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GOLF COURSE-PIG FARMER'S FEUD A SIGN OF THE NEW TIMES IN FLORIDA

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Source:

STUART - Even on a cold, windy day, a laundered handkerchief scented with starch brings welcome relief from the odor in Paul Thompson's mucky front yard. But the stench of pig poop, rotten food and chickens isn't the main concern of developers who built a new golf course within sight and sniffing distance of Thompson's 43-year-old farm.

It's the constant strains of pop country music, piped in by the pig farmer to soothe the sows and boars, that sent owners of the Florida Club at Martin County squealing all the way to court. Now the 9-inch case file has come to represent what Thompson's lawyer dubbed a battleground between old Florida and new Florida.

"These are old Florida Crackers who live out in the woods and they live there because they don't want anyone bothering them," said lawyer **Lance Richard** of Stuart. "As the urban development moves up the coast you are going to see lots of people living inland and a lot more cases like this."

In 1957, the 61-year-old Thompson and his wife settled on a plot of dense brush, palmetto trees and pines three miles west of this once sleepy coastal town 30 miles north of West Palm Beach.

Standing on the dirt driveway flanked by pig pens that leads to his house, the blue-eyed, flat-topped country farmer said he raised and sold hogs over the years while picking up side jobs - a sheriff's deputy, a carpenter, a commercial fisherman - to make ends meet.

"If you been here all your life, unless you were born rich, you had to do things to survive," said Thompson, clad in dusty brown work pants and shirt.

Just a few a few years ago, big cash began trickling into the now burgeoning city where orange and grapefruit groves are being replaced by middle-class subdivisions and upscale golf courses.

While golf course developers knew Thompson's farm was right next door when they began their project in the mid-1990s, court records document the complaints about the smell and noise once the homes started selling.

Club owners filed a lawsuit in 1997, claiming the music harasses and annoys club members and employees, discourages sales of home sites and drives golfers away.

Tom Wackeen, an attorney for the golf course, and the club's general manager, Greg Cotton, did not return numerous telephone messages left at their offices.

The case hasn't made it to trial, although the presiding judge said he would rather have a jury make the decision. Circuit Judge Ben Bryan doesn't relish the idea of having to "sit and listen to music and decide if pigs stink."

If the case gets to trial, witnesses could include a neighboring county's sheriff's deputies, hired by Martin County officials to conduct noise level tests along the club's 15th hole .

Their testimony could be countered by experts prepared to attest to the benefits of piping music to farm animals.

Thompson, who said he's struggled to make ends meet for years, declined an offer by the golf course to buy his land for thousands of dollars.

"The club's lawyers will tell you it's all about money, but that's not true," Thompson's lawyer said. "This guy's just living on his land. He doesn't want to move. That land - before the club - was out in the middle of the woods."

It's been more than a decade since Thompson attached a couple of speakers to wooden poles inside the wire pig pens and tuned the radio to 107.9, one of Stuart's country music stations.

Recently, Thompson talked about his Yorkshire pigs - which weigh between 800 and 1,200 pounds - as remake of country band Lone Star's "Amazed" blared, slightly distorted. The music is on a timer, playing from 8:30 a.m. to 5:30 p.m.

Originally, the farmer played the music for himself. Then he heard that the tunes could help the pigs relieve stress and, in turn, make their meat more tender. Most of the pigs he sells are barbecued at the spit for parties.

Thompson says he lives in a country where no one has the right to take away his freedom to raise pigs and play music.

"There's your bottom line."

Illustration:

Caption:

Chart: