

THE ROAD I GREW UP ON

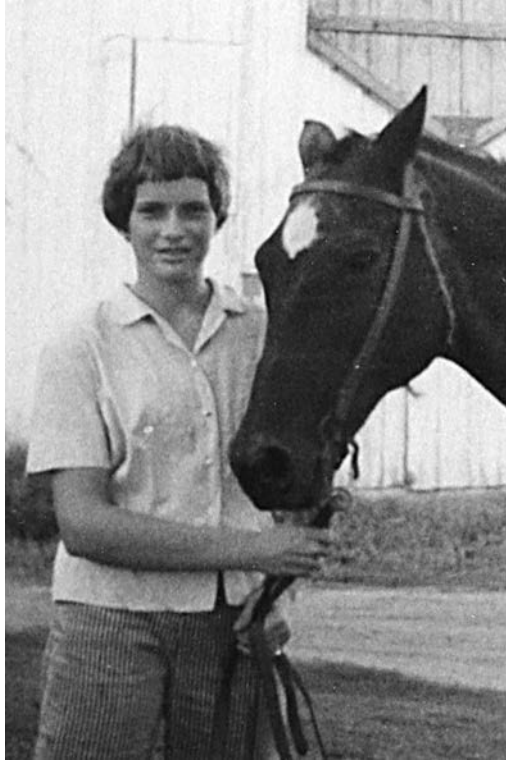
Requiem for a Vanishing Era

VOLUME 1



Helen DeElda Gunderson

THE ROAD I GREW UP ON



Helen Gunderson. Circa 1959. *The Helen Reigelsberger Woelfel collection.*

Being human is not so much “I think, therefore, I am,” as professed by the philosopher Descartes. The essential thing about being human, I believe, is that we tell stories. Could it not be said, “We tell stories, and therefore, we are.”

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Helen DeElda Gunderson

GUNDER-FRIEND PRODUCTIONS

Ames, Iowa

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Line art of Farmall tractor by Lonna Nachtigal, Ames, Iowa.



Endorsements

A deeply personal and thoughtful history of rural Iowa at a crossroads. Interweaving family history, personal narrative, oral history, and a keen photographer's eye, Helen's portrait of a country road frames the stories of farm families in order to explore traditional themes of ancestry, community, and rebirth, as well as very timely issues such as sustainability, patriarchy, and gender. Iowans will immediately feel at home on this road, one way looking forward to an unfolding future, the other looking back to a well-traveled past.

Daniel Hartwig

Daniel Hartwig, Head ISU Special Collections and University Archives

Told with honesty and deep reflection, this book contemplates rural life and agriculture's past and future in Iowa. Helen weaves together personal memories, agriculture and rural life trends with accompanying photographs, letters and drawings, to give readers a glimpse of how multifaceted farm life in Iowa is. Through her narrative Helen tackles death, gender, land stewardship, and implications of modern agriculture. Helen eloquently describes the way these big issues intersect her life, and how her thoughts on life's big topics continually evolve. Helen's openness to share provides inspiration that we can all seek to do better, by learning from our own experiences and those of our fellow persons.

Sally Worley

Practical Farmers of Iowa executive director
www.practicalfarmers.org

Like her expressive photographs, Helen Gunderson presents a clear-eyed vision, an unvarnished perspective, showing how her Iowa roots left a lasting impact on her life. Using **The Road I Grew Up On** as her platform, she spent decades documenting the evolution of modern rural life and takes the reader along on a transformative spiritual journey. For many, Iowa's land represents a sanctuary, a sacred place of beauty and potential. Once populated and revered by the likes of her ancestors, the familiar shared heritage of farm life is now erased from the landscape, conquered by seemingly uncontrollable forces. What remains across time are immutable parallels between the past and remnants of once prosperous rural communities grounded by generational ties.

Mary Bennett

State Historical Society of Iowa
Author of *An Iowa Album*

The Road I Grew Up On: Requiem for a Vanishing Era traces the relationship among people and place in the light of changing technologies, values, and political-economic context. We meet those who gained title to the land; and those who farmed it as tenants and owners – not just the farmers, who the norm of the 1950s and before were assumed to be men, but the families; the institutions that brought families together; and changes in the land and lives of those who had lived along the northwest Iowa road. The descriptions of places and people are amplified through photographs illuminating each era and family over time. The narrator's perspective of link over time, reflecting on the influence of social norms and expectations, huge changes in the socio-technical regime, and alternatives to that regime, makes this both a memoir and a morality tale about the structures that rend people and place asunder, as well as the values and innovative practices that bring them together. This book is an excellent mix of history and biographies, and a joy to read.

Cornelia Butler Flora

Distinguished Professor of Sociology Emeritus, Iowa State University
Research Professor, Kansas State University
Author *Rural Communities, Legacy, and Change* 5th Edition

Helen's words give us a look at life, community, hard work, pain, joy and struggles of family farms in a day when the street address for a rural home was simply, "Rural Route." Where her words stop, her striking photos deepen the story. As she reflects on the changes in her lifetime from vibrant rural communities and diverse landscapes to big Ag and the expansive monoculture of row crop farming, one can only imagine what the next 75 years have in store for Iowa. While Helen's story is about Iowa and Iowans, it also provides a chronicle of a nostalgic time in America's rural agricultural history that is still idealized. Her book, thirty years in the making, is part documentary and part autobiography. It's a story of diminishing community, yet finding community, rural challenges and optimism. Helen is a deep thinker, well-attuned to her feelings, who lives a life toward healing the land and people through her art, storytelling and relationships. Her story is a legacy about doing what is right for the land and the people, and that gives us all hope.

Joe McGovern

Iowa Natural Heritage Foundation President
www.inhf.org



The Book

The Road I Grew Up On: Requiem for a Vanishing Era is a two-volume anthology self-published by Helen DeElda Gunderson, a fourth-generation, septuagenarian Iowan who grew up on a farm in Pocahontas County, Iowa, where she currently owns inherited farmland. After earning an undergraduate degree in physical education, a master's degree in instructional technology and a Master of Divinity, and following a diverse career that took her to other states, Helen lives in Ames, Iowa, on what she calls her urban farm. Her anthology, written from a liberal perspective, consists of regional and neighborhood history, personal memoir, spiritual insights, other opinions, and photographs. The seeds for the project were sown in fall 1989 followed by years of Helen's taking photographs, shooting video footage, recording interviews, conducting other research, and writing about the neighborhood and culture where she grew up. By 2004, she had formatted a large book, but it lacked a final chapter. She did not take up the challenge of writing for the book again until 2019. The first volume consists primarily of chapters from the 2004 book, while the second volume consists of chapters written in 2019 and an unexpected additional chapter completed on July 31, 2020, about living in the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic. The preface essays for both volumes is located at the beginning of the first volume. All appendix material is located at the end of the second volume.

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Acknowledgements

The thoughts I expressed in conclusion of my chapters on death seem the best way to express my gratitude for the many people who have supported me in general and specifically with this documentary project.

It would be impossible to create a diagram, not even with a 3-D computerized software program, to show all the different people who have been angels in my life. Also, it would be difficult to define the variety of nuanced roles they have served and their level of significance. Admittedly, I have chosen to distance myself, for one reason or another, from some of those people who I had been close to, and others have shut doors on me. Then there is the passage of time and the matter of death that have their ways of altering or dissolving relationships. However, I am grateful for those who have been angels in my life and those that continue to be.



Foreword

When Helen DeElda Gunderson was young, there were 11 families living on farms along the road where she grew up. Today, only three of those farms are inhabited, and only one is home to children. The cattle, pigs, and chickens are gone as are the windbreaks, barns and so much more that were typical of rural Iowa for much of the 20th century. This book explores, through prose and photographs, that vanishing era.



Helen at her urban farm. 2014. Photo by Joy Leister.

My grandparents, Vera and Bill Fisher, farmed just miles from Helen's road, and I grew up hearing about the various Ives, Gunderson and Brinkman family members who are featured in this book. I remember Helen's mother as the friendly librarian at the Rolfe Public Library, where my grandmother would take me when I visited their farm. I didn't meet Helen, however, until 2006, when I joined Practical Farmers of Iowa as its Executive Director. We became friends, and I was delighted when our Board of Directors chose her for our first Farmland Owner Award in 2013.

More than half of Iowa's farmland is owned by those who do not live and labor on their land. Helen is a leader among those owners. She has worked hard to provide

land access for the next generation of farmers. She has begun moving her land toward organic production and has established desperately needed pollinator habitat. Her plans include continuing her legacy beyond her death through her bequests to a few select Iowa nonprofit organizations.

Helen's leadership is in word as well as deed. She writes thoughtfully about the need for those who own land to be connected with it, "like knowing about the soils, the people who farm it, and the ethics involved in managing it." She writes about the negative effect of programs like the Farm Bureau's Century Farm program, which celebrates holding on to land ownership long after a family is gone from it. Why not a program that "would honor landowners who transfer their property to young farmers, sustainable farmers or other people who would manage the land in ways healthy for the environment, economy and community," she writes.

I love reading books about rural life, books such as Mildred Armstrong Kalish's *Little Heathens* and Ronald Jager's *Eighty Acres*, but most of those accounts are not honest about the disadvantages of rural life. Helen's willingness to admit the "nostalgic and disenchantment, the love and disdain" is the reason *The Road I Grew Up On* is so fascinating. She doesn't shy away from the fact that we stole this land from Native Americans, or that those of us who chose urban life are part of the fabric of "the unsettling and destruction" of the Midwest farm culture. She explores family dynamics, rigidity about what kinds of relationships are acceptable, denial of feelings and the repression of imagination, all of which she experienced growing up in rural Iowa.

Helen's examination of the limited agricultural opportunities for women farmers is especially fascinating. As she now manages her Pocahontas County farmland and has transformed her Ames properties to a delightfully diverse urban farm, she certainly is a triumphant example of what women can accomplish.

As I head toward my 60s, I remain shocked at how quickly any trace of my grandparents' farmstead and legacy disappeared. Some of that land is still in the family, but what was nurtured by my grandparents is gone. Today I even need help locating the spot of the former homestead not too far from a parcel of Helen's land that she calls DeElda Farm—none of the trees or homesteads I previously used as landmarks remain.

Helen's attention to detail is such a gift for those of us who have experienced that loss. She documents road conditions and maintenance, moving day, when farm families moved to different farmsteads, riding the school bus, farm activism, the coming of electricity, changes in farm equipment and a whole lot more.

I was continually amazed at Practical Farmers of Iowa at the civility and affection people of widely different religious and political perspectives showed each other. Helen is a great



Fabric artwork of farmstead where Teresa Opheim visited her grandparents, Bill and Vera Fisher, northeast of Rolfe, Iowa. Bill's side of the family originally moved to Pocahontas County in 1886. Bill died in 1984 and Vera in 1988. Their daughter and son-in-law, Barb and Wayne Opheim, still own 80 acres of Pocahontas County land. Artwork created by southern Iowa artist, Meg Prange. fabriwocky.weebly.com/

example, and that tolerance – which is becoming rare – is woven throughout her book. She deeply respects the people she interviewed. She names them all – the landowners, the tenants, the excavator who demolished her parents’ and grandparents’ homes and the cremation worker at the facility who worked with her mother’s remains. As she says about her stoic ancestors, these rural Iowa folks were “born into this world, were once children, were loved and in turn loved others, experienced joy, had their foibles, faced challenges, feared what the future would bring, and yet continued on their journeys.”

Helen’s book is not only a gift for today but for future generations, for those who may come to it to learn about an ancestor, old farming techniques, land ownership patterns, changing gender identities and much more. Helen writes that storytellers are people who “look at the ordinary under their noses and shape it in a way that, if held before us, helps us look at our lives, seeing them in ways that we have not seen before, and giving us new meaning and vision.”

Helen, my friend, you are a true storyteller.

Teresa Opheim

Minneapolis, Minnesota

Project Director, Climate Land Leaders

Main Street Project

www.mainstreetproject.org/

Editor, *The Future of Family Farms: Practical Farmers’ Legacy Letter Project*

www.uiopress.uiowa.edu/



Preface in Five Parts

An Iowa Heritage | A 1991 Perspective from St. Helena, California

Envisioning the Project | A 1991 Perspective from St. Helena, California

Piecing a Whole | A 2002 Perspective from Gilbert, Iowa

Completing a Project | A 2019 Perspective from Ames, Iowa

Living in the Pandemic | A 2020 Perspective from Ames, Iowa



Flag at Sunset Ridge Park, Rolfe, Iowa. 2007.

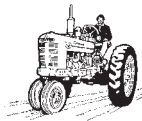
An Iowa Heritage

A 1991 Perspective
from Saint Helena, California
Helen D. Gunderson

The story that begins in the 1880s when my Gunderson ancestors came to Iowa until now as I sit here in California, wondering where I can find a sense of homeland, is not a unique drama. It parallels a whole era of midwestern rural life. It is an era that began with people seeking new land for farms, homes, and communities. It is an era that totters now as people struggle either to remain a part of that land or move away, seeking new places to call home in this modern age, when such a small percentage of the population lives in rural America or is involved in farming.

The story of the rise and fall of the Midwest is not one to be explored solely by Iowans or other Midwesterners. As author Wendell Berry says, the crisis of agriculture is a crisis of culture. What the Midwest and the state of Iowa are going through, and what I experience as an expatriate are connected to issues of the country as a whole. These issues are related to meaning, vision, and values and to environmental, economic, and spiritual health.

I admire Garrison Keillor and how his stories on National Public Radio use details of everyday midwestern life, and yet appeal to a wide spectrum of people. He has done what artists, theologians, and other storytellers are called to do: to look at the ordinary under their noses and shape it in a way that, if held before us, helps us look at our lives, seeing them in ways that we have not seen before, and giving us new meaning and vision.



