

PIG OUT

"Patsy," a voice calls out across the back yard. "Come here Patsy. Come on. Good girl."

Patsy comes running across the yard wagging her tail and looking for affection, but Patsy is not a dog. Patsy is a pregnant Chinese pot-bellied pig at The Best Little Pig Ranch in Texas.

Todd and Debbie McGee, both Texas A&M students, have started a new business raising and breeding miniature pigs to sell as house pets.

Debbie, a graduate student in the MBA program, said the public's perception of pigs as big, messy animals needs to change.

"Everybody still thinks of pigs as huge animals wallowing in the mud," she said. "Pigs can actually be great pets, since they are so unique. They're friendlier than cats and most dogs, especially after they get to know you."

Todd, a junior environmental design major, agreed that the pigs make good pets.

"The best house pets are barrows, which are neutered male pigs," he said. "The reason they're neutered is it takes away their scent glands, and makes them more docile."

The miniature pigs weigh about 70 pounds when full grown, Todd said. Todd said his brother, Curtis McGee, Class of '83, sparked their interest in pot-bellied pigs.

"My brother got us into this," Todd said. "He was working overseas and his realtor in Houston imported them. We went over and saw the pigs after they had a litter and thought they were pretty neat. To see the little babies is just unbelievable. They're very cute, just like little puppy dogs."

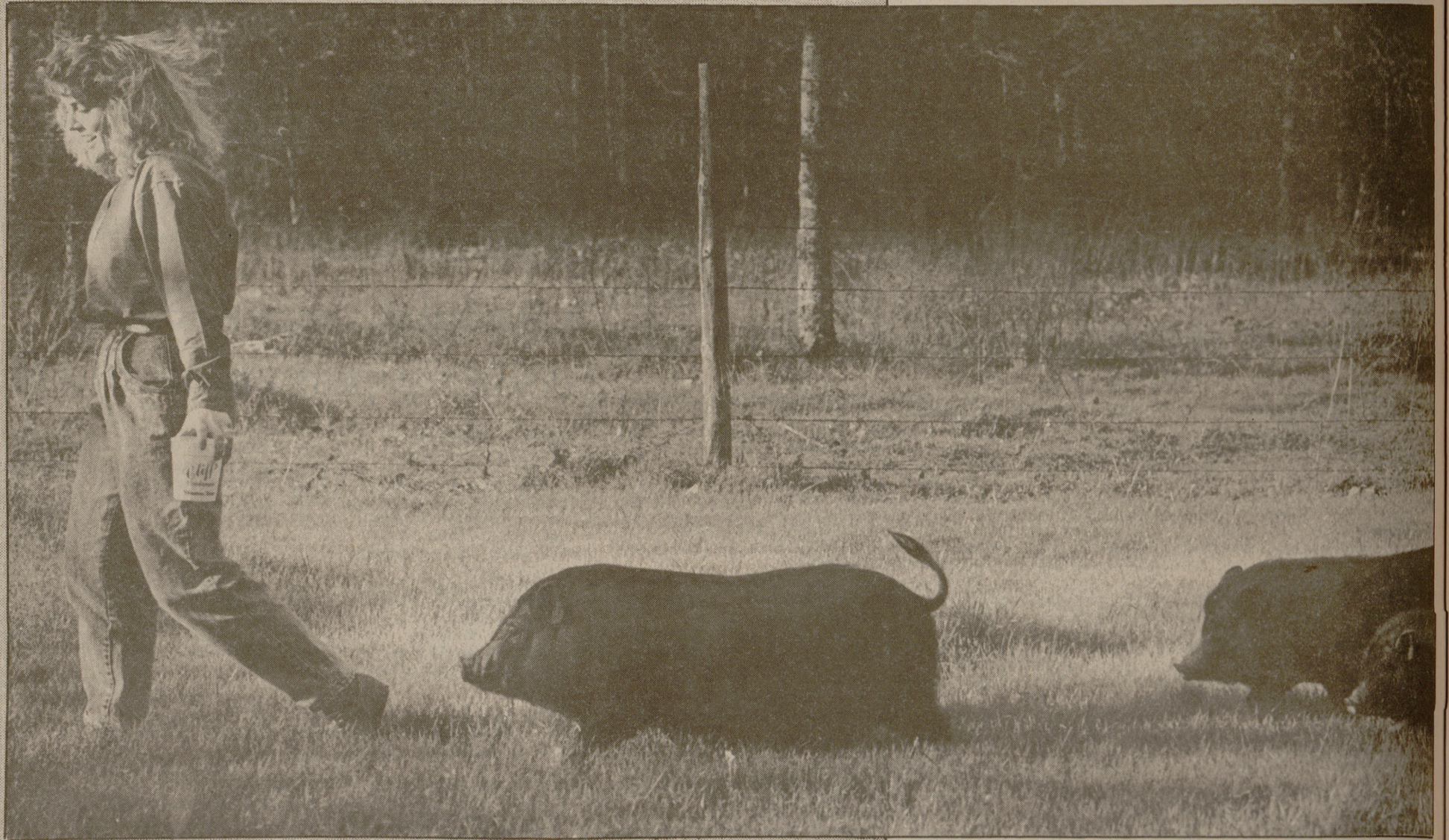
The pigs, originally bred in China, have swayed backs and round "pot bellies" that almost drag the ground, Todd said. Wrinkled faces and dog-like tails are other characteristics of pot-bellied pigs, he said.

