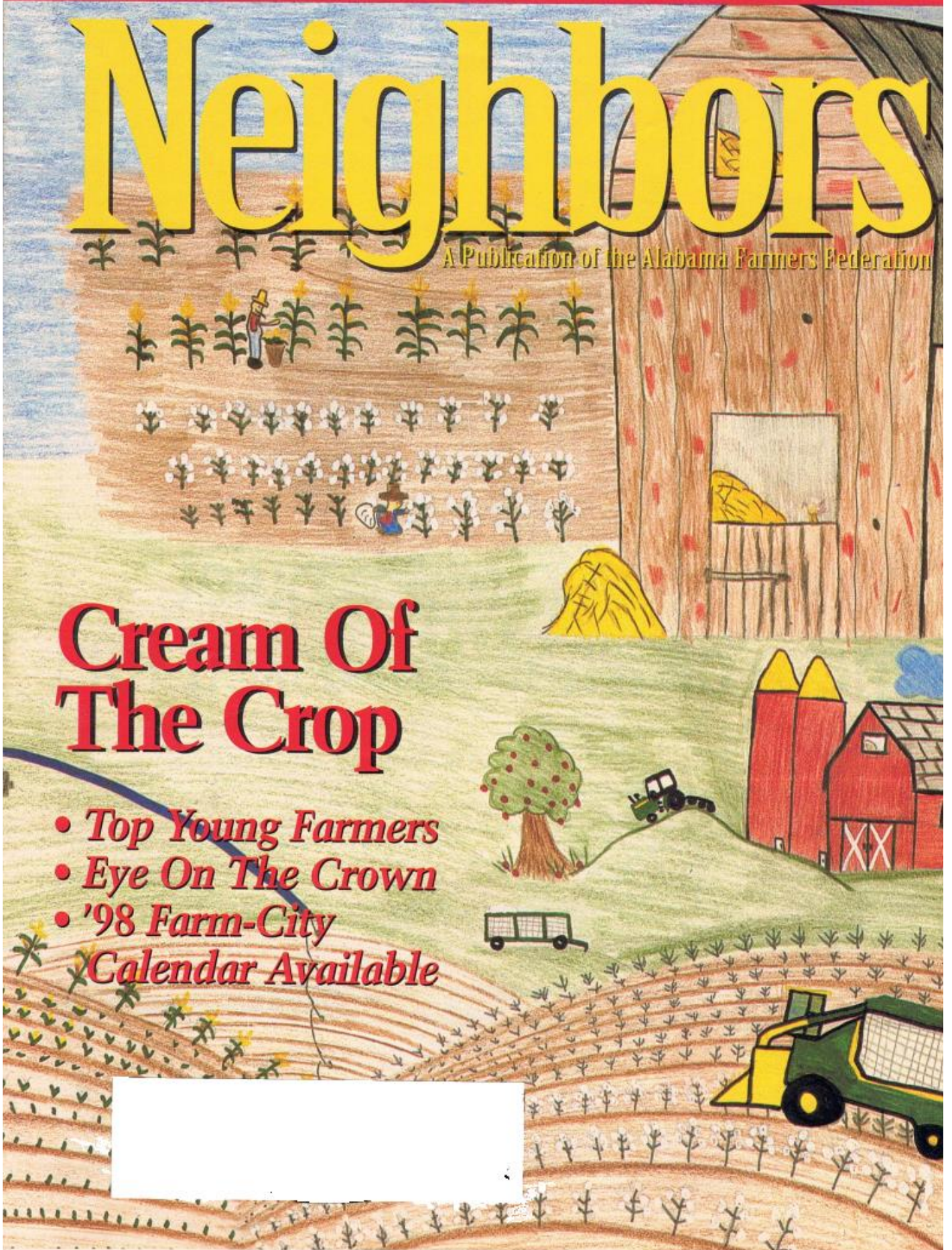


Neighbors

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Cream Of The Crop

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Up until Lee Davis bought four pigs back in 1989, the only experience he had with pork was eating a bacon, egg and cheese biscuit from Hardee's.

"I could tear 'em up, too," says Lee, referring to his favorite breakfast food.

The Mobile native says before he and his wife, Starla, got married in 1988, he worked in the construction business for about three years. It's then, he says, that he developed a passion for bacon, egg and cheese biscuits.

"I was on the road every morning," he recalls. "So, I'd drop by Hardee's on my way to work and order a few biscuits."

