ADULT FICTION CATEGORY

The Pork Riders

*Some carry on, awaiting the next middle-of-the-night burner telephone call or coded newsletter to inform them of the time and place of the next secret feeding. No form of electronic messaging is used due to vulnerability to tracking software.*

*These rich and influential men, including many notable Knoxvillians, will not be identified in this report. There is no prima facie evidence that they have broken any laws and may well be burdened enough by their own losses. And besides, we represent the worst in cowardly, patronage-system-backed, smalltown journalism.*

*These Knoxvillians persist in their peculiar culinary pursuits despite the fact that some of their number are cripples and idiots convalescing at East Tennessee's most luxurious sanatoria or dead in some of the region's finest graveyards. Or will be soon enough.*

*(Trigger warning: racially insensitive terminology is left in situ to preserve context.)*

A very exclusive club was formed last fall by a group of wealthy businessmen and power brokers. The sole focus of the clandestine society, its inspiration and raison d'etre, as they like to say, is the arcane gustatory experience of dining on raw pork.

This club, which has no charter and keeps no records or minutes or any other type of evidentiary documentation, has a floating membership whose identities are connected on a need-to-know basis. A reasonable guess would place their number at about three dozen. All are likely to be powerful in their various spheres of public and private business. All are dedicated to a new and dangerous gastronomic trend directly refuting what every mother knows.

They are all males. And every single mother’s son of them was doubtlessly raised in households in which ‘don't eat undercooked pork’ was a constant admonition in the kitchen.

During the course of interviews over the past several months, a consistent profile emerged of the admittedly Orientophilic men who, deeply committed to Japan-worship, have ritualized a gustatory fashion to a more readily available All-American comestible.

Our leaked view into this lifestyle comes courtesy of a former leader of a group calling themselves “The Pork Riders.” He traces the beginning of this misadventure to a corporate party back in the ‘80s when a takeover of the American heartland by Japan, our former enemy and supposed ally, seemed imminent.

Just as the Japanese confront destiny with each bite of fugu—liver of the puffer fish—our good old boys do-si-do with trichinosis and worse as they work their way from one end of the state to the other, from one end of the hog to the other. It was a vain tactic, delving into the inimitable Asian mind for the secrets of business success. It would bring nothing but economic—and gastrointestinal--catastrophe.

We shall call this man “D.” A former communications director for a federal energy production agency, he now is elderly, long since on medical retirement. Interviews were conducted over a period of months in the solarium of his family’s palatial home and estate overlooking Lake Loudoun.

The condition of the wheelchair-bound man would worsen over the course of our series of interviews as The Pork Riders were wracked by tragedy and scandal. In D’s case, as with the others, the hookworms that infest victims of trichinosis had encysted in the muscular tissues of his chest, throat and jaws.

D’s spindly legs were covered by a shredded scrap of a blanket. As it developed, the quilt was the perfect diversion to warm D up—to the conversation with our team. Bragging happily on this irrelevant subject, D wheezed how his great-grandmother had made it "and it was all that kept great-grandpappy alive at Point Lockout, during the war, you know."

In the beginning, the existence of The Pork Riders was little more than society gossip. In fact, this paper’s notorious “Mealy Mouth” restaurant critic had dropped so many references to it over the years that The Pork Riders were considered to be nothing more than humbuggery to fill column inches. Until the group’s existence was confirmed by D, our sources believed it to be an elaborate prank. That was until we saw D’s CAT and PET scans and other medical proof of his diagnosis, as if his wracked physique weren’t enough.

Though his position would change as his condition worsened, D initially presented himself as a whistleblower with the goal of disbanding the group as a hazard to public health.

‘I don't drink, you know, except a little whisky. And I wished I’d stuck to that,” D began his cautionary tale. “Jack Black and sake don’t mix,” he added a bit more ominously.

“This whole thing commenced with a dinner party at the Warhead Plaza Inn for some visiting Japanese energy officials. Seems like we were celebrating our new contract with them for nuclear turbines. When the speeches and skits were over, we all kicked back with a few drinks and there was even a karaoke machine going. Something, I might add, that mystifies me more about the Japs than any other crap they like.

