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Stories from Summer Vacation: Jeannette Vaught and Food-Industry-Animal Research in the Archive

by American Studies

Our next report comes from Ph.D. candidate **Jeannette Vaught**, who describes a recent research trip to Ames, Iowa, to research Iowa State University’s Special Collection for materials on food and animals.



According to the archivists, I may be the only humanities researcher ever interested in this apparent crisis.

Early this summer I took my last major research trip to the Iowa State University Special Collections in Ames, which houses massive collections of veterinary and agricultural materials spanning decades of scientific research, industry marketing, and political lobbying. Since my dissertation accounts for animals used both for sport and food, the ISUSC provided the bulk of my food-industry-animal research. Most of these collections have gone largely untapped, judging by the amount of dust rising from many a box of documents. At one point, the archivists had a difficult time locating a box from the Beef Improvement Federation collection, and were extra perplexed by its absence since, well, no researcher had ever requested it before! I capped off my 10 days in the archives by swinging down to Des Moines for the amazingly weird World Pork Expo, the major annual industry trade show. While I write about cattle, not hogs, the Expo nevertheless showcased every detail that goes into industrial meat: booths represented reproductive technologies ranging from individual insemination techniques to patented genes; feeding technologies from fortified corn products to methods of delivering the food to the animal; management technologies from gestation pens (excuse me, now they are called “individual maternity areas”) to slaughter restraints – the list goes on and on. There was also the option of eating some fresh meat scraped from the proverbial whole (roasted) hog, cracklins included. Talking to industry people and hearing their takes on their role in American food production was as useful as the bounty of primary historical records I took home from the archives.



I took a break from library time to visit Iowa State’s lovely Reiman Gardens, home to the Largest Concrete Gnome in the World.

The remainder of the summer will be spent turning that research into chapters. I have a handful more interviews to conduct with sport and industry veterinarians at Texas A&M, but once those are completed, it’s pretty much all writing from here on out. In other animal news, I’ll still be hanging out with my horse, Dallas, and teaching riding twice a week, and am adopting a greyhound to share my apartment with come July.

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