"When they get excited, that tail gets to wagging 90 miles an hour," Todd said.

The McGees are expecting their first litter of pot-bellied pigs to be born around March 22. Six weeks after the pigs are born they will be available to buyers, so if you've got the money, honey, they've got the swine.

"We'll wean them after four weeks," Todd said. "Then they're ready to be adopted after about six weeks."

However, you've got to be living pretty high on the hog to afford one of these pets. According to Todd, the miniature pigs cost between \$1,500 and \$6,000, depending on their markings, characteristics and personality.



Debbie McGee takes the pigs for a walk.

Pot-bellied pigs have been bred as pets for many years in other parts of the world, but are relatively new in the United States, Debbie said.

"The miniature pig has been domesticated for centuries," she said. "For a long time they were kept as pets by Chinese emperors. They've been popular in Europe since the seventies, but they're still pretty new to the U.S."

"Pigs are smart, curious animals and they're easy to train," Todd said. "It's easy to teach them to sit, it's easy to potty train them and it's fairly easy to leash train them. It's an absolutely stunning sight when you see one of these little pigs on a leash walking down the street."

"They're good about minding. As long as food is involved, they'll do anything. The way you train them is

One of the problems the McGees have encountered is city ordinances that prevent pigs from being raised within city limits. College Station has such an ordinance now, Todd said. However, these ordinances are being thrown out in many cities, he said.

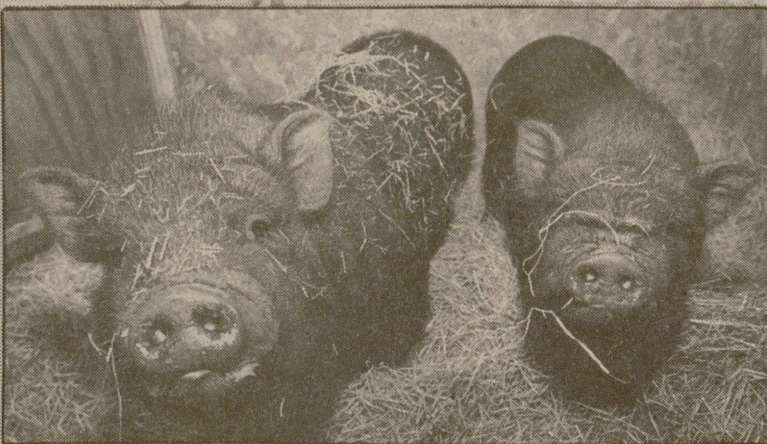
"In most of the cases that have come up, city ordinances and deed restrictions that prevent pigs from being in an area have been overturned," he said. "The reason is that these pigs are pets and are actually even cleaner than cats. As breeders, we have a very important role to educate the public."

The public's view of pigs in general must change before all of the restrictions on miniature pigs will be lifted, Debbie said.

"The biggest problem is the pig image right now," she said. "They're smaller than many dogs allowed in the city limits and they're cleaner. The biggest challenge right now is trying to get them accepted as pets, even in the city limits."

