Between the Bottomlands and the World

An Abbreviated Glossary of Experiences in and Around Beardstown, IL

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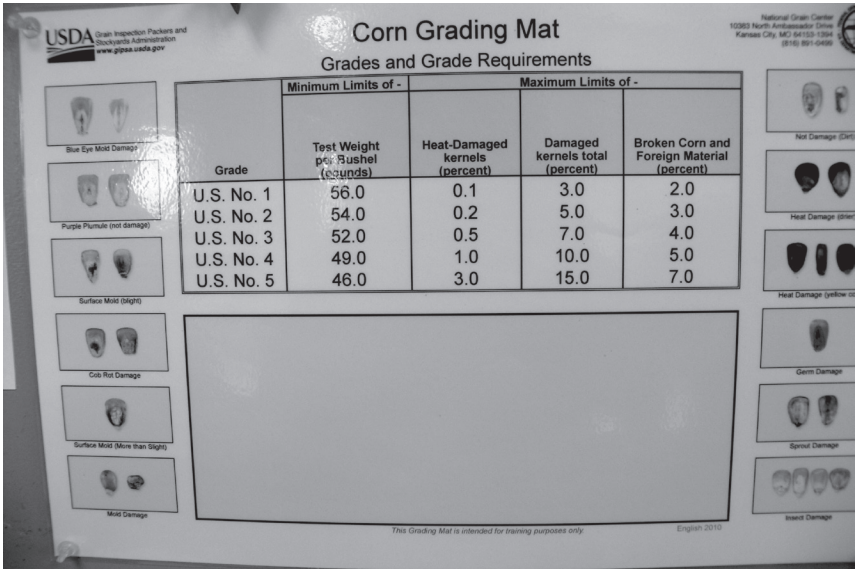
INTRODUCTION

Beardstown, IL is a relatively small town with a current population of around 6,000 that is located on the Illinois River, south of Peoria. It was founded in the early 19th century by Thomas Beard on land known as Indian Mound Village, a name suggestive of the indigenous inhabitants that have been all but eradicated from any visible history. The river has played a huge role in how this land has been shaped, facilitating the movement of earth, wildlife, people, and ideas. Today, the river's importance to the town is still visible, if muted, but there are other vectors of change that have superseded it. What follows is a set of stories about some of the contemporary conditions of Beardstown in the form of a glossary. These terms came to define many of our experiences there and provide one entry into the complex set of relationships that bind the town to the midwestern region and to the larger world.

VERTICAL INTEGRATION

Driving around Central Illinois, it's hard not to be overcome by a strong sense of horizontality. A lateral force pulls us toward our destination, pressed through the space that exists between the ground and the sky. Scenes of the pastoral are very present here; this area is seasonally quilted with corn and soybean fields, and dotted by farmhouses, grain elevators, and the occasional solitary church. "The land" appears as a soft, flat surface upon which things grow and move, a life-sized slide show of real and fictitious pasts. But, of course, vertical realities intersect with this horizontal perception of



Grading chart for corn quality at the Johnson grain shuttle—a large facility that moves grain by rail to TX feed lots.

existence. There are other images, not yet painted into a Grant Wood-esque rendition of the Midwest. These realities present a different set of consequences and expectations. They can be found in the workings and history of the largest employer in Beardstown, Cargill Meat Solutions.

Cargill Meat Solutions, known locally by the name Excel, is one division of Cargill Incorporated, a company that journalist and writer Brewster Kneen has called an "invisible giant." Cargill started as a single grain storage "flat house" in Iowa in 1865, but within 20 years the company handled over 1.6 million bushels, quickly moving into a prominent position in the growing global business of the grain trade. From its early days, Cargill's owners were involved in various aspects of national and international commerce—railroads, communications, lumber, salt, and shipbuilding. Before the middle of the 20th century, the company was operating in South America and Europe and in 1957 began using an IBM 6560 computer to manage its global production and pricing mechanisms. While Cargill can be viewed as an extension of international commerce in the colonial age—think of the East India Company or the Hudson's Bay Company—it must also be understood as operating in a very different geopolitical and economic world from earlier colonial trading companies. What distinguishes enterprises like Cargill from modern corporations is its size, status as a non-publicly traded company, and its involvement in the production of vastly different (but deeply connected) products. Just a small sample of Cargill's affiliated businesses illustrate the company's many tentacles: Always Tender® (meats), Sunny Fresh Foods®

(eggs), Diamond Crystal® Salt, Gerkens® Cacao, ClearLane® Deicer, North Star Steel, CarVal Investors. The process of consolidation and management of every aspect of a business practiced by Cargill is known as "vertical integration" in the language of economists. Cargill, in fact, no longer considers itself a grain company, or any kind of material production company, for that matter. It's now in the business of "customer solutions."