I am concerned about loss and grieving. There have been only a few times in our nation's recent history when we collectively faced death and grieved together. That happened when we watched the funeral procession for John F. Kennedy and saw the harnessed, yet riderless stallion. An event of similar impact, yet without the same ritualistic treatment, happened when we saw the space shuttle Challenger explode. Another example, albeit of a different nature, is that of the Vietnam War Memorial in Washington. For too many years, the United States had no collective focal point for reflecting on this war or honoring its war dead. Many people bottled up their feelings. Fortunately, the country now has this mirror-like, black wall with its engraved list of casualties. People can come individually or in groups, look for a specific name or feel the impact of the entire memorial, create their own rituals, and know they are united with others in their grief and healing.

The question then arises as to when, where, and how do we come to terms with changes in rural America, less spectacular than the previous examples, but involving the death of an era and the loss of a way of life. The changes are slow and stretched out over time. It is hard to know when to stop and pay tribute because, although the shadow of loss is obvious, there is

some question as to whether or not there actually is a death. It is easier to deny the possibility than face it squarely. In addition, many of us have a stoic heritage that taught us not to admit feelings to each other or even to ourselves. So if change is slow, and it is not certain there is a death, and if people do not talk about feelings, how can there be a focal point for the masses to turn to in collective grief? Where is the symbol that will unite people, affected in diverse ways by the trauma happening in the rural Midwest? Where is the event that allows us to look into the darkness, knowing that in some way and at some time new symbols will arise?

The good thing about funerals is that they are collective rituals, marking a point in time, allowing people to unite, tap into their grief, and allow healing to begin. Small-town Memorial Day observances are wonderful in the ways people mingle at cemeteries, running into old acquaintances, greeting each other, and in many cases reminiscing about their heritage. Yet, the shortcoming is that the actual ceremonies pay respects only to military personnel without honoring our rural heritage or touching on the important questions related to the passing of an era. If there are no collective rituals designed to face the changes, there at least need to be prose, poetry, photographs, videos, paintings, and other works of art for people to gather around.



In 1988, I created a slide show on the theme of death and renewal to present at the 125th anniversary of my hometown of Rolfe. I put sweat and tears into it. I thought it would be the last photo project I would do about Iowa. I figured I would get on with my life here in California. But getting on with life has meant going back. I have felt torn between going “cold turkey” and ending my photography of Iowa or investing more in my project ideas. Is the work important? Will there be support and an audience for it?

From the fall of 1989 to the fall of 1990, I spent 17 weeks in Iowa. At first I was naive and diffuse in my focus, but gradually I am defining my goals. Do I take what images I have on hand and complete some of my project ideas in a limited format? Or do I put energy into what I am doing now, soliciting support from the Iowa Humanities Board and other agencies to pursue these dreams full scale?

I am particularly concerned that women be supported in interpreting the midwestern experience. I would like to see a feminist perspective (or perspectives), because there are so many ways in which rural culture is patriarchal and woman’s voice has been lost. Fortunately, some women authors and artists have expressed themselves on these issues. However, I want to give voice to my experience, to create visual symbolism through the medium of photography, and perhaps video, accompanying it with written text or verbal comments.

My perspective is one of love for people such as my grandparents, their way of life on the homeplace farm, and other elements of growing up in Iowa. Yet my perspective is also one of disdain for aspects of that same heritage: the favoritism shown to men, the limited roles for girls, the rigidity about what kinds of relationships are acceptable, the denial of feelings, the repression of imagination, and the style of discipline. My perspective is one of compassion and tenderness complicated by anger and frustration. It is also one of a tug-and-pull, dreaming about moving back to Iowa and yet wanting to stay my distance in order to do as Joseph Campbell suggests and come to terms with the myth system that I grew up in and, in turn, grow into the myth of my own life.

There are two sides of the coin in regard to my rural heritage. The stories and issues I want to explore are extremely important to me but are quite ordinary. There are plenty of Midwesterners with similar backgrounds. However, the fact that our stories have so much in common is no reason to negate my quest to interpret my rural heritage. Indeed, the ordinary nature of my story connects me with other people, and I hope whatever symbol or icon that comes to me in the process of creating a work of art will sustain not only me but others. Indeed this dichotomy of the exceptional versus the mundane of my heritage provides the raw material for this book.

There is synchronicity in my quest. In the spring of 1989, as I contemplated more photo and video forays to Iowa, I had no idea that during the next 12 months workers would tear down my grandparents' house on the homeplace and that my hometown would hold its last high school commencement exercises. At the same time that I am growing in understanding the significance of my rural heritage and coming into my own as a storyteller, the symbols of change in Iowa are ripe for harvest and important to interpret.

What is also clear as I pursue this project is the depth and energy I bring to it. My Iowa heritage is a gift and so is the passion to interpret it. As the two forces join together, the effect is like the fusion of two dynamos, creating something significant as the energy flows full circle.



Helen with pickup truck at the Joanne and Robert Brinkman farm in the northeast corner of Section 18, Garfield Township. The farm is along Highway 15 at the east end of the road where Helen grew up. 1989.

Envisioning the Project

A 1991 Perspective
from St. Helena, California
Helen D. Gunderson

If you head out of my hometown of Rolfe, Iowa, and go two miles south and look west, you will find the five-mile country road where I grew up. There is not much that is unique about my road, but because it's ordinary, yet easily delineated, it is a good focus for interpreting rural Iowa culture. The road and its people represent a manageable slice of Iowa farm life analogous to the sample of grain that a local co-op takes from a wagon of corn in order to examine the quality. And that is my intent: to examine the quality of farm life throughout the years along my road.

In many ways, the process will be like that of an archaeologist who selects a specific *tell*, a site that is ordinary on the surface, in order to dig in and learn about a culture. I have already begun to examine the road, but with a camera instead of a pick and a shovel. I have also been talking with people, looking at old photos, and studying abstracts for almost every unit of land along the road. There is more to the road than I had expected when beginning to photograph and videotape all the farmsteads, both occupied and abandoned, along the five miles. I hope to continue the project, gathering more visual images, writing about my personal perspectives, and interviewing people who still live on the road in addition to people who have moved away and other resource persons.

Recently a video about the history of railroads in Iowa, titled *Tales of the Rails* was produced and supported in part by the Iowa Humanities Board. According to producer Dirk Eitzen, he chose the topic of railroads as an entree to meeting ordinary people, getting them to talk about their own lives, and exploring the culture of rural Iowa and the way it is changing. His documentary was more about the people and their experiences than the history of the railroad per se.

My project will be about the lives of those who have lived on what I call "my road," using it as an opportunity to get them to talk about their experiences. The project will be about rural Iowa history and folklore, giving voice to rural people. It will not be simply for rural audiences.

An advantage of doing a project about my road is that no one has done a history of it. It's not an established unit of culture like a town or county that has already published its history. The road has no institutions such as schools, churches, newspapers, veterans' organizations, or women's clubs, which would insist on having their say. There are no renowned founding fathers or mothers whose epitaphs must be included. There are no political bigwigs or self-aggrandizing Main Street personalities. The road can provide a sampling of ordinary life, giving voice to people who are involved with the whole fabric of rural life, but not beholding to anyone except themselves in telling their stories.

What attracted me to this project was the visual impact of the road with its many abandoned farm sites: some with only one or two buildings left, some with no buildings and hardly a sign that there ever was an active farmstead.

My family moved to the road when I was an infant in 1945. Subsequently, my knowledge of the area spans nearly a half century.

As changes continue to take place, it will be interesting to see the landscape of my road and the area around it. Certainly there will be more abandoned farmsteads; perhaps even my parents' place will be gone. The county might close additional roads so farmers can plow them back into productive land, and the countryside may become more like that of Kansas.

When I look at the abandoned farm buildings, I see them as ruins worth examining and recording. They possess a sense of beauty and dignity, even though many people would never stop to take a second look or recognize their significance. The buildings won't be around much longer, but they need not breathe a last breath with no further function. If presented well on film, they will serve as icons for looking at the past, pondering the present, and moving into the future with a sense of what some theologians call "the eternal now."

These abandoned buildings are what first caught my eye and attracted me to undertake a project about my road. However, there is still considerable latitude in deciding where to focus, what phase of history to examine, what themes to explore, what voices to present. One focus could be the crop of us kids who rode the school bus in the 50s: exploring what it was like to grow up on a farm in that era, examining family environments, speculating about the hopes our parents had when they moved to the road, looking at how rural culture has shaped us, and finding out who and where we are now that we are grown.

Or the project could look solely at school bus routes in relation to patterns of school consolidation. The road project could step even further back in history, picking up the perspective of someone like Don Grant who grew up along the road in the 30s. The project could then look at the many land transactions that took place around 1929 and the early 30s. During that period, one of the land abstracts points to the foreclosure of a Rolfe bank. Further back, many abstracts include the controversy involving a Mr. Stockdale who, in the late 1800s, contracted with the county to build a new courthouse and a bridge across the Des Moines River in return for all the wetlands in the county. Of course, there is an even earlier history of the United States deeding land to the railroad companies, who in turn sold property either to entrepreneurs or directly to settlers. Each of these stories and countless others could make fascinating entry points for further study.



The Gundersons have been large landholders, mainly southwest of Rolfe but with one farm northeast of town. We have thought of the property as our land and that we will always be there, either ourselves or someone in the family lineage. But there may be a day when the Gunderson name will be as obscure to the area as Charlton or Dady. Or perhaps we will be like the Shannon family whose name shows up as landowners in the plat book but who otherwise have no identity in the area, no familiarity with the people, and no legitimate connection to a rural heritage except holding titles to farmland.

This brings up issues, not just of nostalgia, but of ethics and absentee landownership. A key to a rural heritage is the concept of people owning and living on the land. Osha Gray Davidson describes the ideals of our ancestors well in his recent book *Broken Heartland*:

To a people whose ancestors had only recently been peasants in Europe, owning land was seen not only as a path to wealth but also, more importantly, as the sole guarantee of freedom. As one colonial farmer wrote, “We have no princes for whom we toil, starve, and bleed: we are the most perfect society now existing in the world.” (page 22)

The country has radically moved away from this ideal; however, it may never have existed as well as we would like to think it did. Our nation is moving toward a two-class culture, and there is what Davidson calls the “rise of America’s rural ghetto.” It is hard for me to know where I fit.

Through the years, I have received land from my grandparents and parents. I am able to live in California, earning income from it while someone else does the farming. I am not personally caught up in the crises of losing land, being forced off a farm, living in poverty, or having to work for a meat-packing company or Walmart to survive. In that respect, I am on the outside looking in at the farm crisis and at times wondering whether I have a legitimate right to interpret rural Iowa life. The truth is that everyone has a right to interpret his or her own experience, and the notion of a rural Iowa heritage will differ depending on the person.



Of course, there is an era and an issue I have not mentioned. The project could step even further back in history to look at how our nation has treated the Native Americans. Somehow in my growing up years, I believed that the history of Iowa began in the 1800s around the time that the Gunderson family and other settlers came to Pocahontas County.

Many of us recognize that we have pushed Native Americans off the land to the periphery of society and made it nearly impossible for their cultural values or ways of life to survive. What we must also understand is that a culture that exploits will eventually be exploited by someone bigger.

I never thought that the kind of life I knew growing up in Iowa would be jeopardized. I always thought there would be family farms, even if I had not figured out how to be part of them personally. I always thought farming would be valued and farmers treated fairly. I never thought this way of life would be endangered by exploitative and alien forces, including governmental policies that care little about rural values. However, had I studied history more closely, I would have been aware that many of these issues have confronted farmers throughout the history of the Midwest.

That which I call the “rural Iowa culture” is really quite young, about 150 years old. It is hard to think that in such a short time our heritage has barely been planted and risen up, only to fade away or become something very different than our ancestors envisioned. The Native American cultures had existed for a longer period of time and now are nearly erased. What will become of our heritage?

It is important to see our ancestors as pilgrims who were displaced from their national origins, faced uncertainty, traveled to a foreign country, and eventually established new homes. Their strength or identity did not come from remaining on one site forever. Not many people in the history of civilization have been able to do that.

The farms where many of us grew up are important icons, prompting the mind’s eye to recall specific places and people who represent the virtues of our heritage. However, we must

not make them into idols or let our personal identity or sense of God be locked up in one farm, one road, or a particular myth system.

For some of us, including me, who are the product of a rural heritage, it can also be tempting to look back and project a certain kind of security on the farms and family structures where we grew up. Yet we know we cannot go home again. Even if we could, we would find that some of the things that seemed virtuous in those situations will not serve us well now. I may be sounding ambivalent, but that is part of the struggle of sorting out values. It has been an arduous process for me to scrutinize the myth systems that I grew up with and envision the ones that I want to grow into. Joseph Campbell, in his interviews for public television on the power of myth, talked about the changing nature of virtues. He said that a quality that may have been virtuous in one era may later be a liability when circumstances change, and vice versa.

It is important to look at this thing that is called a rural heritage, honoring its positive qualities and being aware of legacies that limit us. As Carol Bly pointed out in a lecture for the Iowa Humanities Board and in her book *Letters from the Country*, there is much that is good about midwestern rural life, and we should not apologize for it. But she goes on to say how it has shaped people, teaching them to repress feelings and devalue the imagination. There may be reasons that some of our ancestors were so stoic. Perhaps it was a virtue they needed in order to survive. Today, it is not a virtue. Instead we need to know what we are feeling and be able to communicate in depth with other people. We also need active imaginations to discover approaches to living that are relevant to today's challenges.

A few years ago, I was at a New Year's Day retreat. The leader gave a definition of home that I found eye-opening and comforting. She said, "Home is not a place but a path you travel and where you meet your family." This definition helps me see my road in Roosevelt Township as a path that many people have traveled in the migration of people coming—some staying and some going—in the history of rural Iowa. It is a place where they have met other people who have become part of a shared heritage. It is no longer my home but a significant part of the path I have traveled.

I realize life is a process of movement and that the journey into the future is as important as the heritage that has brought me to this point. But as I meet the challenge to move ahead, I feel a passion to go back and examine my road. The quest is valid, and just as there can be a certain kind of spiritual discipline found in intimately farming one piece of land, there can also be a spiritual dimension in intimately examining one segment of culture and creating a statement or work of art about it.



