

## Vertical Integration

*Stephen Truman Sugg*

Whoever told you Club Fed is a country club is full of shit; this place is hell. I've tried to get transferred out of here, but the warden objects every time. My jailhouse lawyer told me that I'm the only prisoner on record ever requesting a transfer *out* of this joint. Most white-collar boys like me do everything to get *into* this place—call Congressmen, buy high-power lawyers. But I'd room with Charles Manson or the goddam Unabomber to get out of here. I'd go to Leavenworth and be someone's bitch. Anything to get out of here.

My cellmate's name is Brutus. I know that because BRUTUS is tattooed on his right arm, just above the swastika. He played linebacker at a junior college and is bald by choice. A real skinhead Neo-Nazi, he gets letters from true believers, both domestic and in Germany.

Brutus shouldn't be in Club Fed. A Google search will tell you that Harold Wright, a.k.a Brutus, killed two people, including an undercover FBI agent who was embedded in Brutus's cross-burning posse. And he is suspected in two modern day lynchings in eastern Texas. One involved the dismemberment of a white man who made the mistake of marrying a black woman. The other victim had made the mistake of being black and gay, in a town where neither trait was looked upon kindly. Brutus got a lifetime at Club Fed as a reward for ratting out an aging Klansman who murdered a couple of black schoolgirls in 1967. Otherwise, he'd still be in Supermax, where he belongs.

Brutus happily shared with me details of the lynchings and other misdeeds, but no one listens when I offer this information to anyone of authority. I'm on the low end of the totem pole in the prison hierarchy.

Brutus gets both bunks in our cell, preferring daytime napping on the bottom and nighttime sleeping on the top. I sleep on the

floor, in a spot he assigned to me near the toilet. I protested, but that got me punished, and punishments from Brutus involve my contact with his genitalia, something to which I've become accustomed, but which I don't enjoy.

Oh, yeah, in case you cannot tell, I'm black. The warden personally made this cell assignment, putting a labor-law violating 5'6", 140-pound college-educated black guy with a deranged, hulking white supremacist with a record of dismembering those he doesn't like. The corrections officers, warden, and the other inmates all know what is going on. They encourage it and watch it play out like it is the goddam Hunger Games. Someday, my story is going to get out and I'll sue Uncle Sam for millions. If I live that long.

Like I said, I'm in for labor law violations, trumped-up ones at that. I graduated from Kansas State University's College of Agriculture in 1988. Went there on a diversity scholarship. I was their diversity. The media and the college made a decent amount of noise about my graduation. I had a 4.0, was Homecoming King, and my degree was in Agricultural Engineering, a field in which blacks were rarer than Asians on a football team. And no, I didn't play football or basketball, although I got that question at least once a day for the four years I was at the school. The college put my shining mug on every brochure and made me front and center at every career day. "Look, here's our successful Darkie," they'd basically say, convincing themselves that they weren't racist.

It was all bullshit. I'd hear the professors and my classmates tell jokes about jungle bunnies, tar babies, and welfare queens, and then turn silent as I walked in the room. Fellow students said that I got A's because of affirmative action. And the white girl who was going to the Agriculture College's Barnwarming dance with me got "sick" a day prior. The same thing happened the next year. I was used to it; same shit happened to me in my whitebread suburban high school. Classmates liked me all right, as long as I knew my place. If you don't believe me, you should have seen the flyer they put out in 1988. It was for a charity coon hunt, which happened to be on the first day that Kansas celebrated Dr. King's birthday as a holiday.

I was a token—albeit a smart one. Upon graduation, every Ag company wanted me to work in their PR department, or in some “outreach” position, showing that they hired dark faces in positions beyond janitorial. My classmates in Agricultural Engineering—all of whom had lower GPAs than I—got offers to do actual agricultural engineering jobs. I didn’t. So I took a PR type job with one of the big Ag firms. I can’t even remember the name now. They all look the same.

After a few years of working for what seemed like all of them—Cargill, Pfister Grain, Pioneer—I found my niche working in subsidiaries of the meat and grain industry giants. Back then, the grain companies and meat companies were basically becoming one. They called it “vertical integration,” which was a fancy way to say “monopoly.” The shareholders got richer if the company controlled the farmer—usually a big factory where they’d warehouse sows stuck in crates, owned the contracts on the grain feeding the sow, owned the slaughterhouse and even the meat distribution channels. One company can control the pig from conception until it is slathered in barbeque sauce at a county fair.