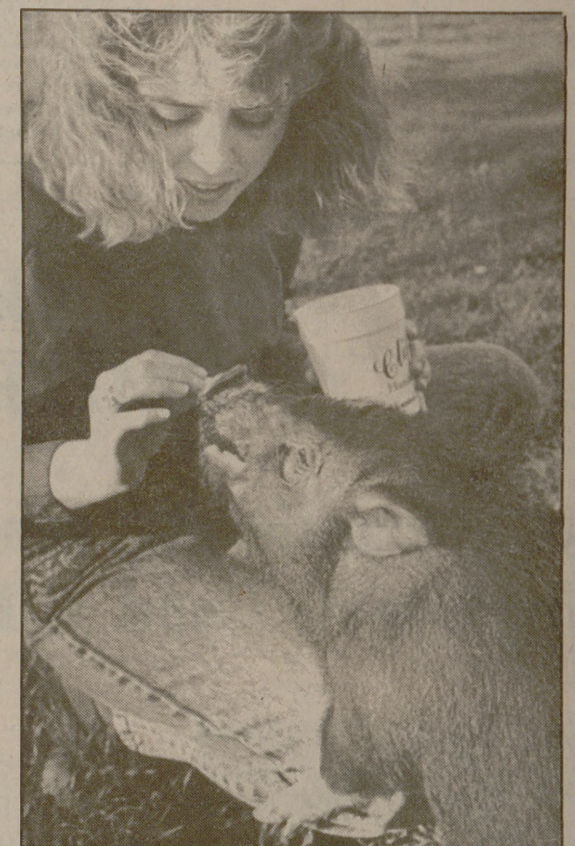
Potential pot-bellied pig purchasers should give the matter thorough consideration before "adopting" one, Debbie said.

"When you buy a pig, it's like buying a dog or any other pet that will be around for a long time," she said. "Since these pigs live for 10 to 20 years, it's not something you do spur of the moment."



Naming the pigs is one of the McGees' favorite aspects of raising them, Debbie said. Names they have chosen include Patsy Swine (named after singer Patsy Cline), Frankenswine, Valenswine and Casanova. The McGees also enjoy training the pigs to perform tricks.

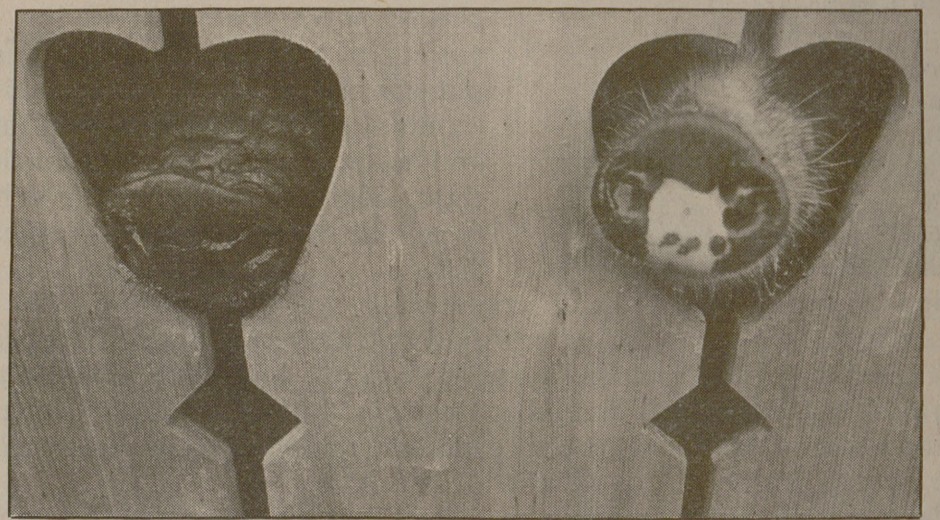
by coaxing them with food." The pigs eat commercial pig food in the mornings and evenings, and eat cheese and Honeycomb cereal as treats for successfully performing tricks, Todd said. They also enjoy eating acorns and grass in the backyard, he said.



Honeycombs cereal is the pigs' favorite snack.



Annie Swine gives David McGee a pig kiss — she nuzzles him with her snout.



The pigs put their best snouts forward when they want the barn door opened.

Story by
Bill Hethcock
Photos by
Phelan M. Ebenhack