Detail of a quilt at the 1900 farm at Living History Farms near Des Moines. Circa 1989.

Piecing a Whole

A 2002 Perspective
from Gilbert, Iowa
Helen D. Gunderson

During 1996—the 125th anniversary year of Iowa becoming a state—the Friends of the Oskaloosa Public Library invited me to give the keynote talk at their annual meeting. The late Beverly Everett, who coordinated my visit, asked me to send a summary of what I intended to talk about so she could give it to the media. I was not a veteran speaker with a well-honed message. However, I penned some thoughts and told her the title would be “We the People: Iowa’s Sesquicentennial as an Opportunity to Reflect on Identity, Values, Meaning, Change, and Community.”

What I wrote reflects the struggles, questions, and ideas I have had since the fall of 1989 when I began photographing the farm buildings along the road where I grew up. For several years, my project involved the gathering of materials—taking photographs, shooting video footage, conducting oral histories, borrowing photographs, doing courthouse research, and keeping a database of information. It seemed fine in the early part of the 1990s to be doing just that; yet, as time wore on, I became concerned that I would never emerge from the gathering phase and produce something with the materials. Fortunately, a couple of public libraries and some galleries invited me to show an exhibit about the project. Even so, I often worried that when it came time for me to leave this earth, my tombstone would say, “Well, she always said she was going to do a book or finish her video, but the poor soul never did—what a pity.”

In part, the delay in producing a book or video has to do with the fact that I am dealing with current history and my story continues to be played out in real life. My parents still live along the road, and I have no idea when they will choose to move or when health problems will force them to move. The story of my road will take on drastic new meaning for me when my parents no longer live there—or when they depart from this earth.

Another part of the delay has to do with the fact that radical changes are happening in agriculture—in other words, the story of farming is ongoing. It has been said that in Iowa if you watch the corn real closely on a sunny day in July, you can see it grow. I haven’t actually seen corn grow, but the analogy is a good one for describing the changes in agriculture. There is a lot of seasonal routine that makes farm life appear to be the same from one year to the next. However, if you stop and pay attention—for instance as I do as an outside observer with my camera—you can see changes happening right in front of your face. There are the razing of buildings, the removal of fences, the removal of a mile of dirt road, the last hayfield, the last cattle and pigs, the first tractor with caterpillar treads used for tillage, and the first genetically modified seed as evidenced by new corporate seed signs posted along the road. The rate of agricultural change in the last decade, just as the rate of change in society at large, is much faster than our ancestors would ever have envisioned or than I could have imagined as a child in the 1950s.

Another part of the delay has to do with my own maturation and coming to terms with my love/hate relationship with my rural heritage. And as is often the case with someone trying to express herself, there was (or is) that element called the writer’s block.

For a long time, I have known the issues that I want to address in this project, but it has been hard to find a focus among the many threads of thought. It has been (and still is) hard to fathom giving voice to any matters of depth that family members or other people might find offensive.

I've appreciated the opportunity to mount exhibits about my road. I am glad Beverly Everett invited me to speak to the Friends of the Oskaloosa Library. Each of those projects or, should I say, deadlines, was a catalyst for me to form my thoughts and organize my materials one more notch toward ending the gathering phase and beginning the production process.

The letter I sent to Beverly explaining my tentative ideas for my talk is a good barometer of the issues that were on my mind in 1996—not only for her library program but for any eventual book or video I would create. Here is some of what I wrote:

I may speak about the value of the arts (photography, literature, etc.) as a mirror and shield for us to use in understanding who we are and to gain wisdom to meet the challenges that face us. The arts can be like the shield in Greek mythology that Athena gave Perseus so he could slay the monster Medusa and not be killed in the process. I may speak about how I started out with a passion to return to Iowa to photograph the rural scene; that I was drawn to photograph abandoned buildings but that the process led to other interests; that there was an inner eye leading me toward something—toward dealing with my love/hate for my heritage; that my work has given me insights and wisdom and has been a healing process; that my project has put me in touch with many people; and that I have discovered community through it.

I may also speak about rigidity; about the hazard of not being able to talk about tough issues; about people becoming divided and labeling each other and not really knowing who each other is. But I would also talk about how we may not even know ourselves as individuals very well because (for the most part) our culture is one that stays on the surface of things. Where is it that we can feel safe to explore who we are as individuals and what our passions are all about? Can we truly have healthy families and communities if we follow the advice that says, "If you can't say anything nice, don't say anything at all"?

What do we see about ourselves and our heritage when we look at an exquisite photo of an abandoned farm or of draft horses at work, when we read a memoir of rural life or listen to Garrison Keillor spin a tale, when we hear the hymn "Tis a Gift to be Simple" or "For the Beauty of the Earth," or when we see a film such as *Country* or *Field of Dreams*?

What do we yearn for in the past and what do we hope for in the future? Do we dare dream? How can we be imaginative in hard economic times when there is a movement for our culture to be more rigid and intolerant? Can we let our imaginations lead us into creative and wise solutions? People need more than bread; they need roses too. A person needs to nurture the soul, belong to community, reach for the future, and become all of who she or he is meant to be as an individual. And finally, if our communities aren't what they used to be, how can we find new ways to establish a sense of community?

The title I gave Beverly for my talk could easily be converted to fit my road project: “We the People: A Rural Road Project as an Opportunity to Reflect on Identity, Values, Meaning, Change, and Community.” Of course, the project is not a democratic one; it is my project and in ways is a portrait of myself. I recall a portrait photography class that I took at a community college in Napa, California. We spent the initial class sessions in tedious discussions, trying to define portraiture. In the process, I realized that any work of art is a self-portrait of the artist. An artist who chooses a bright and cheery scene and portrays it with glossy colors is creating a reflection of that dimension of herself. An artist who instead picks an isolated and somber scene, perhaps a lone corncrib in a hayfield, and renders it in black and white photography or in muted tones, is creating a reflection of another part of who she is. Some artists stay on the surface, avoiding deep inner joy or consternation. Some artists seek to create work that is soulful. I am one of the latter.

Granted, this is *my* project. The themes, the written essays, the oral history remarks, the photos, the layout, how it is edited—all these elements have been dictated in an unilateral way. On the other hand, I have deliberately chosen to include the stories of people who have lived along my road rather than focus on a singular autobiography or family history. Hopefully, the inclusion of multiple voices will add interest to the project, not only because of the variety of stories, but because of the variety of mindsets.

It is easy to fall back on stereotypes and assume that all people from small-town, rural Iowa would think alike. Instead, it is fascinating to discover how people, who all have lived along the same road, can be the products of different myth systems: different ways of seeing things and different values. It is valuable, however, that this project is the work of one person rather than by a committee or by other democratic processes. The latter usually has a way of watering down a creative project—taking the bubbles out of champagne and the fizz out of a bottle of pop. Also, not many people would take the time to gather all the material and then churn away with it to produce a quality final project.



Sometimes this work comes easy, even the writing. But often—especially with the writing—I feel like I am entering a dark tunnel or deep abyss. I wear a miner’s helmet but it has a weak battery, and the light is dimmer than heck and practically useless. Yet I continue to enter this inner darkness to explore who I am, to understand what this project means, and to decide how I will interpret the experience of growing up along that road. By entering the abyss, I learn that it is not as important to be able to see with my eyes; instead, the key is to explore what I feel. The process is called soul work. The abyss is the space where a person can hear the still small voice of God as Elijah did. It is also a space where I can connect with my subconscious self. I discover memories that are asking for attention, and I must again experience those forgotten fragments of my life, whether painful or beautiful, in order for healing to occur. The inner abyss is not full of death as is often associated with darkness. Instead, by entering it, I can discover a source of light to illumine not only the journey inward but the journey outward as I connect with other sojourners.

I recall conversations I have had with a spiritual director named Zoila, who is an Episcopal priest. We met in 1983 when I was in my second year of studies at a Presbyterian seminary in the San Francisco area. The next year, I interned with a congregation in St. Helena and in 1985, after graduation, returned to that town and focused on photography and developing a small

business called Gunder-friend Productions. I opted to not seek an ordainable position for a variety of reasons. The key was my realization that I was more called to use my creativity and become an artist than to be a generalist as a pastor with the responsibility of encouraging the talents of parishioners.

Religious denominations and seminaries place a lot of emphasis on discerning who is genuine pastoral material. I have often said that the seminary atmosphere was like “Mirror, mirror on the wall, who is the most pastoral of us all.” I once told Zoila that seminary was too much like a vocational school in that it trains pastors for specific congregational roles rather than understanding there is a whole spectrum of callings in life. She pointed to the term *vocational* and said it is derived from the Latin term *vocare* which means “to call.” In essence, she meant that regardless of the fact that the seminary process was a training ground for pastors, it had served me well in helping me discern my call to work with photography and express myself through the arts.



Finally, in the summer of 1993, I decided to move back to Iowa, a step I had dreaded for a long time. Although I felt more truly myself in California, I also knew that in order to take my road project seriously, I had to return to my home state and be more accessible to my hometown area. Being here with my own apartment and car is much better than trying to conduct the project by commuting between Iowa and California. To have remained on the West Coast, I would have needed to pay high airfares, then either rent or borrow a car, and stay with people at the risk of overdoing my welcome or the risk of trying to accomplish too much in one trip before heading back to the West Coast.

It was difficult to contemplate the move back to Iowa but easy to discount the value of my work. It was also easy to question why I had gone to seminary and tempting to think of myself as a failure compared to other graduates who had gone on to be ordained and take pastoral positions. But Zoila did not criticize my choices. Instead she encouraged me to pursue the call to work on my Iowa projects.

Zoila had a neat way of reframing my misconceptions. When we first met in 1983, it was at the beginning of the Lenten season, and I asked if she expected me to give up something for Lent. Instead, she asked me what it was that I wanted to take up—perhaps regular walks in the green hills covered with oak trees in the Mt. Tamalpais Watershed behind the seminary. She also had a way of reinterpreting liturgical symbolism such as the eucharist. She saw beauty and soulfulness in my photography. She knew my story about my rural background, seminary journey, longing to find a career niche, and dreams of being of service to humanity. She often said that I should think about my work in the framework of providing bread for the world.

One of our most poignant conversations occurred in January 1993. Zoila suggested that I was not creating something new under the sun with my road project. Instead, she said I was working with something that already existed. She went on to explain that I was bringing together aspects of different peoples' lives and shaping the pieces into a form that people could use to reflect on their lives and to find sustenance. An image of the Lord's Supper flashed through my mind. I suggested to Zoila that it would be a significant ritual if each person who came to worship brought a scrap of bread representing his or her brokenness and that those pieces would be joined together through the mystery of the liturgy to create a loaf

of bread to be used for Holy Communion. In other words, the liturgical leader would break apart the newly created loaf and offer the bread back to the people to feed them at a deeper level. Indeed, the word *liturgy* means “the work of the people.” Zoila agreed and said that the process I described was what communion was all about—that together, our brokenness can be transformed and made into bread for one another and the world.

The work of a liturgist, theologian, or artist is to work with common, or perhaps even mundane, elements of life and use them to interpret life in meaningful ways. The challenge is to work with these elements in a mystical or soulful way that allows the spirit to move through them. That is what Garrison Keillor does when he takes scraps of small town, rural Minnesota life and spins them together in ways that feed the souls of his listeners.

I also liken the process to what I have learned in the past several years about making quilts. I never thought I had it in me to make quilts, but often after I came back to Iowa, I stayed with a friend, Ruth, and her family in Pocahontas in their big Victorian house. She was an excellent quilter but a conventional one and a purist, sewing her bed-size quilts by hand. One Christmas vacation, after I realized that a person could piece a quilt with a machine, Ruth got me started on making my first quilt block. Then I was hooked. It was not long before I asked Mother if I could have the Singer Featherlite portable sewing machine, which our family obtained in the late 1950s for 4-H projects. The Featherlite is a durable and smooth-running model coveted by many quilters.

During the 1990s, I also recall meeting a man named Carmon, who is a textile artist and had a fabulous exhibit of quilts at the Unitarian-Universalist Fellowship in Ames. His genre was entirely different than Ruth’s. Instead of conventional quilts, his pieces were prophetic and included found objects such as a jacket pocket, a zipper from a pair of blue jeans, a photo of J. Edgar Hoover, or fabric he had silk-screened with the staff, musical notes, and lyrics of the hymn “’Tis a Gift to be Simple.” Carmon also coordinated three large quilt panels—each some 14 feet high and six feet wide—for a mural that hangs in the main meeting room of the fellowship. When Carmon designed the quilt, he incorporated many small pieces of fabric that members donated to the project to represent their lives or the life of the fellowship. And although Carmon did the master planning, many hands worked on quilting the finished panels.

I still quilt, but I am not a conventional quilter such as Ruth nor an innovative one such as Carmon. I visit the quilting stores now and then—it seems there is one in every significantly sized Iowa town these days—to stock up on material and eventually find ways to use it. My repertoire includes pillow covers, place mats, and quilted vests. My approach is vastly different than the old-time process in which a quilter used scraps left over from sewing projects, material from clothing the family had outgrown, and chicken feed sacks made of cotton. It is amazing how those artisans could piece something together that was functional yet beautiful, providing both warmth and nurture with value not only during their lifetimes but in the lives of their descendants.

Quilting has been one way to learn to trust the creative process, especially since I do not use prescribed patterns or kits. A person cannot rush a quilt. It takes a long time, patience, and plenty of attention to detail to make one. That is also true of a long-term project such as my book.

Another interesting aspect of quilt making is the role of intuition. Sure, it helps to know math and have an aptitude for geometry, but a large portion of my quilting involves playing around with colors and fabric designs. I may get obsessed and stay up all night hauling out swatches from my stockpile of fabric. I place them on a large desk to see what goes together. Sometimes, two fabrics that I thought would be great partners simply do not go together. Sometimes, I have to dig to the bottom of my stockpile before I find a nearly forgotten piece of fabric that ends up working perfectly in the new project. However, I cannot force these choices. Intuition is important. In addition to playfulness, a creative project involves a spell

or two of musing to discern what the design will be. Sometimes, the final design is vastly different from the one I had in mind when I bought the fabric.