Regulators, of course, had a few issues with vertically integrated meat production, starting with the Sherman Antitrust act. But targeted donations to members of Congress on the Agriculture and Justice committees led to a series of Farm Bill provisions that made such vertical integration go from being considered “monopolistic” to being encouraged, all in the name of rural development. Health regulators also had multiple issues with large concentrations of sows who were injected daily with antibiotics in order to remain healthy. And the locals with farms nearby disliked the thirty-acre “depositories” of animal waste. Their homes smelled like pig shit all the time. We usually paid affected locals about five grand per year to quit bitching. Money made shit smell better. But no one, aside from a few greenies on the coasts, really cared about the environmental effects of big hog operations.

I was good at the vertical integration. It appealed to my sense of efficiency, and gave me a chance to use my agricultural

engineering background instead of being the smiling black guy at every corporate event. By 1996, I was Vice President of Production at Premium Integrated Commodities, a subsidiary of another subsidiary whose parent company had cornered about 22% of the domestic pork market. Times were good in the industry, and so was my paycheck.

My advantage was my engineering background. Everything in vertically integrated agriculture is a process. The only messy part is when humans get involved to clean the shit, inject the meds, slaughter the animals, and regulate the industry. But I knew that humans were mere cogs in the process and could be replaced like tires on a truck. Everyone else got all worked up about the human toll of things. I didn’t, and that’s why I was the best at the job. People need to learn to think in processes. Emotion kills profit, and life had taught me to suppress emotion.

I got the human side of vertical integration down to a science. We supported politicians and they, in turn, supported us. I went from avoiding politics to being on the guest list for every political fundraiser in three states. At most fundraisers—Democrat or Republican—I’d be the only black guy in the room, except for the servers. I got used to it, and my money was green. After a few drinks at one of the fundraisers, a colleague—my boss, actually—thanked me for not “acting black.” I didn’t respond; I was just focused on the corporate ladder. I left the activism to Jesse Jackson and Al Sharpton.

By that time I was getting company stock in addition to over a quarter million per year and a healthy set of perks. Times were good. The Japanese were buying up our pork and the EPA and OSHA didn’t ever see a regulation they wanted to enforce. And if they did, our Congressional delegation was ready to make them rethink their decisions. I had pictures on my wall with five out of six of Iowa’s Congressmen, both of Missouri’s Senators, and a shitload of state-level politicians too numerous to mention. The Governors of three states sent me birthday cards one year; the Kansas Governor even called me personally to convey birthday greetings.

Folks in our field were scared once Clinton came to office and put the enviro-nazis in charge of the EPA and placed folks at the Department of Labor who didn't hate Mexicans. But I knew we'd be okay. Clinton oversaw Tyson's rise in Arkansas. You can't set foot in that state without smelling chicken shit, and yes, it does smell like money. We had to put up a few more appearances during those days, making sure we paid minimum wage and shit like that, but times were still good, believe me. Clinton was just as good to us as the first Bush, and better than the second Bush, but W. had a different set of issues.

Labor was always the sticking point in the processes I oversaw. Our plants—slaughter and production—were out in the middle of rural Missouri, Iowa, and Kansas. The work sucked; wasn't much different than what Upton Sinclair wrote about a hundred years prior. People wanted cheap meat, and we made it—at scale.

The suits in Manhattan and Minneapolis leading our vertically integrated companies couldn't understand why local Jim Bob and Betty Sue whitebreads populating small towns wouldn't spend 8-10 hours per day balls-deep in feces and animal guts while earning minimum wage. But it wasn't work for white folks. So they hauled in Indians from the reservations out in South Dakota. But they weren't any better than the white folks. Then we got smart and got Mexicans. Actually, there were only a few Mexicans; most of the ones I secured were Guatemalan or Honduran. They worked harder, talked back less, and had fewer family ties in the States to distract them. Single, sturdy young men with few distractions were our ideal workers. The local strip clubs and bars appreciated our choice in laborers.

We subcontracted out the hard parts of finding the Spanish-speaking workers—getting them fake papers and places to live. Didn't want our hands dirty. We'd create these shell companies—empty LLCs—that did all that shit. Then we could claim with plausibility that we were “shocked” that four men named Hector Sanchez, all with the same social security number, worked at our plant, which, of course, had the “highest standards.”

Every few years, our plants or our competitor plants would get raided. Usually, we'd hear of a raid at a competitor or sister plant, and then we'd send our workers home and cease production when we knew the inspectors were on the way. It always worked pretty well, unless the bureaucrats were particularly pesky, which would happen when the labor unions—they hated us—would lean on the feds to enforce labor and wage laws. Paying overtime was not our strong point.