To better grasp the form and scale of these activities, we have attempted to learn from the spaces where such activities are present on the ground. We tried to visit a Cargill elevator in Gilman, IL. Sarah entered a small building next to the city-block sized grain storage facility there and was immediately struck by the number of control boards and screens displaying data. The single IBM computer of 1957 has evolved into a massive, globally connected system of real-time inputs, outputs, and comparative analyses. Brewster Kneen explains the way that Cargill sees the world:

To source, transport and deliver bulk commodities globally requires a rather special view of the world, a view one can really only adequately get from outer space, from a satellite.

Cargill's perspective, according to Kneen, is one that enables the company to look down on the globe and see cropland, transportation networks, markets, and barriers to their success in exploiting those things. In some recent promotional literature, Cargill resolves two competing views of the world:

From a single seed in a farmer's field to a dinner table halfway across the globe, Cargill brings ideas together to help satisfy the world's needs.

The material singularity of a single seed is within the company's sight, but is only meaningful when accumulated into the bulk commodities that can satisfy the needs of a world composed of waiting dinner tables. Cargill doesn't simply inhabit the horizontal surface with us; it shapes that surface to its benefit, from a vantage point positioned above everything that has been vertically integrated beneath it.

BULK COMMODITY

Three GPS-equipped John Deere 9660 STS combine harvesters were in the field collecting tiny kernels of corn like blue whales harvesting plankton in the Pacific Ocean. Only the whale would have had to engineer the sea to contain dense, homogenized rows of plankton to be as efficient as the farmer-combine. That, and the whale wouldn't actually eat the plankton, but would ship it off to other whales far away to process into derivatives and "value-added" products. Or maybe feed it to other animals that they would later eat, transferring the calories into other forms of consumable flesh.

One of many piles of corn, stored on the ground at the fall harvest when elevators and warehouses are full. This corn pile, owned by Cargill, is located near Beardstown on the westside of the Illinois River.

A single grain of corn is around a centimeter in size. But no one measures the size of corn in kernels. It's measured by the bushel, pound, ton, acre, hectare, mile, kilometer, dollar, yen, yuan, peso, and euro. If you're a specialist, it's measured by the twenty-foot-equivalent-unit. This field, planted and harvested by Dudley Farms, Inc. is about 7,000 acres of hybrid corn. It's taken away in 1,000-bushel units, carried by 18 wheelers from the field to an elevator in nearby Pleasant Plains,IL. From the logically named "dump pit" the corn is then moved in smaller units, riding in tiny, but rapidly moving, buckets up and into drying and storing compartments.

A Discovery Channel documentary on corn has called the U.S. corn harvests the "Superbowl" of farming in recognition of the scale and magnitude of the effort. It's also an apt analogy given the fierce competition and branding involved.

We met the Dudleys (two brothers, Matt and Steve) one day while they were harvesting. They explained a little bit about the role of land and real estate in commodity farming. They also provided some anecdotes about their interactions in the global trade for corn and beans. We discussed things like "identity preservation" and the need to keep different kinds of corn separate, as Europe and Japan don't import genetically modified corn from the U.S.

Their farm, they told us, is small by current commodity crop standards. Land in this part of the country, Central Illinois, can go for more than $8,000/acre. This land is leased, not owned, a fairly common practice for even large farmers. Steve Dudley explained that buying and renting farmland is an

extremely competitive part of the business, as local farmers compete with each other to buy up scarce land as it becomes available. And they're not just competing with each other. Speculative investors, buyers who plan to eventually sell or lease the land for profit, represented 21 percent of land purchases in 2008,according to the IL Society of Professional Farm Managers and Rural Appraisers.

