

## Pork Queen

DES MOINES, Iowa (AP) - The throne is under siege. Is the pork queen's reign in danger? In Iowa, of all places, where hogs outnumber people?

Iowa has crowned a pork queen since 1960, but some in the pork industry are starting to wonder if the title's time has passed.

Fewer young women are entering the competition, critics note. Last year, there were only 11 contestants. There's no more national queen contest because Ohio is the only other place with a state pork queen.

Another common criticism is that the contest excludes young men. Maybe the Iowa Pork Producers Association, which sponsors the queen, should pick a "pork ambassador" who could be male or female. Nebraska, Missouri and Illinois all have gone that route, said Jen Holtkamp, spokeswoman for the 4,000-member Iowa association.

Soo Greiman can't see it. Greiman was the 1973 Iowa pork queen and the 1974 national queen. Her daughter, Cassidy, is the current Iowa queen.

"My guess is a young man is not going to want to serve as a witness for the pork industry riding on the back of a car in a parade, wearing a sash and waving," Soo Greiman said.

A traditionalist view, to be sure. But pork queen supporters say the position is all about tradition \_ a bright, personable young woman who understands the ins and outs of raising hogs and can speak knowledgeably about one of the state's major industries.

Iowa markets 25 million hogs annually, one-fourth of the nation's total. At any one time there are 16 million hogs in the state, about five for every person.

"We're the major state in the country," said Tim Bierman, who raises hogs near Larrabee in northwest Iowa. "There's no reason why we shouldn't be doing it."

The issue of keeping the pork queen came up during this year's Iowa Pork Congress in January. After some discussion, delegates put off a vote and instead asked that a recommendation be prepared for next year's meeting.

Bierman said he knows how a vote would have turned out.

"I would say 90-plus percent were for the program," he said. "I don't think there's any question what the delegates wanted."

The matter still isn't settled, however.

The committee that runs the queen program is being combined with a committee that oversees the association's youth ambassador program, which encourages junior high and high school students to get involved in the industry.

Those two committees, to be led by Bierman when they merge in October, are expected to discuss where they want to take the queen program at a meeting on Wednesday.

"For the time being, I think that committee is planning on maintaining the queen concept as long as young women are willing to participate and make it a viable contest," said Steve Kerns, president of the Iowa Pork Producers Association.

Supporters were encouraged that the competition drew 17 participants this year. Still, that's nowhere close to what it used to be.

When Soo Greiman was chosen pork queen, there were so many county queens entering that the association had to hold regional competition to narrow the field before it reached the state level.

But times have changed. There are fewer family farms and families are smaller now. There also are more activities for girls in rural areas, including athletics, drama, music and speech.

"When I was young, we farm kids had 4-H and FFA," Soo Greiman said. "Our summer used to revolve around what our church was doing and what 4-H was doing. When we went on vacation, we spent it at the Iowa State Fair."

And there's something else at work, too.

"It's not as cool to be involved in agriculture as it was even 10 years ago," said Cassidy Greiman, who's an exception to that thinking. Farming has always been cool for her. So has the prospect of becoming the pork queen.

"Really, it's been a dream of mine since I was 7 years old," said Greiman, 19, who will be a sophomore in agriculture this fall at Iowa State University. "Watching the Iowa pork queens and going to the Pork Congress and watching the girls at the ceremony, I always wished I could do the same thing."

So far, it has been everything she had hoped. Greiman, whose family farms south of Waterloo, said she makes regular appearances at county fairs and grocery stores. She handed out pork burgers at the recent World Pork Expo in Des Moines.

She feels the contacts she has made in agriculture have made the position more valuable than an internship.

"The pork queen is a tradition," she said. "At the Pork Expo, somebody said, 'I wouldn't have been able to find you without the crown and sash.' People look for that. They want to meet the pork queen."

Even so, the position often is the butt of jokes. A recent column in the Iowa State student newspaper lamented that stories about the pork queen foster an image of Iowa as nothing but corn, pigs and overall-clad farmers.

Greiman shrugs all that off.

"I'm very proud of where I come from," she said. "I don't think we should deny the fact we are the No. 1 corn, soybean and hog raising state in the U.S. I think we should be proud of that \_ because we're feeding the nation."

The more interest in the position, the greater the likelihood it will survive, said Kerns, who farms near Clearfield in southern Iowa.

"As long as that committee can put on a reasonable and good contest, I think they'll keep the thing viable for a few more years," Kerns said.

That would please Greiman. The outgoing queen always crowns the new queen. Greiman hopes she'll be able to do that in January.

"It has gotten a lot of publicity and I think people have come to the realization that, wow, this is a bigger deal than we think," she said. "People care about the pork queen. It's a tradition. It's Iowa."