So we “invested” to get rid of those problems. Our government affairs director—himself a sleazy and once-indicted but not convicted former Congressman—figured that once we reached a certain price point in paying for our shady labor and covering up the practices, not to mention the workplace accidents, it'd be easier to put those funds toward buying public policies more suitable to our style of business.

We targeted the Appropriations Subcommittees in both chambers of Congress. We had to convince those subcommittees to simply not fund the enforcement activities that were drowning our business. And it was easy. Our execs each gave about twenty grand per member to the campaigns of four relevant committee chairmen and we invested substantially in several prominent members of the relevant subcommittees from both parties. Miraculously, budget line items for the enforcement activities at the agencies we hated declined precipitously because of newfound “fiscal restraint” as they called it in the funding bills' legislative language. Fiscal restraint from Congress equaled a fiscal bonanza for us. Buying Congress, it turned out, was much cheaper than paying minimum wage and obeying workplace safety regulations.

Buying off state-level enforcement of environmental and related regulations was even easier. We hired a lobbyist in each state house—the best money could buy—in the states where we had operations. In Kansas, a retired state senator turned lobbyist cost \$100,000 plus expenses; in Iowa, we got one for half that much. In Missouri, we got the Anheuser-Busch lobbyist to take us on as a side job. In each state, our lobbyists existed to kill bills that would

have messed up our work. Advocates for family farmers would try to get bills calling for smaller hog waste lots, more competition, and other bullshit. We'd talk about jobs, rural development, and then sponsor a hot dog day in the capitol for the legislators. All that helped. But the money talked even louder. I've yet to see a state representative who could not be bought. Not one. And for the ones that dithered on our causes, we could always buy, or at least rent, the chamber's Speaker or President Pro Tempore to get his or her members in line. Usually, at the state level, about \$20,000 from our CEO to the leadership political action committee of a chamber's top officer always stalled legislation that we didn't like.

Such tactics weren't cheap. My last spreadsheet showed our combined companies shelling out about a half million per year in "government relations" costs. Big money. But I also calculated that we prevented regulations and legislation that would have cost us about five to ten million per year. Like I said, I'm a numbers guy.

9/11 changed everything. Damn near killed our industry. Congress got all ramped up about enforcing immigration law after that day. Gave the INS millions and millions of dollars—more than they could ever spend looking for Arabs—so they got up in our business. Such bullshit. I can assure you than none of the semi-literate men we had working at our facilities were going to have the time, energy, or language skills to learn to fly another airplane into the World Trade Center. Guarantee you that.

But we got inspected, inspected, and inspected. Calling our friends in Washington only slowed it down; nothing could stop it. One time, they found that 96 out of 100 workers on our production floor were in the country illegally. We got some bad press on that one. And we had to slow down production for a few weeks after that until our shell LLC could find Hmong refugees (a long story...) to man our plant until the Mexicans and Central Americans would show up again at full force.

Getting good labor became such a clusterfuck that the CEO put me in charge of fixing the problem. That dumb bastard thought my black ass could go to Compton or Watts and bring back a busload

of homies to work at our plant. He had clipped several articles on black unemployment and placed them conspicuously on my desk. He even told me that he'd pay ten bucks an hour for any "real American"—black, white, or otherwise—to work in the plant. But the white folks wouldn't do it; we'd tried that years before. And not many black folks would find the rural Iowa, Kansas, and Missouri cultures welcoming.

So we were up a labor shit creek. Hiring the illegals was just too risky now, and it was costing us too much in legal fees. We had to change our ways. That is when the 'tards came. Yep, 'tards. Probably isn't the politically correct name. But Forrest fucking Gump had about twenty IQ points on the 'tards I got to work in our facilities.

We had hired a labor specialist consultant who taught us how to maximize "efficiencies" in the labor market. Basically, when 'tards turn 18 or 21, depending on the state, they go in limbo if they don't have families who want to deal with them, which is common. They'd become drains on the system, getting into legal trouble, falling ill, clogging the ERs, and generally tugging at the public coffers. So several states set up public-private "partnerships," subsidizing businesses that would house the 'tards and keep them from being on the dole. The 'tards would work at fast food joints or in similar jobs, have a warm bed, and get three squares per day with the aid of only minor public subsidy.

But the private sector didn't always work out well, especially in Texas. Several for-profit companies got involved in the "partnerships" and then decided to maximize profits by outsourcing the 'tard labor beyond fast food joints near where the 'tards were housed. At first, as I understand, the 'tards worked at amusement parks cleaning bathrooms, in fish processing plants, and even as weed pullers in cotton fields. The "partnership" agency would collect the 'tards' wages and take out expenses for room, board, and administration, and then give the 'tard the remainder, which usually didn't amount to shit. It was sort of like the company stores who always had a leg up on the coal miners.