As we document these conversations and their harvesting operations, the Dudleys explain their familiarity with being photographed and questioned. "The Japanese businessmen who visit to check out the crops take lots of pictures," Steve tells us. It didn't seem that he was just repeating the stereotype of camera-wielding Japanese tourists. Japan imported almost 13 million metric tons of corn in 2009. 40 million metric tons of U.S. corn was delivered to the ports of other nations that year, adding up to a financial weight of over 9 billion USD. Where does this corn enter the network that ends in the EU, Mexico or Japan? Steve points west on Illinois State Road 125, towards Beardstown.

In Google Earth, a barely perceptible flick of the wrist can get one from a combine in the Dudleys' cornfield to one of two river terminals in Beardstown. On the road, they are a mere 15 miles apart. Corporate giant Cargill and a regional grain cooperative, Clarkson Grain, owns the terminals. Just north, in Frederick, is another large terminal facility owned by Archer Daniels Midland. Sitting on the wall built to protect Beardstown from an overflowing river, one can watch farm equipment, corn, wheat, soybeans, coal, scrap metal, and empty containers move to and from their domestic and international destinations at the pace of a few miles per hour.

TILING

Everyday at 1 p.m. our local radio station hosts an hour-long show called "The Ag Report." A portion of the show is dedicated to the stock and futures numbers of beans, corn, pork bellies, ethanol, and grain commodities. Another ten minutes is dedicated to worldwide weather forecasts. If you aren't familiar with the global trade of commodity crops, listening to the show is like learning a new language; you might recognize a few of the words, but not the overall context. For a little more than 100 years, the corn belt landscape has been tinkered with in small, yet precise measures to produce the commodities on the Ag Report.

For example, the land has been engineered to dry faster after rain and snow. In 1850, the year the federal Swamp Land Act passed, the Midwest was soggy. Regions around lakes and rivers had large floodplains and deep marshes. The Swamp Land Act was designed to boost development west and south of the New England states by helping states and counties drain the land for agricultural production. Once the land was drained, the price and yield per acre increased.

Though drainage materials have changed over the last 100 years, drainage techniques have not. In the first half of the 20th century, drainage was created by laying tiles—short sections of terra-cotta pipe, fit end to end, un-sealed. Placed in rows throughout a field and just a few feet under the soil's surface, water would seep into the pipes, draining in to ditches and nearby streams. In order to coordinate contiguous drainage, taxing bodies called "Drainage Districts" were formed. They were able to leverage the capital for such massive projects and ensure county-wide drainage. Over 50 million acres of U.S. cropland is currently drained, but now the pipes are old and need to be replaced. To the tune of $570 per acre, farmers often hire agricultural Tiling Services to lay plastic perforated pipes for drainage. Drainage contractors will assess the topography and soil type, combined with the type of crop grown, to figure the depth the pipes will be buried. To verify the results of such tiling, farmers employ "yield mapping" using GPS technologies to report the yield and quality produced on each acre of land. Newer GPS units print real-time maps in the cab of the farmer's combine as he/she harvests.

Engineered tiling, GMO seed, chemically enriched soil, state of the art equipment, and satellite powered mapping all reassure U.S. and global markets. While this version of high-tech farming ruptures mid-20th century pastoral images, there is still one sublime element in the scene: the weather. The Ag Report often reminds listeners of that one thing the farmer can't control. For now, the century-old practice of tiling suffices.

FRICTION

For the better part of the last century, Rushville and Beardstown, IL were Sundown Towns—places that, often violently, excluded African Americans and non-whites. As previously all-white communities, neither town developed the historically prescribed and segregated "black," "brown" or otherwise ethnically defined neighborhoods common to most racially diverse American cities. Urban zoning protocols that supported the segregation of cities were never put in place there. In a drive around Beardstown, activist and urban planner, Faranak Miraftab, pointed out the results: ethnically and economically mixed neighborhoods with apartments, trailers and single-family dwellings situated side-by-side. Africans, Carribeans, Cubans, Puerto Ricans, long-time white residents, and Mexicans are neighbors. To our untrained eyes, the town just looked varied—to Faranak, they signaled something more remarkable. (See Miraftab's contribution on this subject on pages 202–215.)

The story of how this formerly all-white town became the home of residents from around the globe has many chapters, including industry restructuring, international trade agreements, the U.S. Farm Bill, the U.S. State

Drainage ditch
in Central Illinois.

Soccer field in
Beardstown, Illinois.

