

HOME *On The* RANGE

IN NORTHERN MISSISSIPPI, AN AUDACIOUS REGENERATIVE FARM OFFERS A NEW MODEL FOR THE REGIONAL FOOD ECONOMY.

BY SONO MOTOYAMA

DESPITE BEING SEVERAL MINUTES LATE, MARSHALL BARTLETT LOPES unhurriedly toward the wood-frame farm store, his lanky frame topped by wavy blond hair controlled under a baseball cap. The group of seven women — seniors from nearby Sardis with a few of their friends — watch him approach from the shaded porch.

His open and unpretentious manner quickly dissipates any impatience the women may have been feeling. In an employee's absence, he explains, he has been filling in at his meat processing plant. When one of the women points to a stain on his knee, he says, "That's not my blood, but it is blood. It's not human, though." The ladies laugh.



They are here in Como, Mississippi, on a pleasant spring day to hear about life on the land that Bartlett and four previous generations of his family have worked for 150 years. And they will get more than they bargained for, with deep dives into industrial and regenerative agriculture, antibiotic-resistant bacteria, the nitrogen-trapping benefits of clover and water irrigation systems — along with the occasional folksy reference to characters like “my eccentric cousin Sherman. Y’all know Sherman?”

The group eats it up.

The farm, which today comprises about 1,800 acres, was always known as “the Home Place,” so Bartlett took the nickname as the official name of his business, Home Place Pastures. It was founded by Bartlett’s great-great-grandfather, Dr. Archibald Yarbrough, who later became a state senator. Yarbrough built the original farmhouse in 1875 after returning from the Civil War. The house burned down about 100 years later. Bartlett’s father, Mike, built the house where Marshall and his two older sibling grew up, across the road from the farm store.

“As a kid who loved to hunt and fish, I had the most idyllic childhood in the world,” Bartlett tells the Sardis group. “I loved this place

and still do. But the style of farming that Dad was engaged in was getting increasingly difficult.”

Bartlett had watched his father become more and more frustrated with the problems inherent in row-crop farming, an agricultural system by which crops such as cotton, corn, wheat or soy are planted in row upon row for efficiency. The choice of crops is made according to what can be sold on commodity markets.

The year begins with a trip to the bank to borrow money to finance labor and buy seeds and chemicals (fertilizer, herbicides) from agricultural giants like Bayer and Corteva. During growing season, farmers may contend with insect swarms and the whims of the weather. After the harvest, they must accept whatever price commodity markets assign to their yield, with no consideration for what they might have paid for inputs, or what droughts or infestations they might have endured.

“Dad’s model was very much similar to the previous generations,” he says. “It was all commodity agriculture — mostly cotton and corn.”

Glaringly absent from this process is any sort of self-determination. “You’re basically just doing all the work and making other people money,” Bartlett says.





Marshall Bartlett pictured in the barn at Home Place Pastures, the regenerative farm he's cultivated in Como, Mississippi. The farm store at Home Place offers cuts of meat as well as freshly prepared items like these chuck tacos, burgers, and more.

And as writers like Michael Pollan and documentaries like *Food, Inc.* and *Fast Food Nation* have shown over the past several decades, none of this is good for human, animal, or environmental health.

Bartlett held a variety of jobs after graduating from Dartmouth College in 2011, but returned to his father's farm in 2014 with a bold plan — to convert the family farm from row crops to raising grass-fed beef and pastured hogs.

But even more important to the transformation was Marshall Bartlett's big bet: seizing control of the entire supply chain.



“A VERY ASSERTIVE KID”

ALATE SUMMER VISIT TO BARTLETT'S childhood home reveals a brick house in a stand of oak trees. Meg and Mike Bartlett welcome a visitor into the cool, welcoming interior. In a sitting room adjacent to the kitchen, they recall their son Marshall's childhood as one filled with outdoor activities and helping out on the farm.

“He always loved farming,” Meg Bartlett says. “He and his friend set up a hoop house to grow vegetables, and then they raised chickens.”

Even early on, he had a mind of his own.