“The crux of the event was right at the beginning when the Nips wheeled out a surprise: a wagon wheel-sized platter of their own hors d'oeuvres on a cart pulled by two geisha girls. They rolled it right to the center of the banquet room and then struck poses like bikini girls at a boat show and tippy-toed away. It was a beautifully arranged display of raw fish, I must say. I was so drunk, I actually thought it looked good!”

D’s laughing at that point led to a coughing fit and the rest of the interview was scheduled for another time.

A week later, D did manage to describe in fits and starts how the Japanese officials, with as much gusto as ceremony, sampled several pieces of rolled up pink and white fish meat, some with layers of rice and seaweed, ponzu and other sauces, wasabi—“Liked to have killed me thinking it was guacamole!”—and assorted other pickles, ginger, and vegetable garnishes.

“Then, they looked at each other for a few seconds—very pokerfaced, you know—then just busted up laughing. You know, those big horse laughs Japs have when they finally loosen up. Then they invited us round-eyes to have at it. We formed a line and had at it. With our fingers! None of us could use chopsticks! Then their English speakers told us what was on the smaller platter elevated at the center. The hub of the wheel, as it were.

“They told us it was fugu—pufferfish liver, deadly poisonous if not prepared perfectly. That shit’s $200 for a few thin slices. But for enough tetrodotoxin to kill everybody in the room, maybe that amortizes out,” D laughed, coughing again, holding up one finger as if to assure us this would pass soon.

“Most of us were a little leery about the fugu,” he resumed. “Two or three guys ate a little. I put a little wedge of it on my tongue. It didn't really seem to have much flavor. But, after a second, I fancied my mouth was getting numb. So's not to dishonor our hosts—we didn't want anybody sepukuing all over the Congoleum—I backed up to the corner and palmed mine into a potted plant.

What took hold that night in the subconscious yearnings of the men from Tennessee was not a lust for fugu so much as a need to own their destiny. And the way to control destiny is simple—know who you are.

As D told our team: “When some of us came up with this pork thing, it was like we were exercising some kind of forgotten yearning. I don’t always have the vocabulary to analyze it. But the driving force was to keep America on top!”

So began the feelers, the rounds of calls, the coded follow-up messages and the brokering of alibis and smoke screens to evade friends, families, various federal agencies and any other interlopers or outsiders.

“Maybe if I was involved in skydiving or snake milking or grizzly hunting or drag racing, I wouldn't have been susceptible. Hell, I grew up on a farm. Now, I own this fabulous waterfront estate and I pay somebody else to run it. I have a sedentary career and a picture-perfect family...”

D made an all-encompassing gesture with his left arm, pale and atrophied but free from any IV tubes like the one dangling from his right forearm. With difficulty, he craned his head right and left to verify his privacy and added, in a voice that strove to be a zealot's diatribe but was hardly more than a whisper.

“Americans don't deserve America anymore. It is only by eating raw pork that I invoke the old spirit of this country. Only raw pork gives me communion with anything real.”

At this point, D struggled to hold onto his train of thought. Rambling, he veered into mystical mythology.

“Our ancestors lived through the Dark Ages of Celtic and English history and survived Appalachian poverty with enough genetic steam to leave us safely on the shores of the 20th century. Those ancient tribesmen—our countrymen—herded their pigs barefoot in the muck without understanding that parasites lurked in the not only in the mud but also the flesh of the animal. The Nips have known since the first guy keeled over that fugu would lay you out if you weren't careful. So, it became a ritualized challenge for them. If people find out what we're doing, they'll try to stop us. ‘Stop us from hurting ourselves,’ as the do-gooders would put it. They would no doubt consider it their humanitarian obligation to save us from our own ignorance. But what we want is to find honor in a denatured, antiseptic society. And we do that by confronting danger in a way that is uniquely connected with our heritage.