All this is true of my road project as well. I may have had a notion of where I wanted to go when I started this book, but putting it together has meant a long process of staying up late at night and digging into the stockpile of written materials and photographs to discern what fits together and in what pattern.

The final parallel between making a quilt and developing this book has to do with how new ideas or possibilities occur during an artistic endeavor. Sometimes, as I begin cutting fabric and sewing pieces together, the creative muse nudges me and suggests that another color or fabric pattern would work better than the choices I had made at the outset of the project. I have heard writers say this happens when they work on a novel. An author may think he or she knows the plot of a book when starting the first chapter, but in the midst of writing, a new character or story line appears that demands attention. It has been important for me to shift from the gathering phase of my road project to the production phase of putting this book together. Engaging in the creative process provides a new way of learning about myself and the culture in which I grew up. And a few new characters and story lines have appeared that demand attention. But most importantly, the act of writing—deciding what needs to be said and in what tone—helps me learn more about myself and the culture of my youth. Indeed, the process helps me find my voice and has brought about healing. As one friend, Mary Helen Stefaniak, who is a writer and reviewed some of my work in 1995, said, one of the themes of my project could be “The softening of hard feelings and rigid boundaries.”

Just as any quilt should be appreciated as a whole without peering closely to see the flaws in how the pieces were cut or stitched, I hope readers will view this work as a whole and not get hung up on any parts that may be uncomfortable to read. As in any work of art, it is important to have a range of light and dark features, a spectrum of color tones, and a variety of textures to make a meaningful whole. I have attempted to assemble the elements of this book in a thoughtful and fair way with no intention to harm anyone.



I recall that Mother, when she was director of the Rolfe Public Library, orchestrated an oral history project for the town in the 1980s. She hoped that all the members of our family would make a tape. I was living in Fargo then, and in 1981, just before I headed west to seminary, I wrote an outline and then sat on my living room couch with a tape recorder and recorded my thoughts about my life and decision to enroll in seminary. After listening to the tape, Mother wrote me a letter and said that I had been blunt in my remarks. I responded that the word “candid” would have been a more appropriate description than “blunt.”

How a quilt or my road project is perceived depends on the eyes of the beholder. As I mentioned before, some people still cling to the adage, “If you can’t say anything nice, don’t say it at all.” However, it is important for people to know themselves and give voice to that which is calling for expression—not only for the health of the individual but for the health of society.



Garlic harvest at Helen's urban farm in Ames, Iowa. 2011.

Completing a Project

A 2019 Perspective
from Ames, Iowa
Helen D. Gunderson

During my sleep on most nights, I have vivid dreams. Some nightmares. Some blissful. Some complex. Many make no sense. Most vanish as early as noon. Some have been prophetic, and I remember them clearly even though they occurred decades ago. I can best describe one such dream from the early 1990s as being an icon of truth that has kept reminding me of the importance of my project about the road I grew up on.

The dream begins with a classic plot line that has occurred often in my dreams. In the spring of my senior year of high school, I have been skipping classes and fear I will not be able to graduate with my peers. One of the school's two English teachers, Barbara Olerich, meets me in the shadows at the end of a hallway near the top of a stairwell, where I have lingered alone during the lunch hour, and talks privately with me.

In real life, Mrs. Olerich did teach at Rolfe High School. She was also a friend of my parents, Marion and Deane Gunderson, and an active Republican with committee roles on both the state and national level. She was a proud, opinionated woman who in the decades since has often reminded me of Phyllis Schlafly, an outspoken, articulate attorney and Republican matriarch who turned the tide against the passage of the Equal Rights Amendment with her successful STOP ERA campaign in the 1970s.

Mrs. Olerich was not my favorite teacher, and having her speak to me in the dream scenario should have been daunting. Instead, it is not. She is understanding and supportive. Mrs. Olerich confides that the school board, administration, and various teachers have discussed my truancy. They have concluded that if I would choose and complete an interdisciplinary project, it would not only fill my course requirements and allow me to graduate with the rest of my class, but it would also be of service to the community.

My intention in the era when I had the dream was to choose one documentary project from a list of several possible topics. I would decide to focus on stories of people related to the neighborhood where I had been raised; however, even the version of the book that I had completed in 2004 contained a significant amount of memoir and opinion. Now after a 15-year hiatus and with the addition of new chapters that I wrote this year, the book has morphed into even more memoir and commentary. Not surprisingly, the project has turned out to be not solely about a fixed five-mile road in a specific geographical area, but about my journey along that road and beyond. I probably have always wanted, even if subconsciously, to write a memoir, but it took starting with a collective project before I could be more authentic in giving voice to my own story.

To understand the significance of the dream, it is important to understand that era of my life. In 1981, I had enrolled in San Francisco Theological Seminary. The school had just developed a visionary center for spirituality based on the teachings of psychologist Carl Jung, who was an advocate of using dreams to seek wisdom—even what some people might call divine insight. I had not intended to become ordained but had gone to SFTS to learn

more about Christianity, faith, and spirituality. For a while, however, especially with all the talk by fellow students who seemed self-assured in believing they felt a sense of calling to be parish pastors, I bought into the notion that being ordained as a pastor would elevate my stature. In some respects, it seemed that becoming ordained would make me feel more whole, analogous to how a bride might anticipate she would have an ideal life by becoming married in a high church wedding ceremony. It became clear, however, during visits to a career planning center in Oakland, California, that professional church work was not my calling and I should take my long-term interests in photography more seriously.

It did not take many years of hindsight for me to become convinced that too much emphasis is placed on the errant belief that a person, who is seeking to be ordained, possesses a calling that is more special than the callings that other people of intention experience. Also, I believe that in many circles, too much deference is given to members of the clergy simply because of their being ordained. Members of the clergy are no more or less divine and no more or less human than non-ordained people.

As graduation approached in May 1985, I felt I was walking off a gangplank into the great unknown of what I would do with my life. I returned to St. Helena, California, the town where I had done an internship at the Presbyterian Church, to be close to friends. By the fall of 1989—30 years ago—I began traveling back to Iowa on photo forays, and by 1992, I knew I wanted to focus my documentary work on the neighborhood where I had grown up.

Even a few years into the project, I had some bummed attitudes about it. I often chided myself that to travel back to Iowa for a photo project could be considered regressive—a falling back to familiar turf and pretending to be a photo/video documentarian but not really moving forward in life with my seminary degree or otherwise earning my own way. Although I have enjoyed many aspects of working on my project, my journals include plenty of entries about self-doubt, blue moods, fatigue, and procrastination, and at least one time when I wrote, “That damn road project.”

The road project, which at times seemed like a regression, has educated me, giving me a foundation for being more involved in farm conversations and decisions, including managing my own farmland and helping me find a lifestyle that is diverse and remarkable. One of the biggest lessons from all these years is that life is not linear, and what one perceives as a default choice can lead over time to something quite wonderful even if there are no guarantees of how one’s story will unfold. As is often the case, the key is to take one step at a time and, as my therapist often advised, “Trust the process.”

The project has gained considerable visibility: grants from Humanities Iowa, the Iowa Arts Council, and State Historical Society of Iowa; a seven-minute feature on Iowa Public Television’s *Talk of Iowa* show; exhibits at libraries and galleries; sections of the book posted to my website; and a 10-minute video on YouTube.

The most affirming event happened on February 12, 2018. The students in Iowa State University’s Graduate Program in Sustainable Agriculture invited me to speak at their colloquium held in Curtiss Hall, where I had taken undergraduate classes in sociology and education. I never did take a course in the College of Agriculture. Yet, there I was—someone, who as part of what had seemed like a regression following a seminary education in California, had come back to her home state, wondering if it were the love of her life or a default, and had woven together a life worth sharing with young people at what might be considered the mecca of agricultural education and influence. I felt as though the words of Mrs. Olerich in my dream from the early 1990s had come true, and that I had succeeded with my interdisciplinary project far past the level of earning a high school diploma.

Another life-affirming element involved the discovery of my home in Ames that I bought in 2006. Then I bought the next house in 2013 and have converted the two residential lots into

a wonderful urban farm that covers nearly a half-acre. The farm and my documentary work have both become interdisciplinary projects that have served both the community and me.

In December 2018, Beth McNeil, Dean of the Iowa State University Parks Library, whose Special Collections Department houses my documentary materials and personal papers, told me at a lunch meeting that the library was creating a digital press and would be willing to publish my book. Then in January 2019, elements of the universe seemed to align, and I was motivated to invest months of work in finishing my project.

I am grateful that Adam Blake Wright has been available to be, as he said, my “spirit guide and cheerleader,” as well as editor. Adam came to Iowa State from North Carolina and earned one master’s degree in Sustainable Agriculture and another in Creative Writing and the Environment. He also worked two seasons at my urban farm before traveling to New Zealand.

To my good fortune, Adam returned to Ames temporarily in January 2019 while his friend, Molly, worked as a chef at The Café, and he looked wide and far for a full-time job. I do not believe he knew of my documentary work or writing prior to returning to Ames. Even so, I knew we had deep respect for each other and asked if he would help me finish the book. Our friendship has been a sweet one, much akin to the deep fondness that a grandparent and grandchild might share, and our working relationship has been beautiful—the timing has been perfect. After a few months in Ames, Adam returned to North Carolina to hunker down with family and continue to look for work. In August, he finished line-editing the book before heading to Colorado Springs, where he now works as the agricultural arts teacher for a K-8 Waldorf School called Mountain Song Community School. I am also grateful to my sister Clara and brother Charles, especially for help with researching family and Pocahontas County history.

One might ask why it took so long to finish the book. Although it is easy to reply that I have procrastinated a lot and had plenty of self-doubt along the way, it is important to acknowledge that it would have been hard for me to express myself fully and make the book available while my parents were still living. Also, I had long intuited that I would not be able to finish the project until “the story was finished,” which would be when my parents and their farmhouse were gone. Mother died in 2004. Dad died in 2010. Finally, in 2018, after the house sat empty for eight years, my sister Clara, who owns it, had it razed.

In the days shortly before my father died, a new friend, Marilla Fox, who was a retired psychotherapist and developing a grief support group at the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Ames, offered to meet with me and other family members at my home. Clara, Charles, and his wife, Gloria, were the only ones who took up the offer. Yet considering how Clara, Charles, and I make up what feels like the first of two families of my parents, the meeting was wonderful and a great help for me in processing grief and related issues. I am grateful to Marilla for her support and ongoing friendship.

My life’s focus shifted significantly in 2006 when I bought this residential property that has evolved into an urban farm. When I told Clara my plans to buy it, she reminded me that most people of my age, 61, were starting to reduce their commitments. I replied that I had never really had the chance to be a farmer, even a casual farmer.

It had not been enough for me simply to tag around the rural neighborhood where I had been raised, photographing true farmers. Instead, I wanted to be the farmer who would be working the soil, growing plants, cooking with homegrown produce, and developing a place with a rural feeling of hospitality. The downside of this urban farm was that I found it nearly impossible to be both a farmer and someone trotting off to document the lives of other people. I no longer had the time nor the intense interest I once had in visiting the turf of my childhood.

Becoming a farmer in my own right on my own urban farm also meant that, on occasion, I needed help visually documenting what I was doing here. I am grateful for Dennis Goodrich, a friend of some 27 years and now retired from a career in video production at Iowa State, for his willingness to bring his camcorder and record my efforts in my childhood neighborhood and on my urban farm.

My interests in using locally grown produce and hospitality carried over to my membership at the Unitarian Fellowship. From 2007 to 2012, I recruited people for what was simply called The Meals Group. We organized several Sunday noon meals each year, including an annual “Iowa Grown” meal with the idea that the food we provided would come, as much as possible, from ingredients grown locally or from around the state. I took great pride in providing homemade bread and pint jars of dill or bread and butter pickles—one for each table.

My interest in food hospitality has shifted to my urban farm where I have hosted many different types of meals. They have included a Fourth of July picnic, a luncheon after a graveside service for a friend, a farewell party for other friends, solstice dinners, and what is becoming an annual Practical Farmers of Iowa-sponsored potluck for Story County and ISU’s Graduate Program in Sustainable Agriculture on the Sunday evening before the beginning of Iowa State’s fall semester.

Also, my friend Jonah Powell and I make bread made from Iowa-grown grains for the Ames Food at First community dinners that the ISU Graduate Program in Sustainable Agriculture coordinates once a month.

In the 1990s, I took cooking classes through the Magic Beanstalk Community Supported Agriculture organization that focused on using locally grown ingredients. That’s when I first met Mary Sand and Kim McDermott, who were excellent teachers and tolerated my obstreperous behavior well. They, as well as chef Donna Prizgintas and former caterer Janie Lohnes, have not only been good friends but are people I can call on short notice with cooking questions. And of course, the ISU Consumer Hotline has also been an excellent source for advice on food preparation.

I am grateful for the nearly 25-year-old friendship I have with Joy Leister, whom I first met when we both lived in Gilbert, the small town just north of Ames. She and her husband were the first to rent my next door house, then they moved to Indiana to be closer to their grandchildren. Joy and I still visit by phone several times a week, and I believe she knows me as well or better than any family member or friend.

I also am fortunate to have known the late Janet Klaas, Ames librarian and historian, who delighted in editing opinion pieces I had written for the *Ames Tribune* and church newsletter and encouraged me to forge ahead with my writing.

One incentive for finding a house in Ames was to have sufficient space to grow at least one new apple tree started with scionwood from the Wealthy tree at my grandparents’ farm. This year, for the first time, the all-organic orchard that I have established has produced a bounty of cherries, plums, and apples with enough healthy Wealthy and Sweet 16 apples to make 22 pint jars of applesauce and a substantial stash of dried apple slices. I am a happy camper, especially when I bite into a Wealthy apple and the taste of it makes me feel as though I am a seven-year-old child on the homeplace farm.