“Marshall was a very assertive kid — more than the other two, I think,” his father says.

“And no matter what kind of adult figure was there, he was always willing to question,” Meg Bartlett says.

“Very true statement,” Mike confirms.

Of all his children, he says, “it's surprising that an Ivy Leaguer comes back and farms.”

Before returning to farming, though, Bartlett made a brief pass at politics, running in a special election for state representative in 2013. He came in third of four candidates in that race.

Outside of politics, however, his passion did manage to persuade others to his point of view.

John Jordan Proctor, today vice president of Home Place Pastures, grew up on a farm in Glen Allan, Mississippi, and watched his father, as Bartlett watched his, take out yearly loans only to end up in a “crippled financial state,” he says.

Proctor wanted to return to farming but viewed the chemical-dependent monoculture methods of row-crop farming as problematic.

“It just did not appeal to me, applying tons of pesticides, applying tons of herbicide, just the monotony of one plant, just corn,” he says.

One of his professors at the University of Mississippi suggested he meet Bartlett.

“We joke about it now, but when I met Marshall, I



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For the holidays, Bartlett says that show pieces like the **STANDING RIB ROAST** and **WHOLE BEEF TENDERLOINS** are popular. He personally recommends **SPIRAL-CUT HOLIDAY HAM**, which is prepared so slices are easy to pull off.

"It's great to have in the fridge to graze on if you're having family and friends over at the holidays," he says. All can be ordered on the website.

Home Place can customize corporate gifts to fit any budget, which it will ship to order; email INFO@HOMEPASTURES.COM for more information. It also composes "curated" boxes. **THE HOME PLACE GIFT PACK**, for example, includes pork chops, sausage, steak, bacon, smoked sausage and ground beef for \$129; a gift card can be included.

For the incorrigible carnivore on your gift list, Home Place offers **SUBSCRIPTION BOXES** at different price points and frequencies, from every month to every three months. You can also compose your own **À LA CARTE** order of any Home Place products. Most economical is its **ANIMAL SHARE PROGRAM**, which allows you to buy portions or an entire animal (pickup only). The deadline for Christmas orders is December 15.

Products and recipes are available on the Home Place Pastures website, HOMEPASTURES.COM. Check the site and the Instagram page (@HOMEPASTURES) for special events with chefs, or to book a farm tour or farm stay.

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was just like, No, I'm not working for this guy," Proctor remembers. He viewed Bartlett as an Ivy League elite who did not have realistic ideas about farming. Yet his professor convinced Proctor to meet with Bartlett a second time and tour Home Place.

"When I pulled up, he was fixing a water line," Proctor says. "He was doing something practical, and I was like, Oh, maybe he does know something."



Home Place foregoes antibiotics, hormones, and feedlots for the animals.

That afternoon, Bartlett made his pitch about what he wanted to accomplish with Home Place Pastures.