"Maybe it is a mistake. Maybe we voluntarily travel back to the past in search of mere thrills, reaching back only for what we want of an imaginary past, failing to regain the lost graces of that time and instead, carrying our selective moralities with us in an overnight bag. In the larger sense. I'm talking strategically, now, I believe what has happened is the victory of *bushido*—the Japanese warrior code—over chivalry.”

D shifted his weak legs under the tattered patches of the discolored quilt and tried to find a position in which he could fall asleep. A nurse shepherded our reporters out to the porte cochere where the newspaper’s van was parked.

As D would explain it during the course of our interviews, by the early ‘90s, on Fall weekends, in as nondescript fashion as possible, lawyers, bankers, developers, government officials, publishers, industrialists, scientists, entertainers and sports figures would assemble at Knoxville's airport for what would become an autumnal ritual.

The Pork Riders reveled in the paradox of being community leaders and quasi-outlaws. Sociologists say the group typifies the clumsy fumbling of bureaucrats trying to retrieve a long-lost warrior status through carnivory and male bonding. Politico-spiritually speaking, the group symbolized a desperate tribe seeking a remedy for their depleted clout.

A leased Beechcraft twin-engine made it a quick hop to secret hamfests they organized in such locales as Cosby, Ooltewah, Etowah, Oneida, Niota, Bryson City, Rocky Face, Dunlap, Dalton, Decherd and Ducktown. Travel time in the air and on land was passed with readings from *The Lord of The Flies* and other totemistic behavior we were unable to corroborate. Fellowship on board the airplane motivated the adoption of logo ideas for tiepins and cufflinks as well as the eventual drafting of a creed: *What’s time to a pig?*

The information-gathering resources commanded by this elite group established a network of pig farmers in the above mentioned “hamlets” as well as several other suspected raw pork-producing areas.

The initial poor communications between the simple, muddy-booted men from the hinterlands of the upland South and their wealthy city cousins quickly turned to delight. A hearty handshake, a fat envelope and the certainty of discretion among all parties guaranteed the availability of freshly slaughtered pork on short notice.

The farmers had been selected with the combination of loyalty, circumspection and compensation that were standard operating procedure in the moonshine days. After all, the transactions were technically illegal. No regard was given health ordinances or statutes regarding the operation of a business or the exchange of funds. Pig farmers who were especially appreciated for the affairs they hosted in their barns, outbuildings or tarpaper shacks often doubled their yearly income on one weekend. Civil engineers and financial advisors became learned connoisseurs of Duroc, Hampshire, Poland China and other breeds and their respective aptness for dining *cruda*. For the most finessed production of *lardo*.

Other typical benefits included capital improvements to their properties: walk-in coolers and dining pavilions incongruously appeared in a short period of time on little pine woods farms scattered throughout the Southeast. These elaborate facilities were sited deliberately in the remotest sections where few travel the dirt roads by accident.

The Pork Riders gained access to a variety of locations for illicit feasts year around. When cellphones came along, untraceable burner phones were provided to the most trusted farmers. Club members could be alerted to a spread of possible dates for the butchering of the choicest hogs. Innocuous ciphers used by the codetalkers might include “baloney,” “trotters,” “tartare,” and Cas Walker’s famous all pork sausage slogan: “From the Rooter to the Tooter.”

A bi-monthly called *The Stock Report* with its seemingly pointless rural columns, mild jokes and dull puzzles was laden with acronyms, abbreviations, initials and passwords pointing out precisely when and where to go. Wives, children and other potential opponents of the club would be unable to discern anything meaningful from these missives. There was no mast in the hard copy to identify the publication’s source. The Pork Riders were so glibly confident in their secrecy that they deliberately inserted porkbelly future reports downloaded from the NASDAQ as well as any joke or song lyric they could think of that was remotely porcine.

The men deplaned at rural air strips where they were met by chartered 4X4s. Soon they would be whisked down winding county roads onto steadily more tortuous gravel roads and then rutted dirt tracks and fire roads, their heads lolling out the windows of their sport utilities like eager hounds whose nostrils were sucking blood molecules out of the air.

A couple of hours later, they would take a rough seat in some barn or cabin to partake of the ultra-rare flesh of the hog. Pork sliced so thinly one could read a miniature Bible through the gossamer wafers of meat.