Health issues have also motivated me to finish this book. In the past few years, I have visited the emergency room at Mary Greeley Medical Center in Ames four times with three overnight stays in the hospital. The first incident was when I did the dumb thing of trying to use my cell phone while riding my bicycle. It ended in a bad fall that injured my left hip. The other visits were due to mild symptoms that could have been related to stroke or heart problems. The worst diagnosis was that I had experienced a TIA (a mild stroke that

does no damage). The good news is that these ER visits have been wake-up calls, reminding me that life does not last forever, and even if relatively healthy over the next decades, my ability to think and write alertly could deteriorate to the point that I could not finish the book. Fortunately, I have the support of many people, including yoga teacher Ruthann Obrien Haddish, acupuncturist Michelle Ybarra-Rojas, massage therapist Christina Morton, health coach Amy Miller, and a network of friends who have helped me maintain good health and feel at home in Ames and the universe.

In 2015, many of those friends helped me organize a dinner for more than 120 guests that featured Iowa grown food, followed by contra dancing and music by local musicians to celebrate my 70th birthday at the Unitarian Fellowship. It was certainly a festive event, and I do not know of any other time that I have felt such exquisite and sustained joy. I had requested that any gifts be in the form of financial donations to Practical Farmers of Iowa (PFI), and the party generated nearly \$1,000 for the organization.

I am indebted to Teresa Opheim, director of PFI from 2006 to 2016, whose grandparents, Vera and Bill Fisher, had lived in the Rolfe area and were friends of my grandparents, DeElda and John Gunderson. Teresa has long been an ardent supporter of my writing, video production efforts, and growing involvement in managing my land. In preparation for the 2015 birthday celebration, she researched an archive of my written materials and presented a wonderful toast, reading some of my words and adding her own commentary about me, the state of agriculture, and the role of PFI. Thank you for your thoughtfulness, Teresa.

Over the past decade, I have often asked myself if I really needed to complete the book, or if I could be satisfied with the work I had already done and satisfied enough with who I am that it would make no difference to my self-esteem if I simply detached and moved on from the project. The answer had always been, “Well, sort of, yes, I could be satisfied.” Now the answer is that I absolutely want to finish this book while I am capable to get the job done.

Some people might ask if working on the project has been cathartic. My response would be, “Not really.” Yet completing this 30-year project is a major relief. Certainly, my perspectives and opinions about my rural heritage will continue to evolve, but I will not be so caught up in thinking about them and deciding how to express them.

To set some context, in 1995, I met with a history professional, Ed Purcell of Des Moines, who had been recommended to be a consultant for this project, using grant funds from the State Historical Society of Iowa. I had plenty of photographs and fragments of written materials to share with him but no sense of how to proceed. It could be said I was expecting “an expert” to pull a rabbit out of a hat and finish the book. After our one meeting, he wrote a candid letter saying he would not be able to work with me in light of career changes and having reservations about my dedication to finishing my project. On March 16, 1995, I wrote in my journal:

I met with Ed, my consultant, last week. I think I “get” what he is saying. The task is not one of “being productive” by societal standards but of engaging in the creative process so that I will learn more about myself and my rural heritage in a manner that can happen only by engaging in the process and then sharing the creation for others to view and participate in. I owe this to myself and others. He said he is impressed with what he has already seen of my work, but that he wants to see/hear more. He was gently firm and pragmatic.

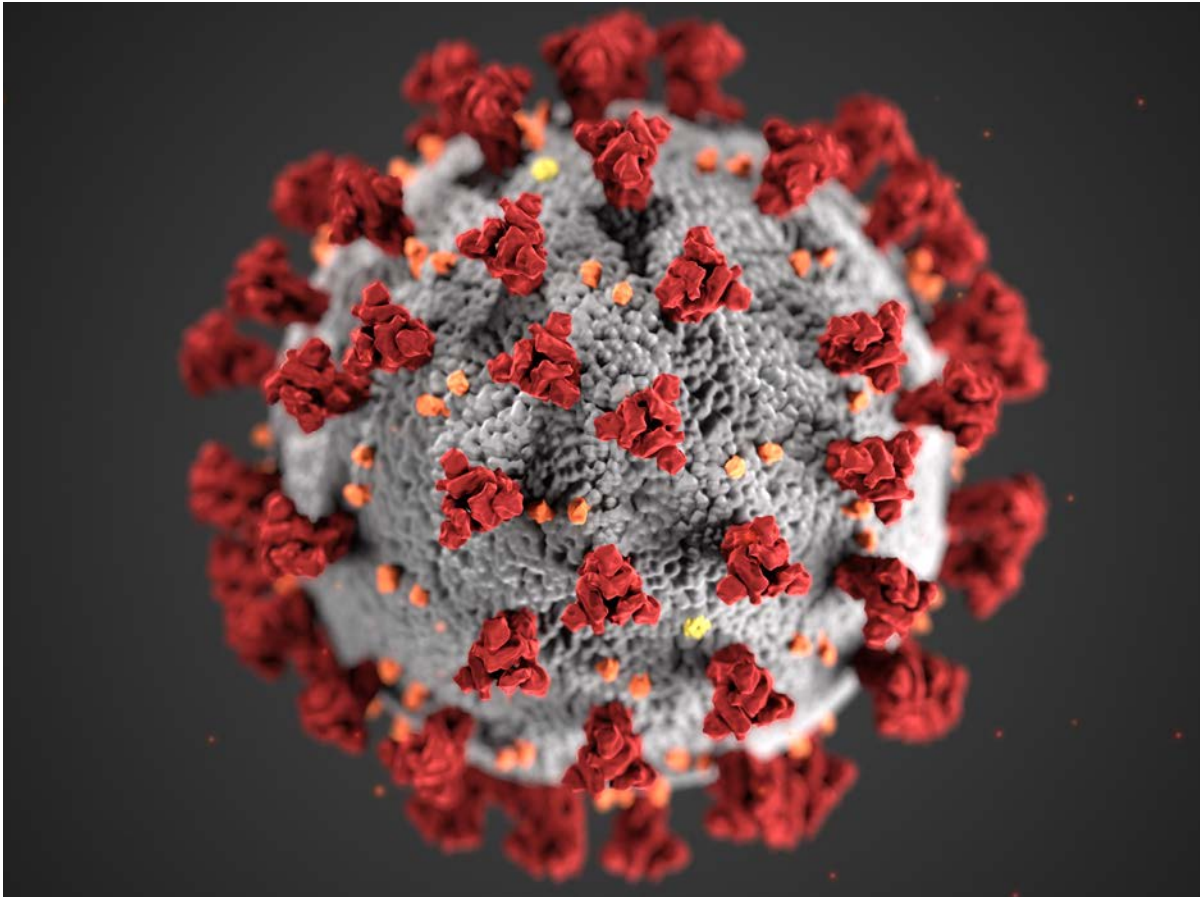
As it turned out, I hired Mary Helen Stefaniak, an author and friend I had met when she worked for the Iowa Humanities Board. She is now a Professor Emerita of Creighton

University after teaching 19 years in the school's English department. I am grateful for her friendship, motivation, and insights.

I feel a gentle, deep sense of well-being akin to breathing in the aroma of lavender oils wafting through a room or the refreshing smell from brushing my hand through the leaves of a cilantro plant in a garden bed shortly after a soft rain. The recognition of this new spirit is not a sudden aha experience but the kinds of slowly evolving maturity and insight that come from several factors: encouragement from other people, creative engagement with the materials, the passage of time, greater wisdom, new perspectives, and the practice of mindfulness and gratitude.

I am both proud and humbled. I smile. One might expect I would be humming "Pomp and Circumstance." Instead, I find myself, nearly daily, humming the tune of the song, "Today," made popular by the New Christy Minstrels in 1964.

I was a counselor during the summers of 1965 and 1966 at YMCA Camp Manitowish in northern Wisconsin. Its evening fireside gatherings in the main lodge with exterior walls constructed of boulders and wooden timbers provided some of the best songfests I have experienced. That's where I fell in love with the song "Today" written by Randy Sparks, made popular by the New Christy Minstrels in 1964, and performed by John Denver, the Sandpipers and other musicians within the decade. The guitar melody by itself is pensive, nostalgic and hopeful. It generates complex feelings. Tears of both grief and appreciation come to my eyes. Sorrow wells up in my chest, yet I smile. The lyrics are about events that are simultaneously mundane and exquisite such as tasting fresh strawberries and drinking sweet wine. The lyrics remind me to appreciate the present moment and know that although time does pass, the joy I have had in the bounty of friendships and other dimensions of life such as my urban farm in Ames or as far back as visiting my grandparents at their farm in Pocahontas County will remain with me even though circumstances have changed drastically and will continue to change. Indeed, when I hum or listen to "Today," I feel a great deal of wholeness and joy in general and especially in completing this book even though much of it is about loss and disturbing changes in rural America.



This illustration, created at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), reveals ultrastructural morphology exhibited by coronaviruses. Note the spikes that adorn the outer surface of the virus, which impart the look of a corona surrounding the virion, when viewed electron microscopically. A novel coronavirus, named Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2), was identified as the cause of an outbreak of respiratory illness first detected in Wuhan, China in 2019. The illness caused by this virus has been named coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19). *Photo credit: Alissa Eckert, MSML; Dan Higgins, MAMS. 2020.*

Living in a Pandemic

A 2020 Perspective
from Ames, Iowa
Helen D. Gunderson

In the fall 1999, I believed I had completed writing this book. Circumstances would arise, however, by late April 2020, that prompted me to write again. In January the coronavirus that had barely been on the world radar screen, let alone in U.S. news, had spread into a pandemic that has radically changed the culture of nations around the world. Initially I intended write a short epilogue from the perspective of living in the age of the pandemic, not realizing the pandemic would continue to balloon and be an ever present threat with no end in sight. I also did not anticipate the confluence of the pandemic with intensified news of systemic racism and of the president's desire to have unbridled authority. My few pages of new writing morphed into 40 pages.

If for no other reason, writing a new final chapter has been a valuable way for me to deal with these challenging times and record thoughts that could be appropriate for a personal time capsule. I would love to know more about what life was like for my ancestors, for instance, during the Great Depression of the 1930s. They most likely were well-enough endowed that they did not suffer much compared to other families. Still, I would like to know, and perhaps someday, someone might want to know what life was like for me or other residents of Ames, Iowa, during the pandemic.

During these difficulties, or for that matter, during any challenging phase of life, I would encourage people to write and not be fussy about choosing a genre, whether it be emotionally charged entries to toss in the wastebasket at the end of a writing session, succinct details in a diary, a gratitude journal, other feelings and thoughts in a personal journal, or perspectives about local circumstances. One could also write letters or cards to family members, friends or other people, for instance, thanking a city council member, nurse, postal worker, hardware store clerk, or neighbor. One could make connections with someone incarcerated in prison or a person quarantined in a nursing home, or one could write a letter to an editor or elected officials.

I completed the new last chapter for this book on the morning of July 31, 2020. That same day, a Friday, due to having been in close contact with friend who had tested positive for COVID-19, I drove to the Test Iowa site in Des Moines to be tested for COVID-19. Because I had not driven on the Interstate, with its new complicated ramp system, between Ames and Des Moines in recent years, I chose to take back roads. I planned to travel directly south from Ames along the west side of Ankeny and into north central Des Moines. Unfortunately, I took a wrong turn and found myself northeast of Des Moines in Bondurant, nine miles off my intended route. The mistake was beneficial, considering how I was extra anxious about what the friend had told me about her experience of taking the test – that it was exceptionally painful. The need to focus on navigating complex roads and getting to the right place on time became a distraction from my worries. The mistake was also beneficial because the detour gave me the opportunity to see many huge examples of urban sprawl and related development in an area that had consisted of small towns and farm fields north and east

of Des Moines in the 1960s when I attended Iowa State University. Large tracts of land had been excavated, leaving sculpted mountains of soil in preparation, I presume, for new roads, subdivisions, public facilities such as schools, and corporate centers. The most conspicuous new construction that attracted my interest was long, low, and large with more loading docks than I could count. I guessed it to be Amazon's first ever fulfillment warehouse in Iowa. Once home, I did some Internet research. The facility was announced to the public in February, but on the drawing board and with non-transparent arrangements with the City of Bondurant long before Amazon officially released its plans to the public. It is intended to cover 645,000 square feet with an estimated cost of \$295 million and will hire 1,000 employees. Facebook is building a fifth data center just six miles south of Bondurant in Altoona. The construction of these large-scale Amazon and Facebook projects reminds me that agriculture, which is a major focus of this book, is not the only arena in which corporate America is impacting the Iowa landscape, its communities, and culture.

Finally, I arrived at the Test Iowa site. The security officer at the entrance to the drive-through area in a parking lot showed no concern about my tardiness. There was hardly a wait as I sat in my car with the windows rolled up and only five cars ahead of me as we inched forward to the central testing area under a large awning. The staff was friendly. A woman asked that I show her the barcode that I had received online and printed at home. I held the paper flat against the inside of the car window, while she scanned it. Then she asked to scan my driver's license. As she looked closer at me to begin the test, she said that it looked like I had experienced a recent fall. She was correct. Only 10 days earlier, when walking out of the Carpet One store with an envelope and pre-ordered piece of metal the size of a yard stick, I was focused on the envelope and missed the curb, falling to all fours and knocking the left side of my forehead hard on the concrete. Little did I realize that accident might be a factor in the agony I would experience when the woman actually performed the COVID-19 test. She inserted a cotton swab, I imagine an specially-designed, long Q-tip, up my right nostril. The experience was uncomfortable but manageable. Then she inserted a second cotton swab up my left nostril. I screamed. It was as though she had pushed the probe into an inflamed, infected boil. Had she kept it there much longer, I may have fainted, but within seconds, the test was completed. I drove to a Casey's store to buy gas and use the restroom.