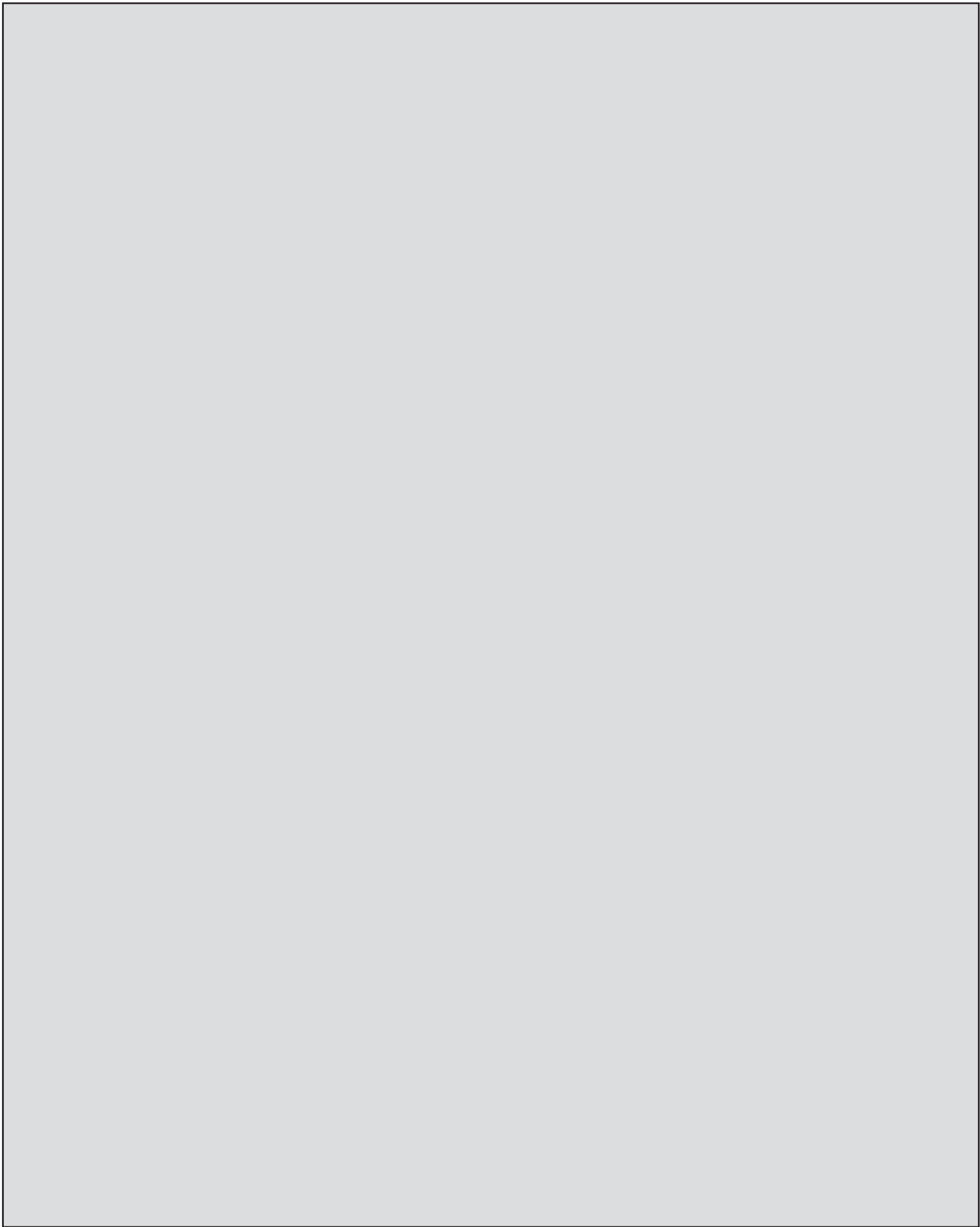
"Then I got really excited to work with him for the summer, just to see what he was up to," says Proctor (who also serves as the head pitmaster of the Sweet Cheeks barbecue team that annually participates in Memphis barbecue competitions). He began as the farm's first summer intern in 2014. Bartlett hired him after his graduation the following year, and he's been there ever since.

"FEEDING THE MICROBES IN THE SOIL"

LOOKING BACK WRYLY AT HIS younger self, Bartlett recalls the period, after his short-lived foray into politics, when he was establishing Home Place Pastures.

"At the tender age of 24, I thought I had it all figured out," he says. Though he was not elected as a politician, he felt he could achieve the same goal of helping the community by creating a thriving agricultural practice.

After graduating from college, he had worked as chief of operations for a New Orleans meat supplier. He recognized an avid market among chefs for local products. And he had been inspired by regenerative farmers like Joel Salatin of Polyface Farm in Swoope, Virginia (featured in *Food, Inc.*),





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and, particularly, Will Harris of White Oak Pastures in Bluffton, Georgia, whom he now regards as a mentor.

