Paul Brown started pasture farrowing in 1991. Before that he had worked for his father-in-law who pasture farrowed 500 gilts, and Brown also had worked for a SOO-sow confinement operation. From these experiences, he decided what he wanted to do.

Three reasons to pasture farrow:
1. It's profitable. He said he never lost money until 1998.
2. It's enjoyable. He likes working outside in June when most of farrowing occurs.
3. The family can work together. "Farming is in the middle between a business and a way of life."

The big advantage to pasture farrowing versus other systems is flexibility. Disadvantages include predator losses and losses to extremes in weather.

Ways that he believes pasture farrowing is similar to other producers system:
• You can use artificial insemination, and
• He uses terminal boars and purchases gilts.

Brown has been using a Heston stack processor to build piles of bedding that he puts farrowing huts on top of. This practice has helped during wet conditions.

Gary Johnson focused on management of a pasture farrowing system. He follows a pasture farrowing calendar (he provided a printed copy). Nothing has changed except for some minor adjustments. However, if he doesn't follow it closely, he can have a disaster.

Johnson uses a batch system, farrowing the same group twice a year. This system would fit well with hoop finishing. He now uses early weaning so the calendar as printed should show an additional 21 days before breeding for fall farrowing. Early weaning fits very well with pasture farrowing.

He is considering a custom breeding program that would use artificial insemination. All females would be synchronized and then a custom breeding service would do the AI.

Johnson tries to keep his system all-in/all-out with grow-to-finish pigs by using empty barns and sheds in the area. The only disadvantage for pasture farrowing is the high labor needed during a short period of time. He figures one person is needed for every 100 gilts when they farrow.

For Dave Odland, pasture farrowing is the conventional system. He farrows two sets
of gilts each year. Although the number varies, typically he has 150 in first group and 100 to 150 in the second group that farrows in late July and August.

For a May 25 farrowing date, he starts breeding sows around Groundhog Day. By the end of May he is usually done planting and typically children are out of school, so it is a family-friendly system.

Odland said he doesn’t get hung up on numbers but tries to expose enough sows so that 150 to 200 head are bred. He tries to take advantage of their gain between December and July because the sale of sows is a big part of his income. Sow sales help spread out income and he can take advantage of the situation tax-wise.

He usually markets 1,000-2,000 hogs each year. His system is flexible depending on market

Pasture farrowing is a low-input system. They try to use what they have for building huts, such as lumber from old barns. They also try to build huts that are easy to construct.

Oats are planted in late winter and spring so that it can be used for bedding after harvest. Beans are planted on the oat ground.

Odland said he believes that high grain prices more detrimental to his income than a low hog market. In the 1980s, his hog operation had an average annual income of $60,000 after taxes, compared to $30,000 in the 1990s.

QUESTIONs:
How much preweaning mortality do you have and how have you tried to prevent it?

Johnson: It is high. He has used a bale processor to make a pile of bedding for the farrowing huts to sit on top of. The sows don’t seem to paw in the bedding as much after it has been through the processor because it is shredded more. Sometimes Johnson said he will make piles in October and November so that the bedding will settle by spring farrowing. Gilts will not use the shed if it is too full of bedding, but that does not seem to bother sows.

Odland: He has what would be considered extremely high preweaning mortality, close to 20 percent. If he farrows 9, then he’ll wean 7 to 7.5 pigs. If he farrows 10, then he’ll wean 8 to 8.5 pigs. He has tried early weaning but most of his losses occurred in first two to three days. The difference is in the genetics of the sows and their mothering ability. He has found that a 6 x 8 ft. house works best. “You have to have the mentality that if you have a big rain and you lose six or eight litters in one night, that is part of this low-cost system.”

Brown: He has about 8 to 12 percent mortality. Using processed cornstalks helps cut mortality, and so does using a 6 x 8 ft. hut. If the A-frame is bigger, sows or gilts tend to double-up inside. He has tried some of the English-style huts, which are excellent in the spring because they can be closed for greater protection from the weather. However, they are more expensive than other huts.

