helen was found in an abandoned outbuilding on a farm in Lower Saucon Township. Rather than destroying the animal, the Township generously gave \$500 towards her care. This is Rose's first time fostering and she admitted it has been challenging. "You need to be top pig at all times," she stressed.

When potbellied pigs first hit the pet market, no one was exactly sure of their life expectancy. Now it is known that a healthy pig can live fourteen to twenty years, and owners should consider their care a long-term commitment.

Susan is fortunate to still have the original two pigs she started with,

Bromley and Blossom, both now eighteen years old. Her other pig, Lulabelle, died of kidney failure at 14-years-old last February. A dogwood tree was planted in her honor, and a celebration of her life was held in May. The memorial event will continue to be held the first Sunday each May for those wanting to share their losses.

Another service that Ross Mill Farm provides is hospice care when owners can no longer care for their terminally ill pigs. Susan offers free consultations in the owners' homes, or if desired, pigs can be boarded at a reduced rate.

The Magidsons have been taking some of their deceased pigs to the University of Pennsylvania where necropsies are performed. The studies yield valuable information on diet and other health issues affecting aging pigs, and the findings are shared with vets throughout the country.

On a lighter note, Susan pointed to a young pig named Wilbur here for grooming. Not just everyday grooming, but special treatment to prepare him for a wedding. Already a handsome fellow, his skin will be further enhanced by a natural whitening shampoo, making his black bowtie really stand out.

Services like these are performed by Brenda Koller, the trained 'pigtician' who lives on the premises and has her own pig. For the past three years, she has been in charge of grooming and spa treatments. A special hydraulic pig lift, designed by tool and die maker, Dale Welch, facilitates the grooming process. There's even a convenient pickup and delivery service for a spa/vet treatment all in the same day. Brenda also practices Reiki therapy on the pigs, an ancient method of channeling healing energy through the gentle placement of hands.

The farm's dedicated staff includes five full-time and two part-time workers. Rich Bowers has assisted the Magidsons for twelve years and is responsible for feeding and cleaning the pigs. Jen Brown is another full-time employee who works in the office. Susan said, "The employees are all independent thinkers and

doers and enjoy the happy, peaceful environment. They can bring their kids and pets to work or take time off whenever necessary. We're extremely flexible at the farm."

Adjacent to the farm, the original settler's home sits on a hill. Built in 1696, the fieldstone cottage was opened as a bed and breakfast by the Magidsons in 1999. Located next to Little Neshaminy Creek and surrounded by woods, the cottage offers a tranquil retreat. It's equipped with all modern conveniences, a working fireplace and sleeps six. Pets and children are welcome. Rates are \$120 per night and inquiries can be made online or by calling 215-322-1539.

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Looking ahead, future plans at the farm include fencing in a wood lot and building a new pigpen. Richard is also excited about marketing the ultimate pig house, a specially designed cedar home made by the Amish. Providing a clean, dry environment, the two-door house boasts a mudroom, an entrance hallway, bedroom and a roof that lifts. The house has already been shipped as far as Florida.

The couple will also continue to enlighten the public about pigs at events like pet fairs, and also conduct eight farm tours a year. Donations are accepted for the tours that enable people to see the pigs without committing themselves. Groups such as the Cub Scouts, the Fresh Air Fund and 4-H Club also participate

in some of the farm's programs. Recently, 4-H members from New Jersey picked up a pig, which they will foster and eventually return to the farm.

Of course, the annual PigFest remains a major attraction and fundraiser. This year's event, held on September 13, will feature contests, games, food, music, demonstrations, raffles, auctions and more. Hours are 11 a.m. to 6 p.m. Admission to the festival is free, but donations are appreciated.

If pigs could fly, they would come from all corners of the world to experience hog heaven at Ross Mill Farm. Though pigs don't have wings, those fortunate to end up here are cared for by people with unlimited compassion.

Ross Mill Farm is located on 2464 Walton Road, Rushland, PA, and is open to visitors by appointment or during farm tours. Call 215-322-1539 or visit them online at www.0rossmillfarm.com. ❖

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