Harris is a leading light in the regenerative agriculture movement, a holistic approach to farming that seeks to improve or restore soil degraded by the intensive industrial methods that dominate the American food economy. He sees the health of the community as linked to the health of the soil. After spending 20 years as an industrial rancher, Harris reversed his methods. He began to forego antibiotics, hormones, and feedlots for his animals, and eschewed pesticides and herbicides for his



Cuts of meat are available individually or as part of a farm-share program.

land. He began to grow a diversity of mutually beneficial species. Instead of shipping his cattle hundreds of miles to a slaughterhouse, he invested millions in building meat-processing facilities on his own property.

"Today we don't feed animals, we feed the microbes in the soil," he says in a short documentary about his practices. "The microbes feed the soil, and the soil feeds the plants, and the plants feed the animals."

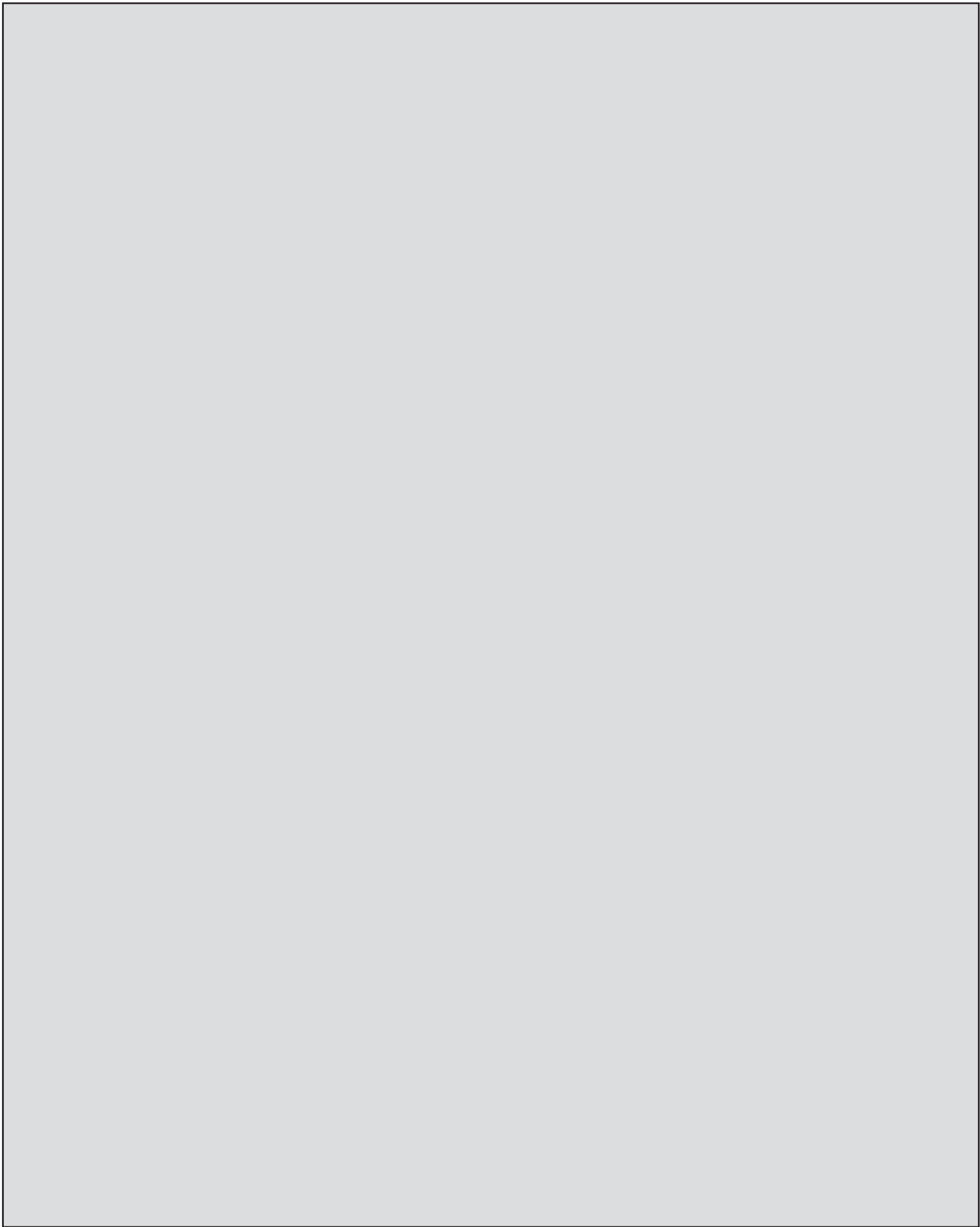
Bartlett visited White Oak Pastures in 2017. In a recent phone conversation, Harris recalled the first time Bartlett came there, when they toured the farm, discussed livestock production and land management, but also "the recovery of our little rural town of Bluffton, Georgia," an impoverished area that was gutted as people found it impossible to make a living in farming. He has kept in touch with Bartlett regularly over the years.