There was always moonshine, apple jack and homemade beers and wines although local well water—sterilized with shooters of the finest products of Tennessee and Kentucky—became the traditional beverage.

With the grinning farmer's family standing by as servers, the Riders stopped between dainty nibbling and bone-sucking for call-and-response of ritualized japery.

“I ain't had so much fun since the hogs ate my little brother,” someone always remarked. When the talk turned to women—or rather, turned against women—someone always joked: “what happened to my wife? Oh, she went out to take a shit and the hogs ate her.”

Another man never failed to joke: “Never teach a pig to sing. It's a waste of your time and it annoys the pig.” Always concluding with the group credo: “What's time to a pig?”

By the time The Pork Riders slipped back into Knoxville, they had spent several thousand dollars each for the privilege of eating a few ounces of tough, pale pink, tasteless meat. They claim the real payoff is in a dramatic decrease in “uptightness” and an increase in their sexual and philosophical capacities. This “rush,” they say, lasts nearly two weeks, roughly the amount of time between “rides.”

Interest in these activities never flagged. Far from it, it became an obsession. One that would last for decades as sons and nephews were awarded legacy memberships. Many Pork Riders were aware the hamfests were beginning to dominate their lives even between rides. Some interviewees confessed that part of the rush was from seeing their wives in a dither, convinced the men were involved in sexual assignations.

But, the portents of scandal didn't evolve from a domestic spat. It was The Pork Riders themselves who blithely segregated themselves from the community. People began to notice a certain group of individuals had become devoted to upholding the reputation of the pig as an intelligent animal of historic value. Members of this exclusive club began boring their families, friends and associates with pig stories. One after another. They alarmed people with talk of keeping pigs at their homes. They collected and traded videotapes of Green Acres reruns in which Arnold, the Ziffle's pet pig was featured prominently. Richard III’s boar sigil turned up on merchandise tables. They upset their own children by rooting for the wild boar in “Old Yeller.”

Individually and collectively, Pork Riders eschewed cured pork in all its beloved forms—country ham, breakfast sausage even that holy of holies: barbecue. So dogmatic did they become in adhering to the raw doctrine that their frequent rants against the nitrates and nitrites used in pork curing began raising eyebrows. Their cover was exposed a bit further when several high profile Pork Riders were mentioned together in this newspaper’s “Mealy Mouth” food critic/movers and shakers chit-chat column. According to the breezy item, several of the city's best and brightest were regaling the habitues of Annie’s, a high society watering hole, with claims of megawealth pending the marketing of a new board game they had invented called “Pigtionary.”

The fun wore thin under the relentless questions provoked by the gossip column. Too many people were on the verge of putting two and two together, what with the glib explanations for the trips, the expenses, the weird messages, the references to pigs and the apparent inability to eat formerly favorite foods. The flicker of public exposure chastened the group and they returned to their old discreet patterns.

Despite the renewed surreptitiousness, a collection of circumstantial evidence began accumulating around the inner circle. Prominent people around town were getting mysterious, disabling illnesses. In addition to D, the primary source for this report, this uppermost echelon of The Pork Riders included B., a retired senior official with Tennessee's largest institute of higher learning and several others at the top of their fields. A net of suspicion had been cast. A macabre tragedy would yank it tight.

D and other core members, whom we can describe at this point only in generalities—current and former Congressmen and state representatives, a Pigeon Forge entertainment maven, a criminal court judge and a beloved local news anchor—provided varying perspectives on an episode that could be considered B’s last ride.

It began with a seemingly innocent incident—the telling of a joke very late one night at the conclusion of the Timberlake Country Club Cotillion.

Presumably, all had heard it before. It was in fact such a hoary chestnut that it was subsumed into the group’s phraseology. But apparently B had never heard it. The others could remember little except B’s rapt attention as another Pork Rider told the joke to B. It’s the one about the travelling man stopping along the roadside to ask a farmer why one of his pigs has a couple of wooden stumps for legs. The farmer recounts the many occasions over the pig’s lifetime has proven his courage, loyalty and intelligence to the farmer's family. ‘A hog that good you don't just eat all at once,’ is the punchline.

D explained that he and his friends were “sort of aware” that, as the Cotillion broke up, B remained steadfastly haranguing the other man for more details about the joke.

Exasperated by B’s neurotic fixation, the jokester apparently decided that if B wouldn't believe the story was a joke, he would make it real. Off the top of his head, the man told B the farmer who had performed the vivisection was a man he knew who lived in the nearby mountain village of Walland.

On the spot now, the man (whom we’ll call Joker as a condition of talking to us due to remaining liability issues) explained to our reporters how he set in motion an elaborate practical joke. He got in touch with the Walland hogfarmer and contracted with him to have a multiple-amputated porker in the wallow by Saturday when B would come by. The Pork Rider expressed a $1,500 check to the farmer and creatively suggested that the right rear ham and left front shoulder should be removed.

“The hog still has to be able to walk,” Joker insisted, apparently believing this mitigated the abject cruelty.

Unbeknownst to the jokester, the farmer enthusiastically went about this bit of barnyard mayhem and then promptly took his wife and kids to Silver Dollar City to spend the windfall. He might have planned to be back home early Saturday to meet B but the family car broke down in Boogertown where they spent the next three days at the wife's brother's first wife’s trailer.

Information gleaned from the multitude of sources developed during this investigation suggests that B arrived in Walland on the edge of Smoky Mountains a little after daybreak.

This much is known: B got his local bearings from a souvenir stand operator on U.S. Highway 73. A short distance away, he found an unmarked turnoff leading through a hollow to the pig farm. The shopkeeper later told police and reporters the city man appeared to be ‘kindly off his feed a little.’

Joker was able to reach his Walland connection via cellphone which is how he learned B, his urbane yet hapless colleague, was wandering around at loose ends in a rough patch of Appalachia. A posse was called up and a group of worried men hurried up to the little mountain town in caravan of Range Rovers, Nissan Armadas, and Chevy Tahoes.

Some of those men, including D, provided the following colorful—if deeply disturbing—account, again with confidentiality.

B’s Suburban was in front of the farmer’s vacant home, a dilapidated weatherbeaten frame house pitched off-center on a foundation of stacked fieldstones. A rutted, two-track drive meandered past the frame house and the tilting outbuildings clustered in its immediate rear. Deep mud forced The Pork Riders to park and walk to the barn and wire runs barely visible a little farther up the holler. A low, rusty wire fence came into view as they approached the aged, oak planked barn. Clothes were folded neatly over the pen’s sagging top wire. The men recognized the incongruous pastels and plaids of B's golf duds, glowing with alien colors whose hideousness shone in the dark, humid green of the hollow.

B's naked, mutilated corpse was on the other side of the barn in a huge wallowed-out area. He and a medium-sized sow with two small cedar stobs for legs lay half-submerged in the muck, facing each other side by side in a pose not unlike a lovers' embrace. B's teeth were clenched around a bulge in the pig's bloated jowl. Man and pig alike had been eviscerated by the other tuskers. Assorted pigs stood around, grunting indifferently, looking as if the men's appearance had only momentarily distracted them from brunch.

Patrol cars already were on the way. The parishioners of The Freewheel Baptist Church, nearly all of whom were members of the area Neighborhood Watch had notified the sheriff's department about the procession of “fancy” cars headed down their little-used road.

In shock, The Pork Riders told the deputies everything, which was a lot more than the officers needed to know for their perfunctory reports. References to The Pork Riders, not to mention deliriously hindsighted speculations about B's madness, were among the facts distilled by the lawmen from the shaken Knoxvillians’ prattling. This security lapse, aggravated by the emotional distress of the moment, went onto the public record. In a matter of hours, electronic and print journalists were descending upon the front steps of many a Pork Rider's home.

The club remained on the front page until after the Grand Jury met and decided there didn't appear to be grounds for criminal proceedings. So far. Ironically, the publicity would ultimately attract more new members than it lost among the old guard due to general shame and threats of conjugal or commercial disaster.

