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Meatpacker stays in the mix -- Calihan Pork Processors find a niche by providing pork to sausage makers. The hustle and bustle of the Peoria Stockyards is all but a memory now. But there's one family owned company still keeping things moving at the site. Hogs, specifically. **Calihan Pork Processors**, 1 South St., Peoria, operated by Louis Landon and his son Tom, has found a niche in today's ever-changing meat market. That niche is sausage.

Lou Landon has seen plenty of those changes firsthand since his initial job lugging beef onto the scales in 1953. A Bradley University graduate, Landon attended the school during the era of the great BU basketball teams of "Squeaky" Melchiorre and Billy Mann. "I knew all those guys," he recalled. He also met his wife Joanne on the Hilltop. After graduation, Landon served in Korea for the U.S. Army before returning to work in the meatpacking business started by his father-in-law, Russell Myatt, in 1936. The stockyards in Peoria at that time didn't resemble the sedate scene that greets visitors today. In the 1950s, the company was butchering 200 to 250 head of cattle a day, said Landon. "We were selling beef from here to Indiana, up to Chicago and down to Charleston," he said. But by the 1970s, the meat business was changing, said Landon. "Instead of delivering quarters of beef, the industry went to boxed beef. Meat was handled like canned goods. By boxing it, you could warehouse it," he said.

Landon, who became a partner in the firm by 1970, said his company was selling meat to all the Peoria area supermarkets at the time. As the 1970s came to an end, larger companies had started taking over the meat business, said Landon. "Some clients told me that they could use our beef as a fill-in for their regular suppliers. But we couldn't live on that," he said. So Landon made the decision to close the plant in 1980. He sold off the company's trucks and planned to sell the building until he was presented a bill by the union. "Apparently the union pension fund was underfunded and claimed our share was \$500,000. That's when I decided we better go back into business," he said. Landon reorganized, settling the union problems while sending his company in a new direction. "We (temporarily) reduced salaries and benefits but at least everyone had a job," he said. He also turned to hogs with his new operation.

After becoming the sole owner in 1986, Landon hooked up with Hillshire Farms, the Wisconsin sausage makers. What followed was an exclusive nine-year relationship that set Calihan up as a supplier of pork for sausage makers all over the Midwest. Those makers take the fresh pork Calihan provides and add their own mix of seasonings, then package it under their own label, Landon said. "We sell very little in Peoria. Most of what we process goes to the big sausage manufacturers like Johnsonville," he said. "We've got a good niche (with sausage and bratwurst). We slaughtered 70,000 hogs last year and we'll do more this year," Landon said. "I like what I'm doing. This company is my fifth child. I saw this baby grow up and I'm proud of it," he said of a firm that now employs 50 people.

At 74, Landon shows no signs of slowing down. "People ask me about my father retiring. He's never going to leave and the last thing I want is to see him retire," said Tom Landon, 41, who moved from Florida earlier this year to join his father in business. "When my in-laws passed away recently in Florida, it made me think about

things that are more important than work. I wanted my kids to know their grandparents," said Tom Landon. The younger Landon, who serves as executive vice president, has made the transition from the corporate side to his new position. "Now I'm wearing the rubber boots and walking the stockyards in the morning," he said. While business is good, Tom Landon's not ruling out future changes. "Calihan's not going to stand still. We're open to ideas," he said. One idea, said Lou Landon, is that the company may look into making its own sausage.

[Business Blueprint](#) is a monthly feature that focuses on small businesses in the Peoria area. If your company has an interesting story to tell and has been in business at least a year, write to us at [Business Blueprint, Journal Star, 1 News Plaza, Peoria, IL 61643](#).

CAPTION: Fifty years ago Louis Landon, left, began working at **Calihan Pork Processors** in Peoria, the business started by his father and several other area businessmen in 1937. Early this year Landon was joined by his son, Tom Landon, right, who left a successful job in Florida as a real estate appraiser to become part of the family business. Fifty years ago Louis Landon, left, began working at **Calihan Pork Processors** in Peoria, the business started by his father and several other area businessmen in 1937. Early this year Landon was joined by his son, Tom Landon, right, who left a successful job in Florida as a real estate appraiser to become part of the family business.