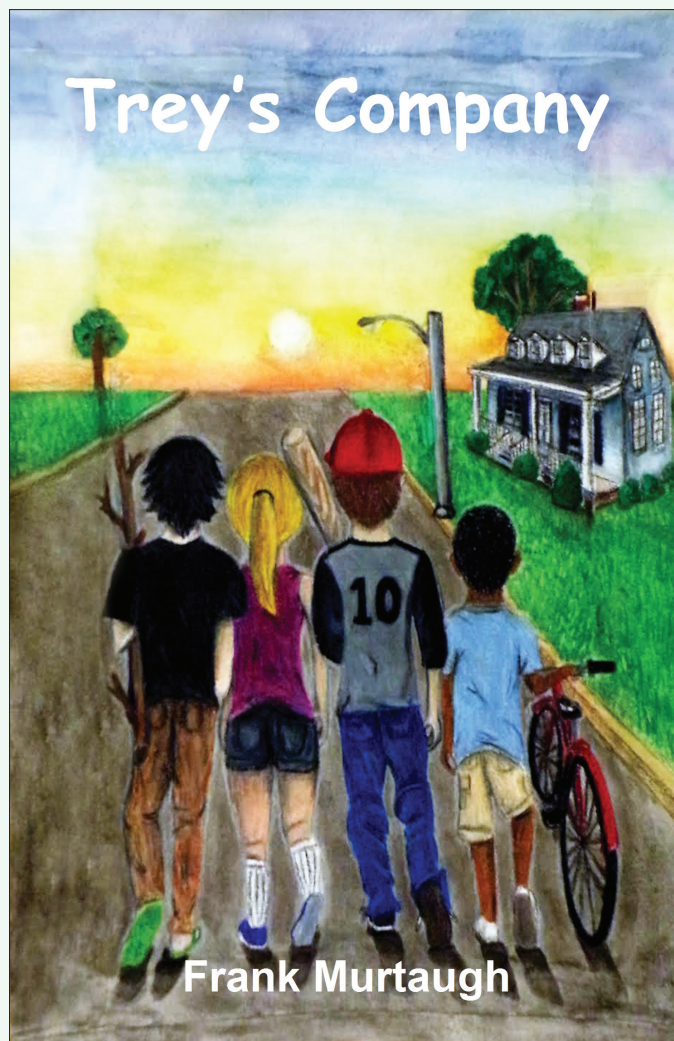
Harris' first impression of Bartlett was of a bright young man, with "a lot of energy, who apparently thought very deeply about things."

Bartlett is currently on a path that Harris himself traveled, Harris says.

When he visited White Oak, Bartlett knew Harris' story, but actually exploring the farm was "kind of the holy grail," Bartlett says.

"For the regenerative ag, vertically inte-





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grated movement, White Oak represents a success story for a lot of us," Bartlett says, referring to farms that simultaneously produce, process and market agricultural products. "They were able to take this generational farm and totally transition it into something else in a very big, bold way."

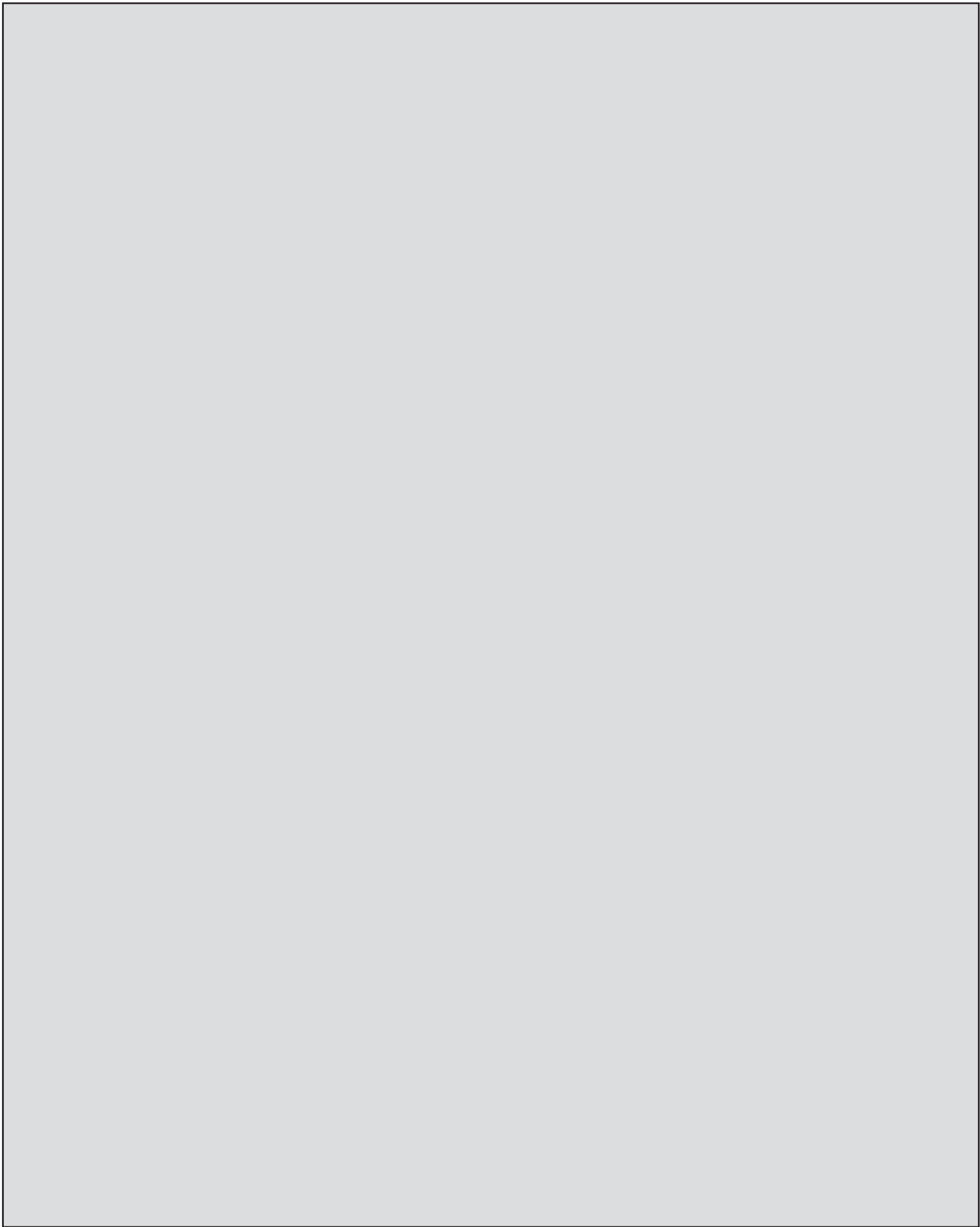
White Oak is also financially profitable.

Girded by his inspirations, Bartlett had confirmation that he could reach a niche market of people who wanted naturally raised pigs and cattle — that was his customer base. Then there were farmers who were telling him they wanted an alternative to the exploitative commodity agriculture merry-go-round — they were his producers.