But the companies getting the subsidies wanted to make even more money; that's when our processing plants got in the picture. We made a deal with several of the private portions of the public-private partnerships in three southern states that had taken on 'tard-care responsibilities. We provided housing near our facilities, three meals per day, and supervision. We also signed contracts agreeing to abide by the home-state regulations for care of the men working for us. We paid the wages (minimum) directly to the private company responsible for the 'tards after deducting for food, laundry, and related expenses. For good measure, we even sent quarterly updates with lots of smiling 'tard pictures to the addresses of any known family members of those in our care. Nearly all came back "address unknown".

It was a good deal for everyone. Within a year, the turnover in our least desirable jobs on the slaughterhouse floor went from 70% to 10%. And our doctor's advice to put the 'tards on preventive antibiotics (smaller doses than the hogs) halved our sickness rate. Even better, our 'tards were all US citizens, which got the INS off our backs. Training did cost more at first because 'tards and Hispanics don't communicate well. But we hired a retired special education teacher to train the 'tards. Problem solved.

We were humming and profits soared. I had money stashed onshore and offshore and a yacht in Missouri's Lake of the Ozarks. I was single and loaded. The white ladies loved me, but they never wanted to take me home to their mommas. And the dating pool in the cities where I lived and worked—overgrown cow towns—weren't exactly teaming with sistas. So I never settled down.

We found the 'tards best for repetitive work. They were nearly ideal. They showed up on time, lacked the capacity to complain to their bosses or to government agencies, and were relatively high-functioning in the basic jobs after just a few weeks of training. And sure, some of them did get hurt. The processing floor isn't Candy Land, but we had an in-house doc who took care of all the injuries. Mostly cuts, broken bones from falls—blood is slick—and the occasional animal pathogen transferred to the 'tards when they

forgot to wear protective clothing. Our 'tard accident and sickness rate was nearly twice that of the non-'tards in the same position, but their injuries weren't reported to Uncle Sam, so they didn't affect our bottom line.

Money didn't motivate the 'tards. They didn't know minimum wage from their own asses. Fear of ass beatings or withheld food worked to an extent—especially with the higher functioning 'tards, but lost meals upset about half the 'tards so much that they'd spend their days crying. Unproductive.

So we started an incentive program. A day without a major cut—they weren't great with knives—slip or fall, or other screw-up yielded all of them a trip to the Tasty Freeze. To them, ice cream was nectar, the greatest earthly joy next to sex.

But the ice cream was affecting our bottom line. Too many of the men were getting fat, which flared up their diabetes, accelerated their tooth loss, and made them too slow on the slaughterhouse floor. A few of them couldn't fit in to their uniforms after all the ice cream combined with the processed food they got for every meal.

After the ice cream cutbacks, we needed other ways to motivate the men. Someone thought of girls. These guys liked the idea of naked girls, and none of them, I'm confident, had ever seen one. So if they'd go a week without an accident and with meeting production goals—the number of animals slaughtered—they'd be rewarded with porn on Friday evenings. Sometimes that meant a video on a projector we'd rent; other times, we'd buy them used *Playboys*. Whatever it was, they liked it—even better than ice cream, and that was saying something.

It went on like that for four years. Everyone was happy. We got cheap meat out of door; the private companies were getting their cut for "overseeing" the 'tards, and the 'tards were off the streets doing productive labor.

Our only snag was housing. At first, we stacked 'tards in houses in nearby communities that we'd rent. But the 'tards were terrible neighbors. They didn't clean, and they weren't terribly social. And

they scared people. A few were on sex offender lists, which was a nightmare for our public relations office. It was just a clusterfuck. And too much bad publicity. So again, it was my job to solve the problem.

It was a couple of years after Hurricane Katrina. Uncle Sam had housed the poor storm victims in FEMA trailers. Problem was, the trailers had formaldehyde. Made people sick, they claimed. The storm victims all moved out. The trailers were cheap and portable. I bought them all for the 'tards and we placed the trailers near our slaughterhouses in what we called "odor zones". Odor zones were places where no sane human would want to live. Perfect for the 'tards. Three to a trailer. And we fed them three squares a day on site.

Texas inspectors did come once or twice to check in on the 'tards that were technically in their stead. So we rented a local motel that week. Made sure it was clean as a whistle, and then we moved the 'tards there temporarily. We got them pizza every night, took them roller skating, and didn't make them work for a few days. The inspectors got an earful that week straight from the 'tards. They told inspectors of what, to them, was a wonderful week. Their memories were short. The inspectors ate it up. Then, the inspectors left, and the 'tards went back to work, living in their trailers. I later saw an article in a Texas magazine that called the program a "model for public-private partnerships."