Department's Diversity Visa Lottery program, the travails of migration, and the struggles of newcomers to make a place home. Anthropologist Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing describes such realities through the metaphor of friction:

It is these vicissitudes I am calling friction. Friction makes global connection powerful and effective. Meanwhile, without even trying, friction gets in the way of the smooth operation of global power. Difference can disrupt, causing everyday malfunctions as well as unexpected cataclysms. Friction refuses the lie that global power operates as a well-oiled machine . . .

Perhaps, from the perspective of Cargill, Beardstown and Rushville residents are the grease, lubricating production for large revenues in their "meat solutions" division. But from the perspective of everyday life in the two towns, friction represents the complicated negotiations regarding language, culture, and ideas of identity. Indeed, the forces of friction have unequivocally divested these towns of their status as "white only," and may well change the way a multinational corporation like Cargill operates. In lieu of paying full taxes on its business, Cargill donates to cultural events and spaces like the annual Africa Day and Mexican Independence Day celebrations, as well as a large soccer field utilized primarily by Latina/o and African immigrants. This support is certainly part of a community relations and employee management strategy. It is important, however, not to assume that Cargill controls what happens in such spaces. Indeed, the unfolding of these rural, transnational spaces constitutes new articulations of community and new forms of struggle. As Tsing notes, a "teleology" of anthropology or meat packing alone can't explain the changes seen in these Midwest towns.

COLD CHAIN

East of town, maybe a mile or so from the Illinois River, sits United Food and Commercial Workers Local 431, the union office for Cargill's workforce of approximately 2,000 people. We wanted to ask union representative, Duke Walters, about the work done at the plant. When we called him to set up the meeting, he suggested that we might also want to talk to some representatives from Cargill. Upon arrival, we found two company reps waiting with Walters. They were wearing short-sleeved, cotton polo shirts sporting Cargill's logo tucked into khaki slacks. They immediately started in with questions for us:

So, why do you want to talk to us?
How does this have anything to do with art?

We explained that we were trying to create images of Beardstown that reflected its complex relationship with the larger world, and that this was

Sign for truck wash specializing in "bio-secure washes" outside of the Cargill slaughterhouse.

difficult because of the prevailing depictions of rural places as isolated and inherently not cosmopolitan. After seeming to succeed in convincing them of our purpose, we proceeded with our questions, but it became immediately apparent that Walters would be a mostly silent participant in the exchange. This was a job for the public relations department.

In between well-rehearsed statements on the company's ethical treatment of the 18,000 hogs it slaughters daily and its progressive stewardship of the Illinois River (into which the company dumps 3 million pounds of toxic waste annually), the reps did manage to give us something resembling answers to our basic questions. Where do the 5.6 million 8 oz servings of pork go once they leave the plant every day? While not being able to speak to many of the details involved in the movement of their goods, they could say this: the small plant in rural Illinois ships to Mexico, Russia, China, Japan and that it collaborates directly with outlets like Applebee's® and Wendy's® to produce specially-tailored products like the Baconator® hamburger. We also learned that cuts of pork are actually taken from Beardstown to Tokyo fresh. "Fresh" as in "not frozen," but vacuum sealed before being sent by refrigerated trucks to ports on the West Coast, maybe Portland or Long Beach, where they are sent by ship to ports in Japan. Less than 30 days after a hog is killed, pork from that hog is put on a shelf in a store in Tokyo. In the world of logistics, this reality is called the "cold chain."

The cold chain is one of the places where the distances between the site of production and the site of consumption are visible.

In 2002, over $1,200 billion of food was moved by 400,000 refrigerated containers (known in the industry as "reefers"). Why not move the sites of production closer to that of consumption? Surely, even for a company like Cargill, the costs of transport are vast. In other words, why does the cold chain exist? Here in the Midwest, our ground grows grain (corn and soy), and lots of it. While the transport of grain makes up another chain of economic flows, a large part of regionally grown grain stays in the area. Considering the costs of labor and transportation, it is actually cheaper, for large and small producers alike, to raise animals in the Midwest because this is where the grain is. Last year, an exported metric ton of meat earned more than 15x the same volume of exported corn and soy combined. Meat can be viewed as grain in another, equally mobile, yet more valuable form. Thus, Cargill reps cued us in to the "warm chain" (our term, not theirs), where hogs from nearby feeding lots in 5 different states are raised until they reach 6 months or 270 lbs. before being brought to Beardstown. Upon arrival, they are gassed and cut into pieces, the parts traveling through the plant's conveyor belts and onto reefers where they enter the cold chain.[1]

HEAD DROPPING

Every year our neighborhood has a barbecue. We buy a pig from a local farmer; one household gets the pig the night before and with 50 lbs of ice, keeps the carcass chilled on the kitchen floor until roasting begins the next morning. At this year's roast, I met a woman, Angie, who had friends who worked in the meatpacking industry. Her friend, Jon, worked on the slaughterhouse floor of Oscar Meyer, and later, Cargill in Beardstown. A few months after our neighborhood shindig, we contacted Jon and asked him about life as a meat packer.