The key was to connect farmers to consumers directly, without going through the commodity market. In other words, the key was the modern structure visible from the farm store: a \$4 million processing plant — needed because consumers don't want to purchase a whole cow. "You want to come out here and buy a steak," he says.

Bartlett now allows that constructing the plant, one of the few farm-based slaughtering facilities in the country, was "an incredibly ambitious plan" for a young entrepreneur. He received grants from the state and federal governments, but also had to go, hat in hand, like his father before him, to the bank for loans.

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Well-known animal behaviorist Temple Grandin consulted on the design of the plant to help minimize stress for the animals. But Bartlett's father was instrumental in getting the initial building constructed.

"He is an incredible builder," Proctor says. "I've never met anyone like him. He built most of the plant, most all of it."

Mike Bartlett is more modest in the estimation of his contribution.

"We got this thick sheath of paperwork from the United States Department of Agriculture giving us guidelines," he says. "And I took them seriously."



Home Place endeavors to use all parts of the animal to minimize waste and maximize sustainability.

The original building began its USDA-inspected meat processing in 2016, with the slaughterhouse opening in 2018. Home Place completed a \$2.5 million expansion of the plant in November 2023.

"We should have built it bigger in the first place," Mike Bartlett says, "but we didn't know what we were getting into."

"THE SAME AS OUR ANCESTORS"

WITH THE PLANT BUILT, HOME Place has been recruiting farmers who are willing to raise animals naturally in exchange for premium prices over commodity-market prices. Bartlett admits that his farm makes up a minuscule portion of the livestock industry in this country. (He manages about 300 acres; part of the farm is rented to other farmers; and 680 acres were recently put in a conservation easement and planted with 290,000 trees.)

Yet by giving farmers an incentive — and the local economic infrastructure — to raise and sell their livestock in the region, "we've really made a big impact on our local producers," Bartlett says.

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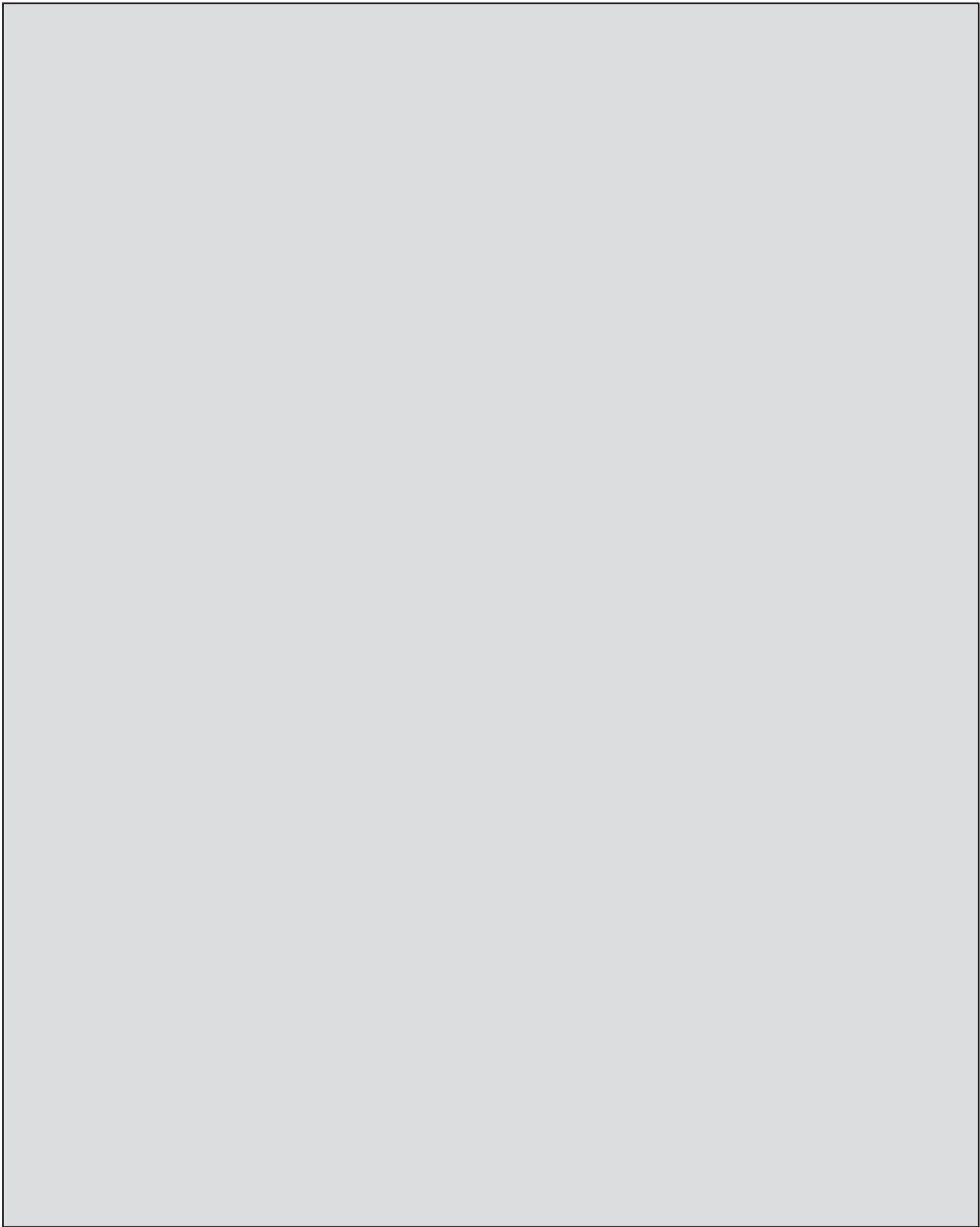
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In addition to a dozen farming partners, Home Place itself employs 26 people, with \$1 million in annual payroll going back into the local economy.