The excruciating pain did not last long, but my nose continued to hurt for a day. In hindsight, I realized the location where the woman inserted the probe into my left nostril was within two inches of the spot where my left brow had hit the concrete. Considering that I had a huge indigo-colored shiner around my left eye in the days after my fall, I imagined there might be a correlation. Did I already have some internal damage in the sinus cavities, and the probe simply aggravated an already sensitive spot? Or perhaps that's the nature of that test – causing great pain to many people. One could only hope for a more friendly kind of test to become available soon.

I drove back to Ames. A friend, Amy Miller, who is my health coach, delivered several bottles of kombucha (a fermented tea), a sandwich, and chips I had pre-ordered from Wheatsfield. She also brought zinc and another supplement to boost my immune system. All I wanted to do was drink kombucha, eat, have space for myself with my cats, and take a long nap.

The Test Iowa woman told me I would get results within two days. An official follow-up email, however, said I would get results within three business days. Fortunately, by Saturday night, a text message arrived instructing me to check online to get my results. They were negative. Whew. A relief to be sure. But a wake-up call, as well, to be more careful about wearing masks, restricting people from entering my home, and keeping my distance from people in general. A reminder, too, to be more intentional about simply staying at home.

It is as though taking the test was a bookend for the chapter that I began as a mere epilogue in April. After making my appointment for the COVID-19 test and anticipating taking it, I knew that the last chapter was complete regardless of whether the results would be positive or negative. I can relax. If I write more about life during the pandemic, the pages will be for a new project, but I truly want to let go of the need to be doing so much, if any, documenting. I can focus on my urban farming, being at home with my cats, cooking well, watching Netflix movies, simply hanging out, and returning to other projects this fall and winter such as editing video footage to post on YouTube



Helen with her older brother Charles and older sister Clara at their farm home. Circa 1947. *Photo from the Marion and Deane Gunderson collection.*

I am grateful, though, to have had the opportunity to write this new last chapter. In 1945, the year I was born, my parents, older sister and brother moved to the road I where I grew up. The United States and other countries in the Allied Forces had fought in World War II against Nazi Germany and Adolf Hitler, who in the minds of many, have been the greatest icons of tyranny in Western Civilization. The Allies defeated Germany in May 1945. I can only imagine that Americans living in that era, especially those who sacrificed so much, either in the military or domestically, never expected a similar kind of tyranny to become so full blown in their home country. Because I decided to add a last chapter, I was able to write about the current president and the havoc he has wreaked upon the nation.

Finally, I want to express my gratitude for the role my sister Clara Hoover (nearly three years my elder) has played in my being able to complete this book, especially this last chapter.

She and my only brother Charles (nearly two years older than me but only a year ahead of me in school) are the only people who have known me for all of my 75 years. The three of us were students at Iowa State during the 1963-64 academic year. Clara then studied library science at Case Western Reserve, and in 1966, Charles went to law school at the University of Iowa before returning to Rolfe to practice law and manage the family farmland.

Charles has helped with my road project on occasion, too. While growing up on the farm, we were almost like twins, often spending time together, playing games or doing farm work. He is about as staunchly conservative as I am liberal, and we differ much in our lifestyles and beliefs. Even so, he has been greatly supportive of me learning to manage my own farm land, and I appreciate his help with my questions regarding family history, area personalities, land transactions, and related matters.



Charles Gunderson and Clara Hoover. 2010. *Photo from Clara's collection.*

There was much to like about Clara when I was a child, but I resented the way Mother and Dad would assign her to be in charge of the rest of us siblings as though she was a second lieutenant who could tell us what to do. For many years, some of us family members had a nickname for both Clara and Mother. Occasionally, Mother would even use the nickname in reference to herself to bring the family to attention at a meal or other gathering. (I will not embarrass Clara by actually saying what it was. Family members will know what “BBF” means, and so might other people.) Over the decades though I came to realize that although Clara could chuckle at the memory of being called “BBF,” she was sensitive about that image. She has worked hard to be supportive of all five of her siblings and their offspring. She will not say catty things about family members or allow me to be catty. Also, she will not repeat confidential news from one sibling to another. Although Clara and her husband Hal are reducing their travels as they age and are remaining close to home during the pandemic, they have loyally traveled to family events (graduations, marriages, funerals and birthday parties) even if in faraway states. They have visited me at least once each fall when in Ames for an Iowa State football game and came to Des Moines when the Iowa Natural Heritage

Foundation honored me for a gift of land I made to the foundation in 2016. They send birthday and holiday greeting cards and, in my case, write a check to my favorite non-profit group in my name for my birthday, knowing that's the best gift they could give me.

The connection Clara and I have forged while writing the last chapter would not have been as possible in previous years when she was still working as a high school librarian, then in a management role with Hal's small programming business, and later as a high school curriculum coordinator until age 70. The stay in place element of the pandemic has also been a factor in making communications between the two of us so convenient.

My writing mentor and editor, Adam Wright, who was a godsend of help from February through August 2019, was available to help only for a short time in July 2020 and reviewed my draft of the new last chapter. Fortunately, in 2019, before he took a full-time job at a Waldorf school in Colorado Springs, he helped me build the confidence I needed to proceed pretty much on my own with the new writing.

Clara is the consummate research librarian and loves using her traditional reference skills along with today's internet tools to find useful information. It is as though she cannot resist opportunity when I ask her for help researching some aspect of Pocahontas County or other history. She is also an excellent copy editor. In some respects, Clara is a liberal and in other respects, a conservative, and our lives, writing styles, and willingness to be candid about family are vastly different. She has, however, been extraordinarily helpful, reviewing several short segments that I have emailed to her. Her turnaround time is often less than three hours, and she is able to recommend simple changes to improve spelling, grammar, word choices, and flow while keeping the material true to my voice and the ideas intact.

The more I have grown in understanding family dynamics, the more I realize that Clara, as the oldest sibling, not only had what I considered a "privilege" to give orders to the rest of us, but her designated role was also one of responsibility. Once as an adult, she said that Mother and Dad told her as a young child that she needed to set an example for the rest of us. My parents' expectations are understandable to a certain extent, however, in other respects are more than parents should expect of a child. Children need to be allowed to be children and not burdened with grown up duties.

Although I have spent too many days (if not years) fretting about the challenges of being a middle child, I now understand that childhood is a challenge, period. That developmental stage has its effect on any person regardless of birth order and adopted role. Thankfully we siblings have matured and shifted in how we relate to each other regardless of our varied roles within the family hierarchy when we were children on the farm.

Clara and I often visit on the phone about everyday living and larger matters. I have a sense of what I can risk telling her and what to reserve for sharing with friends. She is one of the first people I have called to confide that I had an accident or did not feel well. I also turn to her to discuss estate planning or report on my projects. Although there is much she does not understand about me, she listens well and does not criticize except on occasions when she hears me rail about the small-mindedness of other people and how I cannot fathom their rationale or why they would vote the way they did. It is in those moments that Clara reminds me that my perspective is only one of many and that people have different needs, temperaments, and valid viewpoints.

We talk about events in history such as the year when Dad as a three-year-old child suffered from scarlet fever and he and parents were quarantined at their farm home; Great-Grandpa's years as a state representative when he voted "aye" in 1919 with nearly all the other legislators to approve the 19th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution giving women the right to vote; the number and nature of the country schools in Pocahontas County; and the cost of tuition at Iowa State when we were students there. The list is long. I appreciate how

talking about the mundane historical details and sharing perspectives from our own lives take our conversations to a deeper, more personal level than in past decades, and we learn new information about each other.

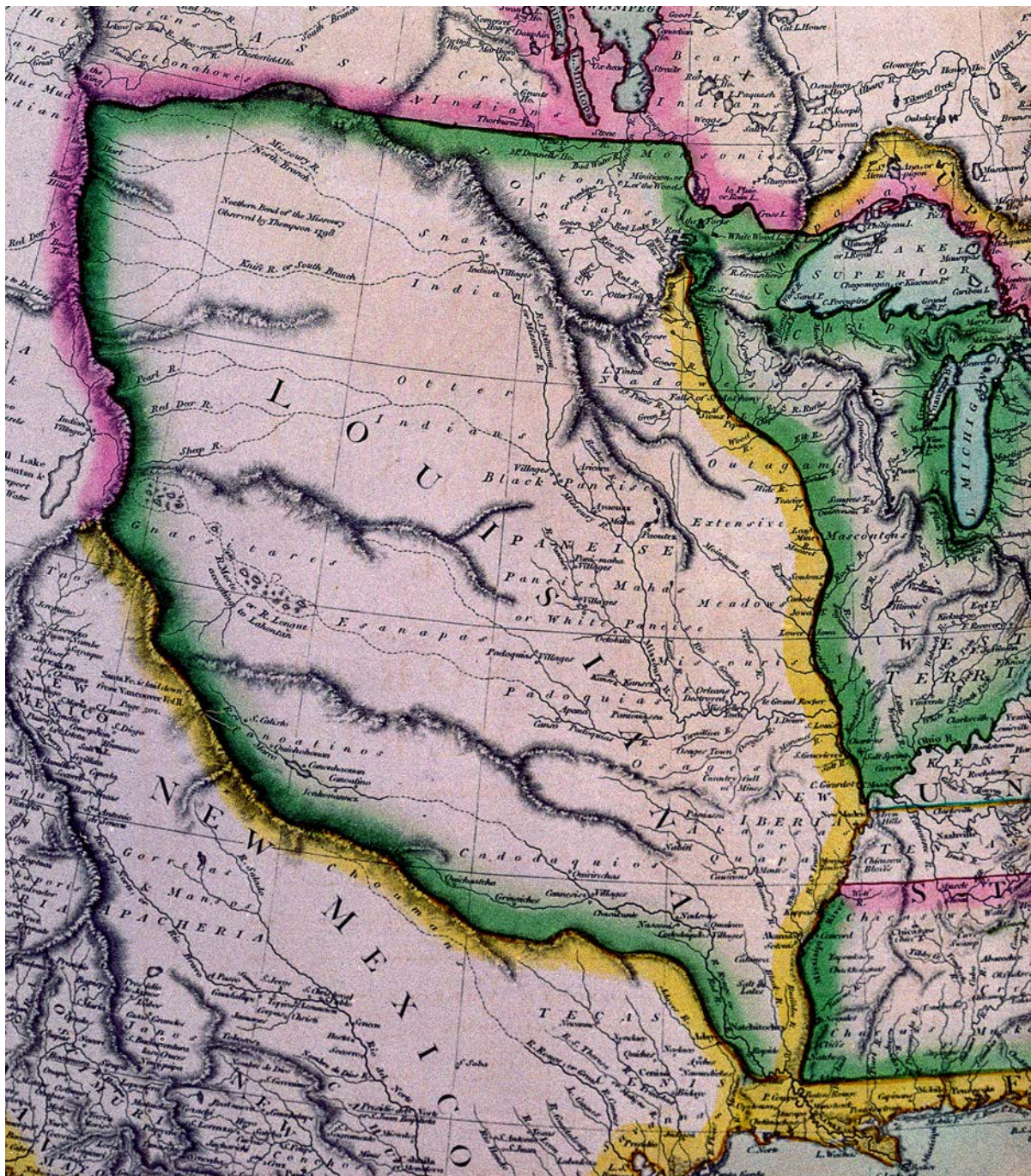
Clara and Hal are both devoted readers. Sometimes she recommends books for me. Sometimes, but more rarely, I hear of a book, for instance on public radio, and tell her. Soon she has arranged for a copy. She receives and actually reads the Practical Farmer of Iowa newsletter and has learned about some of the issues I care about in agriculture. She also claims that she learns new ideas from reading my drafts of writing, when I send them to her for review.

In the last decade, Clara has graciously shouldered much responsibility – mainly as executor for my father’s estate. Mother died in 2004 and he in 2010. Clara inherited their farmstead, where Dad had lived out his life, and was responsible for the maintenance of their house for the years it was unoccupied. By 2018 she had hired a contractor to raze the house and arranged for her tenants to sow prairie flowers in the large yard where we used to play.

It is not that Clara has stepped into the role of “mother” for the rest of us siblings. No, and I might resent it if she did. She embodies, however, perhaps the best kind of big sister one could expect to have. I am grateful that Clara and Charles have my back.

THE ROAD I GREW UP ON

The chapters from here to the end of this volume were written during a span of time ranging from the early 1990s through 2004.



The midwestern portion of an 1804 map of North America by R. Wilkinson of London England. *Used with permission of the State Historical Society of Iowa, Iowa City, which has the original map in its collections.*

SETTING THE STAGE

This road book is primarily focused on the 20th century. However, at a certain stage in assembling it, I felt compelled to tell the story of some of the settlers who came in the 19th century. I felt this compulsion partially because there were some interesting stories of capitalist activity, which were far different than the myth of the hard-working, subsistence homesteader. In fact, few, if any, people in the area of the road where I grew up benefited from the Homestead Act. I also wanted to tell about some of these settlers because they are ancestors of well-known families who have lived in the area. It has been fascinating to see the similarities as well as differences in their stories about moving to Iowa and establishing themselves in the area.

Before telling the story of the 19th-century settlers, it seems important to explain some of the factors that shaped the natural environment of Pocahontas County and the influences that allowed white, northern European-American families to find land here. However, never fear, I don't intend to write at length or with the detail that James Michener includes in his historical novels such as *Hawaii*, *The Source*, *Chesapeake*, or *Centennial*.

His book *Centennial* was published in 1974, and I read it in 1975 when I moved to Fargo to become the assistant sports information director at North Dakota State University. Because I hardly knew anyone in town and felt restless eating supper alone in my apartment, I often dined out and took the 909-page book with me to restaurants. I savored a few pages during each meal, and over the course of several months, the book became a cherished companion.