In 1968 the job at Oscar Meyer was a good one. After serving in the military, at the age of 21, Jon got a job on the slaughtering floor at $2.25 an hour. Oscar Meyer was a family owned business, with AFL-CIO Local 431, Amalgamated Meat Cutters working as unionized labor. In the 1980s, Jon explained, new technologies forever changed the industry: selectively bred hogs ensured standardized sizes and new, automated tools cut, sliced and diced the animal at an ever faster pace. The push to get more "pieces out" created more jobs. People were added to the line, but the speed and repetition of any one job created more injuries. The union negotiated a "piece-pound" standard, in which time studies calculated the amount of work that could be done in a given time. If the worker could produce more pieces/pounds per hour than the standard, he could earn more in wages. Piece-pound was a cross between hourly wages and piecework wages, and yielded a decent middle class living for the all-white, mostly male workforce. Jon describes one of the most lucrative, and dangerous positions on the line as 'head dropping,' which is exactly what it sounds like.

Pictures in the Beardstown Historical Museum of 1965 groundbreaking of Oscar Mayer in Beardstown, IL.

The 1980 and 90s were turbulent times for unions, and the Amalgamated Meat Cutters were no exception. Oscar Meyer sold off many parts of the business. General Foods bought out the slaughterhouse, with Oscar Meyer just owning the end product. In an era of high interest rates, Jon says that ownership of the slaughterhouse changed hands several times, with corporate giants like Philip Morris buying companies like his to invest workers' pensions. After many union concessions, and slaughterhouse closures around the Midwest, the Oscar Meyer/General Foods slaughterhouse was closed in 1986. Everyone was fired and 6 months later rehired under a new company paradigm operated by Cargill Meat Solutions. Today, Cargill slaughters 18,000 pigs a day, 6 days a week, in Beardstown IL. In 2002, Jon, becoming an 'older' worker, was asked to train younger workers to do his job. He saw the writing on the wall and moved to Missouri Foods Company where he also works in the meat business. He says the production is much smaller, but he is happy with the work.

CONCLUSIONS

It is all too easy to see the demographic and economic changes occurring in Beardstown, and much of the Midwest, as a fundamental shift or break from the past, as many sociologists, journalists, and economists have noted. But when has that past ever been stable? In the 19th century, the river brought white settlers, intensive agriculture, and industry. As settled land became municipal territory, settlers-turned-citizens defended their racial and economic

boundaries through sundown town practices and labor union organizing. By the beginning of the 21st century, the forces of capital have largely dismantled both of these boundaries in the quest for ever-increasing profits. The area's old and new residents are left to forge relationships in whatever spaces are available, and hope the big employer doesn't leave them behind.

Districts created in the 1900s helped raise taxes for cropland drainage. More recently new areas, called "Enterprise Zones," have been defined to alleviate the tax 'burden' of corporations. The "Enterprise Zone" in which Cargill is located is a state defined territory that grants it special economic privileges. Such zones use the power of the state to exempt corporations from the responsibilities of citizenship while giving them all the benefits. Cargill helped create a precarious world for Beardstown and its residents, and then used that precariousness to demand even more power from the State to further shape the world.

The industrial nature of the cornfields we drive through on our way to Beardstown is hidden in plain sight, unrecognizable through our lenses of nostalgia and false memories. The values determining the future of places like Beardstown are also obscured by seemingly unquestionable realities—the need for jobs, economic competition, and consumer demand. It's impossible to see these realities as reflecting the interests of most of the town's people, whether old-timers or newly arrived. Looking through the dense walls of corn, and over the wall that hides the river, we try to imagine what other Beardstowns are possible. In fact, we can see some of them taking shape in cross-cultural relationships formed *in spite of*, rather than thanks to, the contributions of Cargill.