During a final interview this fall, D again sat in a state-of-the-art motorized wheelchair in his sunroom. The sun was bright, the air chilly as the proper time for hog-killing came around again. A whole generation had lapsed since the fateful international business meeting in Oak Ridge. The economic takeover of the country we feared so much in the ‘80s had shifted farther east than Japan.

No longer able to speak, D answered questions by direct cerebral USB port built into his medically enhanced Rascal scooter. It would appear D intended his digital personality to sound like the rough old rustic cob he has always try to project. But, in truth, it sounded like Sam Elliott had joined Alvin and the Chipmunks.

His caretaker occasionally stepped into the solarium to check the drip rate of a plastic bag filled with pre-mixed whiskey sours dangling from an IV-type stainless steel stand next to D’s wheelchair. She emptied ampules of other medications into the bag. The tube dropped down to D’s upper lip where it was taped so he could sip with minimal effort.

D spoke, commencing the interview: ‘The worms have entered my brain. Just like in the Pink Floyd song. Or RFK Junior.’ D’s eyebrows arched to make enhance the humor.

When asked to comment on the Walland misadventure last spring, D reacted initially by appearing to doze off. Then the speaker began enunciating. The following took an hour to express. We have deleted the long gaps to preserve as much as possible of D’s eloquence:

‘B had already lost his mind, I believe, judging from the obsessive behavior the night of the Cotillion. If it hadn't been the pork, it would've been whiskey, cars, horses, airplanes. Women. Maybe he saw that *Faces of Death* video where the gooks eat some poor monkey's living brains. Aping the chinks, as it were. Again.

‘By the time he got to Walland, he was absorbed by the idea of eating the ultimate of rare flesh, that is, living flesh. He probably thought about the pig of the joke the way a normal man would fantasize about the Playmate of the Year, looking come-hither on a purple velvet waterbed. It didn't necessarily have to be that particular pig but somehow the joke set him off. Pushed his hot button, you know. Pulled his string. He wasn't going to let a little detail like the fact that maggots were crawling out of the bloody abscesses where the cedar stakes had been affixed by that sorry mercenary bastard farmer.

‘B wanted simply to return to the earth he had forsaken. As have we all. So, he took off his clothes and drew lightning bolt insignia across his cheekbones with the mud. He wanted communion. He ate the sacrament. Sometime during that Saturday, maybe during the night, he and the mutilated hog lost consciousness—shock, blood loss, whatever—and the other hogs took their turn. That's the way I see it happening. I mean, think about the poor boy. As a UT administrator, B's world was artificial from the get-go. So, he gets up one morning after the retirement party and he doesn't even have that Big Lie to comfort him anymore. He has lost his place on the infernal merry-go-'round. He sure as hell doesn't want to get back on it but he's been on it for so long he can't even recognize people from his new vantage point. He's forgotten where he came from but he wants to get back. He just wanted to feel the primal one last time.’

The electronic speech ended with a vow that he would be back with The Pork Riders as soon as the experimental systemic poisoning process eliminated all the nematodes from his body.

D’s body shuddered with a spasm that the young reporter conducting this last interview couldn’t differentiate between pain and ecstasy. He suddenly sat up, leering at her, barking at her in what he could muster from his actual vocal cords: ‘Ya know, whiskey don’t tetch this stuff!’

Dubious as his oath seems coming from a body so shriveled, limbs drawn up in flexed positions, D emailed later with confidence that he will return to his rightful place among The Pork Riders. And that the estimable members of that society will reclaim their birthright—the city’s leadership. With so many longtime, high stakes players among the fraternity, such a vow must be taken seriously. Indeed, The Riders and their lawyers at present have sandbagged the district attorney general well enough to insulate them from any negligence in connection to B’s death.

Reports that the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals and the Humane Society of East Tennessee were petitioning the district attorney general’s office for a swine abuse case would’ve made D laugh.

If he could.

*Next in our series, we examine the “Smoky Mountain sushi” phenomenon. For more, click our subscription offer today!*

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