The novel focuses on the area around Centennial—a fictional town in Colorado, north and slightly east of Denver—to tell the story of the North American West from prehistory to 1974. The impression that stuck in my mind was that Michener began his book with a long scene filled with minutia about a rattlesnake lying on rocks atop a high butte and basking in the sun. However, when I recently checked the book out from the Ames Public Library and took a closer look, I realized that the author actually begins with a chapter about the land. He explains the structure and measurements of the planet earth. Then he describes how the earth's core is surrounded by a mantle of rock that at various times has succumbed to intense pressure with material from the mantle being forced toward the surface of the earth. En route, this stuff becomes a molten liquid called magma that can either solidify or emerge as lava. Michener describes the formation of the earth:

Three billion, six hundred million years ago the crust had formed, and the cooling earth lay exposed to the developing atmosphere. The surface as it then existed was not hospitable. Temperatures were too high to sustain life, and oxygen was only beginning to accumulate. What land had tentatively coagulated was insecure, and over it winds of unceasing fury were starting to blow. Vast floods began to sweep emerging areas and kept them swamplike, rising and falling in the agonies of a birth that had not yet materialized. There were no fish, no birds, no animals, and had there been, there would have been nothing for them to eat, for grass and trees and worms were unknown.

Michener then focuses on the formation of the Rocky Mountains, the movement of glaciers, the development of the plains, and the emergence of a river. It is pretty concentrated reading, but he is an eloquent writer, and his explanations of history are quite understandable.

Michener's second chapter is about the first inhabitants of northeast Colorado. He writes at length about the diplodocus who came to the area 160 million years ago. I had to look up diplodocus in the dictionary to learn it is "any of a genus of very large herbivorous dinosaurs from Colorado and Wyoming." Then Michener spends several pages talking about a furry little animal—a beaver—and its observations of the natural world. Then he introduces the rattlesnake lying on the butte in the sun. It is attacked by an eagle, and Michener takes six pages to tell of their battle and the snake's recovery.

The third chapter talks about the great land ridge between Asia and Alaska and suggests that the first recorded occupation of America by human beings happened between 10,000 and 13,000 years ago. The first human beings appear in the year 9,268 BC. They are an anonymous 27-year-old Native American and his apprentice at Rattlesnake Buttes who make projectile points out of flint for use in hunting mammoths. However, the first substantive character, Lame Beaver, and his tribe do not appear until 1756 when Michener shifts from setting the scene to telling the story of the people.

The novel then winds its way through Colorado history, including the controversy of out-of-whack priorities in college football as evidenced in the rivalry between the University of Colorado and University of Nebraska. As the book nears its conclusion, the key character is Paul Garrett—a respected rancher and ecologist. As the description from the book jacket says, "Garrett and other thoughtful men are trying to find ways to repair the damage done to their land by the headlong industriousness of their predecessors."

Although I felt little identity with the minutia of the early chapters, I did feel that I was part of the narrative by the time I finished reading the book.



I remember meeting James Michener in the late-1970s. I was a member of the First Presbyterian—a large, stately church built in the Gothic style in the central part of Fargo—and he was scheduled to give an evening lecture there. Not only had I finished reading *Centennial*, but I had begun his nonfiction book *Sports in America*, which was published in 1976. It was a critique of sports and provided a perspective that was helpful in my work in sports information.

I went to the lecture but recall being slightly bored with the talk. However, from where I was seated along the center aisle, I was able to sneak a photo of Michener. After the presentation, I noticed many people approaching him with books they wanted autographed. I had not brought either *Centennial* or *Sports in America* and told a woman standing nearby that I was disappointed in my lack of foresight. She suggested that I come early the next morning to the Town House Motel, where he was staying, and catch him for an autograph after breakfast. I took her advice, but by the time I got to the motel, he had already left for an excursion to western North Dakota. I was disheartened, but as I turned to leave, I saw a table where a woman was selling tickets for a progressive dinner. It was to be held that night at some historical homes in the south part of Fargo. Apparently, Michener's visit was part of a conference sponsored by the regional historic preservation organization, which was hosting the dinner as a fundraiser. He was scheduled to be back for it. In the process of signing up for the meal, I met two interesting women from the state historical society in Bismarck who were attending the conference. We agreed to meet at the motel prior to the dinner and that I would provide limousine service for them in my royal blue Ford pickup truck.

When we headed out on the progressive dinner, we heard that Michener had not returned from his excursion. We let go of the idea of meeting him, and went to the first two homes where we had drinks and appetizers as well as tours and fine conversation. Next we returned to the street where we had started the evening, passing the first home as we drove to the third home. I saw Michener getting out of his car at the first stop. My guests said they would save a place for me at the third home for the main meal. Then I walked to the first house, went in, and found Michener by himself in the library where he was sipping a wine and scanning the books on the shelf. He was a dignified looking man and wore a dark suit, white shirt, and tie. I simply meant to introduce myself and have him sign my copy of *Sports in America*. However, no one else joined us, and we ended up having a 15-minute conversation. Our conversation focused mainly on collegiate athletics and the way they warped university priorities. I was most impressed with the interest he showed in my work and ideas. He especially appreciated the insights I had into women's athletics and the inequitable ways they were treated even though the federal government had enacted Title IX of the 1972 educational amendments that said, "No person in the United States shall, on the basis of sex, be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any program or activity receiving Federal financial assistance."

I left and joined my friends at the third home. Fortunately no one was in a hurry, and there was plenty of time to enjoy the main course. I was ecstatic about having been able to connect with Michener. Little did I realize that later in the evening all 30 or so of us who were part of the progressive dinner would meet for dessert at a fourth home, then sit in the living room with Michener for a casual conversation to end the day. The group gathering was as intriguing as my earlier encounter with him but not as personal.

I don't recall that Michener and I talked about history or preservation. At that stage of my life, I had little interest in history or understanding of the importance of historical preservation. I knew that my mother, in her role as director of the Rolfe Public Library, had begun an oral history project at about the time of the nation's bicentennial. And in the late 1970s, I had begun searching for old photos in the Rolfe area. I was mainly interested in finding a good photo of an old threshing scene. One thing led to the next. In 1980, I incorporated many of the photographs that I had found into a slide show with a sound track for my high school's all-class reunion. Then in 1981, I headed for the San Francisco area to attend a Presbyterian seminary, and by the end of the 1980s, I was sowing the seeds for my road project. It has involved oral histories and photography.

One might have thought that I had Michener and his book *Centennial* in mind when I began focusing on my rural heritage, but actually, I had forgotten about my encounter with him. However, in the process of turning my collection of photographs over to the Special Collections Department at Iowa State University for preservation purposes, I saw the photo I had made of him. Later, when I was preparing to write this section about the formation of the land, I thumbed through it, then reread the introduction. In some ways, my meeting with Michener in the 1970s was prophetic and pointed to a latent interest in history and preservation that I would finally develop, albeit many years later. And it is interesting to think about how his work of telling the story of the people of *Centennial* relates to my work of telling the stories of people who have lived along my road. There are differences in the genres. One is a novel by a renowned author, aided by a research team, for a major publishing company. The other is a nonfiction documentary done by an unknown, entry-level writer, with no research team, to be published on a small scale. However, at the core, the stories are ones of the people, the land, a community, and the environment. One narrative is set in northeast Colorado, the other in northwest Iowa.

I point to Michener and his book *Centennial* for a few reasons. On one hand, it represents the kinds of scientific and literary detail that I am not prepared to present in this book. On the other hand, it illustrates the huge length of time and the colossal factors that shaped the environment of *Centennial*. A discussion of rural Iowa would be incomplete without at least a modicum of discussion about similar factors and the importance of the land. After all, the land is the predominant feature that drew Euro-American settlers to this part of the new world.

There are many reasons why I am not prepared to present great amounts of detail about the natural history and early inhabitants of my road area. One, I am not the student of history that Michener is. Two, I do not have a research team like he did to do the legwork for his novels. Three, there is a tremendous span of time prior to the arrival of the European settlers in Iowa. Even the experts I have talked to or whose books I have read are not very clear and concise about history way back then. Four, I have tried to write this book as a personal or neighborhood memoir based on my experiences and the stories that various participants have shared with me. Five, I have a desire to get into the narrative part of this project.

My personal narrative does not start until 1945 when I was born. The narratives of the other participants reach back only as far as the 1920s. Nonetheless, I do feel a connection to some of the early settlers. For instance, two families who live on the highway at the east end of the road where I grew up are descendants of Diedrick and Anna Brinkman who came to Pocahontas County from Michigan in 1873. Kathy Dahl, who was two years behind me in high school, is one of Diedrick and Anna's great-granddaughters. She and her husband, Gary, have eight children. Robert Brinkman, who is about 20 years younger than I, is one of Diedrick and Anna's great-grandsons. He and his wife, Joanne, have three sons. I have enjoyed getting to know both families better through this project.

Hattie Brinkman Ives was the oldest of Diedrick and Anna's 12 children and was a year old when the family arrived in the area. When I was growing up, Hattie was a small septuagenarian. I remember that she sat properly, with a fine hat on her head, in a pew during worship services at the Rolfe Presbyterian Church. She also loved to garden. Hattie's grandson, Dallas, was in my graduating class. We continue to be friends. When Dallas tells about visiting Hattie and how he had resigned himself to simply listening to her spin tales of frontier life, because she was too hard of hearing to carry on a two-way conversation, I can envision what he means.

My great-grandfather and great-grandmother, Charles and Dena Gunderson, were also early settlers in the area. They both came from Wisconsin—he in 1881 and she in 1884. I was the apple of Great-Grandpa's eye when I was an infant in 1945 and he was in the last year of his life. I also have fond memories of Great-Grandma who died when I was five years old.



Some people, when they take a stance, insist that their position is the only correct one. They claim to be standing on firm ground. They assume certain things should be rock solid just as the earth is solid. Well, anyone who has experienced an earthquake or volcanic eruption knows that the earth is more fluid than solid. Also, the people who study natural history and land formations know that the planet is constantly changing.

Iowa's population is also fluid. There was migratory movement among the early Native Americans even before the white people pushed them off the land to marginal areas. Then

there was the influx of the Euro-American settlers who came to Pocahontas County, followed by the out-migration of many of their descendants. One wonders what will happen to the terrain of my road area and the characteristics of its population in another 10 years—or 100 or 1,000 years.

By learning about natural history, a person can understand that rural roads, such as the one in my project, are not really straight, flat, and rigid as suggested by the stereotype of the Iowa grid system. The grid system is like a giant template set upon the landscape, dividing the area into square miles. The result is an illusion of social order and an organized means of buying and selling land. Although the system is a construct of the human mind, its section line roads and the rectangular pattern of corn and bean fields have become an intrinsic part of the landscape. This squared-off pattern affects the mentality of the area's residents just as a mountain, desert, river, or ocean affects other people. However, having said all this, it is important to remember that what underlies this whole socialized system is the land. Without the land and its fertility, the area would never have been populated to the extent that it has been. The land is to be respected, not only for what it will produce but also for its complex history that defies the mold of a simple grid system.



Before proceeding to the narrative of this book, a primer about the ancient history of the area seems important to establish the context for the people who would eventually live there.

Relatively speaking, the distance between Pocahontas County and the fictional town of Centennial, Colorado, is not great when one considers the size of our nation, the entire world, or the galaxy. However, a person does not have to be very astute to realize the huge role the Rocky Mountains have played in Colorado, while the evolution of the rich soils in Iowa is a key to its history from the mid-1800s until today.

I have found it helpful to turn to the elementary school history book *Iowa Past to Present: The People and the Prairie* written by Tom Morain, Dorothy Schwieder, and Lynn Nielsen. Tom was director of research and interpretation for Living History Farms, then director of the State Historical Society of Iowa, before becoming a professor at Graceland College in Lamoni. Dorothy is retired after teaching in the Iowa State University history department for over 30 years, where one of her special interest areas was Iowa history. Lynn is a professor of curriculum and instruction at the University of Northern Iowa.

The authors say, “Geologists think that Iowa once lay south of the equator, where it had a warm, tropical climate. From clues in its oldest rocks, they suspect that Iowa was once a mountain area, before water, winds, and ice wore it down.” Then there was a phase when the continents drifted apart followed by another phase around 500 million years ago when “Iowa was at the bottom of a warm shallow sea.”

Eventually the area became dry again but between two and three million years ago, the climate grew colder. Scientists are not sure why. There was an accumulation of snow in Canada that turned into huge sheets of ice, then those sheets began to push out at the edges, and about one million years ago, completely covered the central United States. In places the glacier, as this moving ice is called, was over a mile deep. The authors also explain the progression from the Ice Age to a warmer climate:

During the Ice Age the climate cooled at least four times. Each time, a new glacier scraped across the Iowa area, flattening it. Then the climate would warm up again and the ice would melt, dropping yet another layer of drift to deepen the soils of the Midwest. The last glaciation, called the Wisconsinan after the area where it has been best studied, covered only north central Iowa, moving south as far as Des Moines. When it melted, about twelve thousand years ago, it left behind flat land that would become some of the most fertile farm land in the world.

After the Wisconsinan ice retreated, the climate was cool and moist. Forests of spruce and pine trees covered most of the state. As the climate became warmer and drier, however, hardwood trees like oak, hickory, and walnut began to replace the evergreens.

As the climate continued to grow warmer and less rain fell, grass appeared in patches between forests and began to spread. Summer dry spells killed many plants but not grass. When rain fell again, the roots of the grass sent up new green shoots. Gradually, areas that had once been thick forests became open grasslands. These grasslands, called prairies, spread across the northern United States, from western New York to the Rocky Mountains.

According to Jean Prior in her book *Landforms of Iowa*, "The icy grip of continental glaciers was one of the most significant geologic processes to affect the Iowa landscape. Most of the deposits underlying today's land surface are composed of materials known as drift that were moved here by glaciers." Regarding north central Iowa, including Pocahontas County, she says, "This region, known as the Des Moines Lobe, is the part of the state last touched by the huge sheets of frozen water that invaded Iowa in the past. This last glacial episode occurred only 12,000 to 14,000 years ago."

After looking through various books to piece together the natural history, I decided to talk with a friend, Carl Kurtz. He is a photographer and wildlife specialist who lives on his family's homeplace farm near St. Anthony in central Iowa where he has converted agricultural land back into prairie. When a segment of his reconstructed prairie matures sufficiently, perhaps after three to five years of development, he annually harvests the seed to sell to such agencies as the Iowa Department of Transportation and individuals such as me who are interested in reconstructing prairie on our own land. Through his seed sales, Carl nets more profit than if he were still growing soybeans and corn on his farm.