Then, the shit hit the fan. A cousin of one of the 'tards wanted to check in on him. Drove up to Iowa unannounced. Shit like that had never happened before; these 'tards were here because no one cared about them.

But that wasn't the bad part. He was a goddamned unemployed documentary film maker. He checked in to a local hotel and filmed the 'tards living conditions for a week. He showed rodents running wild in the trailers, pure filth in clogged bathrooms, and showers that had no signs of soap. And that was just the beginning. He also analyzed the formaldehyde levels in the trailers, which hovered around a thousand times the EPA's suggested limit. And the interviews with the 'tards were real tear-jerkers. Made us out to sound like uncompassionate devils.

Even worse, the filmmaker bastard pretended to be a 'tard after a while, just blended in with them. Worked with them in the plant—we never took head counts. And he took hidden video.

The video showed the 'tards killing pigs without the aid of a stun gun, which is "inhumane" and against the law. And it showed sick and injured pigs getting slaughtered and then turned to sausage. As if they don't all turn out dead anyway. And of course, the video showed our plant supervisors berating the 'tards for various offenses.

The documentary went viral and the filmmaker got on *60 Minutes*. He had his fifteen minutes of fame. Our lawyers tried everything, but you can't do much once shit hits the internet. Every goddamned animal-rights nutball, 'tard advocate, and labor guru were up in our asses. And the state and federal inspectors—our former friends—had an orgy finding violations in our plants.

A pure fucking disaster just because one douchebag had a video camera.

And I took the fall. By myself.

The warden has a retarded son. And I guess the warden, the corrections officers, and even the other inmates think what I did was awful. They believe that the courts were too lenient in my sentence. And they are determined to get their own justice for the 'tards they consider to be my victims.

I swear, even the damn child pornographers and kiddie rapists get more respect in the system.

So yeah, kids, there is a moral to this story: If you are going to hire 'tards, make sure you find ones without families, nosy social workers, and asshole civil attorneys who'll take everything you've ever worked hard for. And make damn sure they don't have do-gooder cousins with filmmaking abilities.

Or, you can pay four bucks for your McRib instead of three. But ain't no American gonna do that. Want cheap meat? Somebody's got to make it happen. For a long time, that was me.

And before you get all judgmental, consider this: The shell of the company that I ran and all of the processing equipment was

sold to Holden Ag Unlimited, a subsidiary of another vertically integrated company with offices in Tijuana, Laredo, and Atchison, Kansas. They set up another pork processing plant in Mexico—a benefit of that legislation called NAFTA.

If you don't like what we did with the 'tards in Iowa, think of how they treat the Mexican 'tards. Think they can complain to OSHA or have feel-good bureaucrats getting in the asses of the company's execs? No siree, not in Mexico. No safety. No rules. They'll be lucky to get paid. But if you think Americans want to shell out a few bucks more for a ham sandwich, you've got to be kidding.

The irony is that the subsidiary that bought my old company supplies meat for the prison in which I reside—Club Fed. Grade “C” institutional-quality animal guts. Commensurate with dog food, but not the high-end dog food. Think Alpo. I chuckle when I see Brutus and all the men eating it every day. I won't touch the shit; I know what's in it. That's why I'm so skinny.

And the execs who ran the companies that I worked for got off scot-free. I'm the only one who went down. They were all “shocked” to learn that the subcontractors to their subsidiaries were taking advantage of 'tards. One of the bastards even went on TV and cried his eyes out. He is the same one who told me that a few dead 'tards were “collateral damage” and that the preventive antibiotics were costing too much. Even I didn't go for that; I've got compassion. But the big execs teamed up with fancy-suit lawyers and wrote fat checks to the organizations that advocate for 'tards. Seven figures. And they all testified under oath that I alone had masterminded the whole scheme without their knowledge. The first time they ever gave a brother true credit for his mind. Now, the bastard exec who wrote the biggest check to the 'tard advocacy organization is the United States Department of Agriculture's Deputy Undersecretary for Inspection and Meat Quality. Unreal.

And the execs even got off in the civil cases. The 'tards had families coming out of the woodwork to sue every part of our companies and even sue us individually. What jury wouldn't go

for a devastated 'tard? But the lawsuits against the companies and the top executives were thrown out by a judge who had fraternity ties one of the executives. The ruling said that the plaintiffs lacked evidence linking the executives to the misdeeds. But they all sued me and got everything I owned.

I guess it works to blame it on the black man. ☹