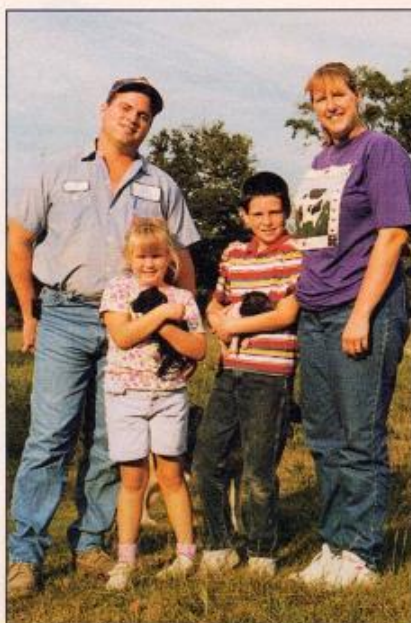
Today, at age 29, Lee still loves those bacon, egg and cheese biscuits. And, these days, he's kind of partial to ham and sausage biscuits as well. In fact, if it's made from the 'other white meat,' then it's a sure bet it's a favorite of his.

"I love the taste of fresh pork," he says. "I wish everybody would start the day with a breakfast menu that includes a little bacon, ham or sausage."

If he sounds like a walking commercial for pork, then that's OK by him.

The owner of one of Mobile County's largest hog operations, Lee has a passion for fresh pork and he wants more and more U.S. consumers to "get hooked" on the product, too.

His advertising must be paying off because Americans seem to be getting the message. This year, the average American will consume about 50 pounds of pork. All total, in the U.S., nearly 20 billion pounds of pork is consumed each year. From sizzlin' bacon and tasty sausage biscuits to finger-lickin' ribs and thick juicy chops, hogs provide the widest, most varied range of food products available from any animal. In fact, pork is the most widely eaten meat in the world.



Mobile County young farmers Lee and Starla Davis, along with their son, Randy, 9, and daughter, Lorrie, 6.

"We sure do eat our fair share," says Lee, who along with Starla and her parents own and operate Gaston & Davis Hog Farm near their home in the Tanner-Williams community, located about 15 miles west of Mobile.

Unlike her husband, Starla, 29, earned an appreciation for pork at an early age. Her father, Albert Gaston, who has farmed nearly all his life, raised hogs for a number of years while Starla was growing up. In 1979, though, Hurricane Frederic ravaged the Gulf Coast area and destroyed all of the family's hog barns.

"I loved the pigs," says Starla.

In fact, it was Starla who convinced Lee and her parents to give hog farming another try back in 1989.

"Lee wanted to get into livestock production," she recalls. "So, we bought four feeder pigs at an auction and came home and spent the rest of the day trying to build a pen that would hold them."

That was eight years ago and the Davises have never looked back.

Today, Lee and Starla are partners with Starla's parents in a 2,000-head farrow-to-finish hog operation that produces more than 1,600 mar-

ket hogs a year. The operation consists mainly of crossbred hogs, but the family does keep a few purebred hogs around for breeding stock. Lee says he plans to expand the 125-sow herd to 500 in a few years.

Gaston & Davis Hog Farm sells all of its feeder pigs to Bryan Foods in West Point, Miss. The farming operation owns two semi-trucks and averages shipping a load about every two weeks to the Mississippi packing plant.

In an effort to keep costs down and efficiency up, the Davises are focused solely on producing a quality, high-yielding hog that performs well at the market and pays for itself.

"Packing plants are paying premium prices for lean hogs, so it's important for us to pay careful attention to the genetics of our herd in an effort to produce a lean animal," Lee says.

The family's quality management approach is paying off. Lee and Starla and their two children—Randy, 9, and Lorrie, 6—are the 1997 Outstanding Young Farm Family in the Pork Division.

Recognizing there is always room for improvement in any hog operation, Lee says he is confident in the quality of hogs being produced on his farm.

"We're as good as anybody," he says. "Sure, there are a few breeding producers that can perform better than us when it comes to yield, but as far as a fairly large operation, I believe we're doing about as good as anybody can do."

While a lot of hog farmers around the Southeast are either downsizing their operations or getting out of the business altogether, Lee predicts his operation will continue to grow.

"As long as labor is not a problem, I believe our hog operation will continue to get bigger," he says. "This is not a hobby for us and we're not in this business for the short-term."

In addition to their hog operation, Lee and Starla have 100 brood cows on their 200-acre farm and are partners in a feed mill. ■