Is pasture farrowing increasing or decreasing in your area?

Odland: Two or three people in his county have quit pasture farrowing. Economics in general and market access is a problem.

Johnson: Due to the inconsistent supply of market hogs, market access has been a big concern.
Can you market gilts that have farrowed at a market hog price?
Odland: We, breed them again because they will gain better and then sell. Usually go by the calendar: wean them by July 5 and sell by August 5.

What kind of pasture do you use and how does it fit into your rotation?
Odland: He has 15 acres that are rotated: oats, then pasture for three years (for a total of four years out of crop production), and then soybeans the first two years that it’s back in production. It might be nine years before it goes back into pasture. He has three separate areas/pens in the pasture that are used during the three weeks of farrowing. He allows one week farrowing in one pen, then moves pigs that have not farrowed to another pen for a for the second week.

How do you move them?
Odland: The ones that haven’t farrowed are ready to go.

Do you clip needle teeth?
Odland: He doesn’t clip teeth but he does give iron shots.

Why give iron shots?
Johnson: With bedding in the huts, pigs don’t have contact with soil.
Brown: He uses a hog cart to process pigs.

Is there a difference between sows and gilts in baby pig survival?
Johnson: Sows are better. Sows wean 20 percent more pigs.
Brown: There’s a difference of 1.5 pigs between the two—sows are better.
Odland: Sows are accustomed to a routine. If there is something different, sows will get excited.

Does using the same cart to process all pigs spread disease?
Brown: We’ve thought about that but we haven’t seen a problem. He uses litterguard for sows.

Do you ring sows?
Odland: Yes or your pasture will be plowed. He uses two humane rings on top of the nose. There is a technique to doing it, however. The ring needs to lay right on the nose with not much of ring above the nose.

Why is there so much pasture farrowing in Henry County, Illinois?
Johnson: The region has rolling terrain and topography. It’s also custom and tradition, people are comfortable doing it. Climate has a lot to do with it, too.

Why would anyone pasture farrow in Wright County where drainage is poor and typography is flat?
Odland: The 80 acres they use is well tiled. They do have another farm that would be better suited because it is better drained, but it is farther away from base and finishing floors.

Are market hogs fatter than average (when pasture farrowed)?
Odland: I’m sure they are. We’ve had trouble using lean genetics in breeding facilities during years that are cold.
Johnson: If pigs would grow slower they would be leaner. Fast growth and leanness are contradictory.

What kinds of rations are fed between farrowing and market?
Brown: We feed seven different rations. Just because pigs are raised like they were in the 1950s doesn’t mean they have to be fed like they were during the 1950s. He has increased the number of rations due to
weaning at three to four weeks instead of six or seven weeks.

Johnson: With good milking sows, you can wean earlier and most of rations are fed before pigs are in the 80 lb. range. He feeds about the same number of rations as Brown.

How/where do you finish pigs?
Brown: We don't finish pigs on pasture, they will tear it up. We move pigs inside at 150 lb. He uses a shed that once was a bunker silo with a roof over it.
Odland: He finishes on concrete and has room for 2,000 head.
Johnson: He finishes in hoops that he constructed with a canvas cover on top of a pit silo.

What is your feeding system?
Odland: During breeding and gestation, animals are fed on concrete. The second group of gilts are fed on pasture after they have rings in. They are fed on dirt, but he has wood platforms to use when it's muddy.

How do you deal with heat in summer?
Johnson: He uses 1,000 gallons of water to fill up mudholes. He is concerned about keeping sows cool, not as much about pig survival. He does this early in the morning before sows get hot.
Odland: He finishes on concrete and has room for 2,000 head.
Johnson: He does the same thing when it gets very hot. He also has used plastic pipe with sprinklers, which seems to help him avoid creating mudholes.

OTHER COMMENTS:
Someone in the audience said he used Jenny donkeys for predator control, also electric wire and llamas. Only one guard animal is needed for each pen.

Another audience member said he has used concrete pools to avoid heat stress and alleviate mudhole problems.