"Instead of shipping all this stuff up to the Midwest," he says, referring to industrial slaughterhouses, "and letting Tyson take it all, we're keeping a little bit of that value here."

As it establishes the early stages of its farmers-to-slaughterhouse-to-consumer supply chain, Home Place is simultaneously developing its direct-to-consumer channels. Its meat is sold in Memphis at Buster's Butcher, the Cooper-Young farmer's market, and South Point Grocery. Local chefs, like Lobbyist chef-owner Jimmy Gentry and Kinfolk's Cole Jeanes, feature Home Place products on their menus, and vaunt their taste and appearance.

The fact that Home Place animals are "roaming and eating freely, and no antibiotics, that plays a huge role in why the meat tastes different," says Jeanes. "It's so nutrient-dense."

The provenance of the meat is also ethically appealing. The fact that Home Place livestock is grown responsibly "is a huge thing for me and our mission at Kinfolk," Jeanes says. "We say we want to tend to the garden nearest us."

While chefs are an important part of Home Place's market, its e-commerce business is essential to growing its business nationally. The trick is to offer a product consumers want at a price point they are willing to pay.

"Everyone's like, why are you out of filets?" Bartlett says. "We all love filets and we're used to just getting box meat from industry." When he tries to explain to customers that Home Place tries to harvest all parts of the animal, "their eyes just glaze over."

"You're tempted to sell your principles short because of consumer demand and price sensitivity," he says. "But the minute I start doing that, I'm going to stop getting out of bed in the morning because the only thing that keeps me going is I'm fired up by what I do."

But the need to economize and eliminate waste is not lost on the group from Sardis.

"What's amazing to me is to think back to my grandparents who had a farm near Bruce, Mississippi. Basically, they were doing exactly what you're doing," one woman says.

"Exactly," Bartlett says. "Will Harris calls it radically traditional farming." Before the introduction of what Bartlett calls "synthetic inputs," farmers would rotate the pasturing of livestock, for example, because it was effective for the health of the animals and the soil.

The ethos of frugality "formed this identity of rural living that we have," Bartlett continues. "It's really tragic that in our rural communities now, you can't find pig's feet or fatback. ... Our goal is the same as your ancestors. We want to sell every single piece of that animal from nose to tail."