Carl hazarded a guess that the ancient forests had not covered the entire state after the glaciers receded but that there had been pockets of grasslands in the forests. As the climate warmed over the centuries, the grasslands would have increased—in part as a result of the Native Americans burning the grasslands for agricultural and hunting purposes.

I am curious about what Native American life was like in the area where I grew up. I wish that I could develop a character for my book similar to the way Michener created *Lame Beaver*, his tribe, and subsequent Native Americans who lived in the area of Centennial. But I know little or nothing about the Native Americans who inhabited the land that would become Pocahontas County. I suspect that their tribes lived mostly in the wooded areas along the Des Moines River and traveled to the prairies and marshlands in the vicinity of my road, but I don't know that for a fact. There is a sign on a huge boulder east of Rolfe not far from the Des Moines River, some seven miles from my road, that commemorates the last battle among

Indian tribes in Iowa. There is another sign north of Rolfe that commemorates the last Native American buffalo chase in the county. (Both of these commemorative signs have been put up by the white population.)

I was a camper and counselor for several years at the Camp Foster YMCA on East Lake Okoboji. There we got the typical white man's version of the 1850s event that has been called the Spirit Lake Massacre. In it Chief Inkpaduta and a small band of Sioux are labeled as the villains. In the pasture next to the camp, there was a marker that commemorated the cabin where one of the Euro-American families was killed. During each session of camp, we had an evening program that involved going to the site, revisiting the story of the massacre, then holding a powwow at a nearby ravine. The ravine made a natural amphitheater. The campers and their counselor escorts sat at the top of the near bank while the focal point of the powwow was a council ring and teepee in the wide, flat bottom of the ravine.

I was often part of the group of staff members who staged the powwow. It was more of a skit than a reenactment of any legitimate Native American ritual. The coolest part of the drama was the invocation of fire from the gods to light our campfire. Amazingly, a bolt of fire would strike the wood stacked in the fire pit, and our ceremonies took on new dazzle. We weren't supposed to tell the campers that there was a wire strung from the center of the wood to a branch of a tree up high on the far side of the ravine. Upon the words of invocation from our chief, a counselor hidden near the tree would light a match to a roll of toilet paper soaked in flammable liquid (who knows what kind of fuel). Poof, the ball of flame would shoot down the wire, like a strike of lightning, and ignite the bonfire. I suspect the logs had also been soaked in fuel.

Those of us who staged the event had awful chants. We made up language using phrases such as Bromo Seltzer and hoped none of the campers recognized the stupidity of what we were doing. I am embarrassed about our immature behavior and how sacrilegious such an event might appear to Native Americans or others sensitive about history.

Of course, I cannot forget that my home county and the county seat town are both named after the Indian princess Pocahontas. However, I have never associated her story with the history of the area. She was from a Virginia tribe that, as the story goes, provided hospitality to Captain John Smith and his crew at Jamestown. Pocahontas married John Rolfe, who took her back to England. She died there, supposedly of a disease she had contracted in America that had been brought to this continent by the Euro-Americans. I guess it's OK that the county and county seat town are named after her. It's not much different than the Nebraska capital calling itself Lincoln in memory of Abraham Lincoln.

Then again, I often disdain the fact that the county and county seat town have assumed the name of Pocahontas. I recall being at a graduation party at a farm near Pocahontas in 2001 where I was a lone voice in an argument about the Princess statue. Two women, who were a few years younger than me, adamantly pointed out that the statue is a fine work of art and represents a popular style from the 1950s that is valuable to retain. Carol and Cheryl also contended that the statue was made to honor the Princess and her people. I responded that I understood their arguments, but I also called the statue garish and said that if white people wanted a statue representing a race they had oppressed, then the statue should be designed with dignity. I even suggested that if the Shaw family who owns the statue ever stopped maintaining it, the city should not put money into it. Instead, I proposed that the town could build a new statue near the digital kiosk at the intersection of Highway 3 and Main Street where there is already a beautiful grassy area bounded by field rocks. The space seems much more the gateway of the town than the current, shabby location of the statue.

I went on to suggest that the city could seek input from representatives of Native American tribes in order to select an image that would indeed honor their people who have been pushed

out of the areas they once inhabited. I also suggested that the statue be one of elegance and not kitsch. Still, I did not feel understood, and when I think about the town of Pocahontas and the statue (which I deem to be ugly), it's easy to stereotype all the citizens of the community as being blinded to the issues associated with the current statue.

There have been magazine and newspaper articles about such works of art. Often the Princess statue is featured. There always seems to be a sentence in these articles, saying something to the effect that the people of the town are very proud of their statue. Irene Shaw, the octogenarian who owns the monument, has been very quick to point out that it is she, and not the town, who owns the statue.

The 25-foot-tall statue was conceived of in the 1950s by Pocahontas attorney Albert J. Shaw; however, he died before the project was erected, and his son Frank Shaw (also an attorney and husband of Irene) saw that it was completed. Irene, a widow for a number of years and well known as a Poky matriarch and patron of the arts, continued maintenance of the statue. She died in February 2004. Her son Bill Shaw is an attorney in the Hollywood, California, area. Her daughter Rosemary Shaw Sackett is the chief judge of the Iowa Court of Appeals. Who knows what the family's future stake in the statue will be.

Bless her heart, Irene believed the statue to be a thing of virtue. In some ways, in my mind, it is not as bad for an individual or family to have such a distasteful statue because this is a nation that values freedom of speech. But it does not seem appropriate for a community to invest public funds in insensitive artwork. And I wonder if the citizens of the area are really all that proud of the statue.

I have occasionally wondered about alternative approaches I could have used in the argument with the two women at the graduation party. It is often easier to know what to say in hindsight than in the moment of frustrating debate.

Here's what I would have wanted to ask. Do you see beauty in the current statue? Do you see courage? Faithfulness? Wisdom, intelligence, or resourcefulness? Does it elicit feelings such as compassion or grief? Do you see any connection to her people and their plight at the hands of European immigrants? Do you get a sense that the young woman loves to commune with nature and considers the creatures of the earth to be her friends? Do you see playfulness? Do you see any human qualities?

I think most people would say "no" to all those questions. Then I would go on to say that when a dominant culture, such as our white culture, which has committed its own form of genocide against the Native Americans, builds a statue to honor one of their people, that culture should do so in a way that exudes at least a few of the qualities listed above. Otherwise, the statue portrays no sense of the Native American woman's humanity and is not an honor but a debasement.

Cheryl and Carol said the Princess Pocahontas statue was in the same genre as the statue of Paul Bunyan near Bemidji, Minnesota, and of Albert the Bull in Audubon, Iowa. They asked why I was more critical of the portrayal of Pocahontas than that of Paul or Albert. First, I would say that neither Paul nor Albert represents an oppressed culture being interpreted by a dominant culture. Second, I would say that the statues of both Paul and Albert have more redeeming qualities than that of the Princess statue.

Another of my pet peeves has to do with the Pocahontas Area Community High School naming its boys' sports teams the Indians and the girls' teams the Maidens. Why aren't both the boys' and girls' teams called the Indians? Or why aren't the boys called the Braves or Warriors in order to parallel the Maidens nickname? Or for that matter, how about the Boys and the Maidens? That would be parallel. The school also prints an icon of a chieftain's bonnet on its official letterhead and other publications. It is wrong for a school district, which consists predominately of Caucasian students and faculty, to use Native American names and symbols for its athletic teams or vehicles of communication. But if the Pocahontas school district does appropriate Native American imagery, then at least it should do so in a proper way. The school is named after a princess, so use her name and a well-designed image of her. And while



Statue of Princess Pocahontas at Pocahontas, Iowa. 1994.

doing that, come up with one name for the boys' and girls' teams or two names that are equal in stature.

If I were to name the athletic teams, I would call them the Poky Prairie Dogs or Sodbusters or something more modern such as the Bean Walkers, Corn Pickers, or Tractor Jockeys. If I had named the county based on its natural landscape, I would have called it Slough Land or Prairie Land. Of course, the county could have taken its name from one of the Native American tribes who actually resided in the area. However, the state already has Sioux County and towns with similar names—Sioux City, Sioux Center, and Sioux Rapids.



On Earth Day 2000, the Iowa Department of Natural Resources published a thin book of beautiful photography and text, titled *Iowa—Portrait of the Land* to tell the story of this land we call Iowa and our place in it. The book speaks about the first inhabitants of the state:

From Siberia, nomadic people crossed into North America perhaps 15,000 years ago, no doubt following herds of caribou, musk oxen,

and mammoths. They traversed a land bridge exposed when expanses of glacial ice had captured enough seawater to lower the ocean level. By 13,000 years ago, those Paleo-Indian people had found their way to Iowa, where they lived in what must have been harsh conditions alongside the remnants of glaciers. The warming climate eventually halted the glacial advances, however, and plants and animals quickly reoccupied the damp, dark, stony soils that formed on top of and at the edges of the decaying ice.

Those early Iowans moved about in cool, moist, spruce and fir forests interspersed with open meadows and wetlands. Hunters pursued mastodons, giant bison, and other big game, often working together to drive the animals over cliffs or into boggy mires where the prey could be attacked more easily. The Indians killed and butchered their quarry with effective stone spears and sharp tools painstakingly crafted from flint. People's lives were short, and populations were sparse—perhaps never reaching more than a few hundred at any one time.

As the climate continued to warm about 10,000 to 8,000 years ago, more hardwood forests grew up, with prairies gradually pushing in from the south and west. Ancient Iowans followed the resources, camping near rivers to gather wild plants and hunt small game and often traveling to hunt bison. But the innovative native people also began using the atlatl, or spear thrower, to increase their hunting efficiency. They learned to grind and chip stone into tools, such as axes, knives, scrapers, and plant-milling devices. Evidence at numerous archaeological sites suggest that populations were growing, perhaps into the thousands.

Dorothy Schwieder has also written an excellent book, *Iowa: The Middle Land*. In it she says that Iowa's first inhabitants consisted of some 17 tribes. She tells of the Ioway, Sauk, Meskwaki, Santee Sioux, Winnebago, Potawatomi, Missouri, and Oto tribes that were part of the prairie-plains culture. People commonly associate other Native American tribes with the state, but the story of their migration into and out of Iowa is a complex one. Some of the early ones came across the land ridge between Asia and Alaska, then south and east. Other tribes, though, who lived in the eastern part of the United States, would be forced west and eventually arrive in Iowa. Then, as with other tribes, they would be pushed even further west and south to reservations in other states. Schwieder describes this forced migration:

Pressure from two sources would result in the eventual relocation of northeastern tribes to areas in the central and western regions of the country. In the 1600s the Iroquois in the colony of New York worked to increase their trading activities with various European powers. As they did so, they expanded their influence over a larger territory, thus displacing other tribes and forcing them west. Later, in 1830, the federal government responded to growing demands for land from white settlers by passing the Indian Removal Act. The act determined that tribes east of the Mississippi would be moved west of the river. A few years later officials amended the act, whereby the Missouri River rather than the Mississippi served as the demarcation line between Indians and whites.

Tribes residing in Iowa would be affected by many of the same influences as those operating on eastern tribes. The Ioway would be forced to give up some land in the Iowa region as a result of pressure from the Sauk and Meskwaki. All tribes, including the Ioway, would eventually be affected by the government's removal policy, being resettled elsewhere. Tribes in the Iowa region would also deal extensively with Indian traders, thus incorporating more and more of the Europeans' manufactured goods into their lives.

Schwieder concludes her chapter about Native Americans in Iowa:

By 1851 all lands in Iowa had passed from the hands of Native Americans to those of the federal government. Reminders of the Indians' presence here would be limited mostly to the naming of some Iowa counties after Indian tribes and chiefs. The exception would be the presence of the Meskwaki Indian Settlement in Tama County. Life would be difficult for many Meskwaki, with poverty and hardship a way of life. Today travelers can visit the settlement in August when the tribe celebrates its heritage during an annual powwow. In 1985 tribal members constructed a gambling casino there. Because of the pressure of white settlement and the passage of the Indian Removal Act in 1830, Iowa contains no Indian reservations, as do neighboring states to the north and to the west. In effect, Indians in Iowa were relocated southward or westward during the mid-1800s. The name Iowa would remain, but little else to give visible evidence of the long, long habitation of Native Americans in the middle land.

Robert Bunge has written an excellent chapter about the Native Americans of Iowa in a book of essays entitled *Take This Exit* and edited by Robert Sayre. Bunge was a professor of the Lakota (Sioux) language at the University of South Dakota and a professor of the Dakota language, culture, and psychology at Morningside College in Sioux City, Iowa. Bunge writes about the first tribes in Iowa:

The first "white eyes" to gaze upon the land now known as Iowa were two Frenchmen—Father Marquette and his companion in exploration, Joliet. With the French came writing. And so Iowa left prehistory to enter the pages of history. This was in the year 1673.

The first tribe encountered by this duo representing Church and State, was the Illini, camped on the west bank of the Mississippi. The name Illini means "men," or "we are men." This people is now extinct as a tribe. Marquette and Joliet also knew of the Mascoutin, or "Meadow Indian"—these people, too, are extinct, but their name is perpetuated in the name Muscatine, Iowa.

Many of the tribes were transient or resided in Iowa for only short periods of time. Others were native to the region or were to become long-term residents. The tribe from whom the state derives its name is one of the latter.

Iowa is one mystery after another. Probably no state name is more shrouded in linguistic fog than the word “Iowa.” The tribe’s name, Pahoja or Pahuja, is variously translated by authorities as “Gray Snow” or “Dusty Noses” or “Dusty Faces.” There is a traditional tale in support of the name “Dusty Noses,” which relates that this tribe camped near the Mississippi in the vicinity of some bare and wind-swept sandbars from whence the winds filled their nostrils and eyes with stinging mud.

Bunge then tells about some of the tribes in Iowa and reminds the reader of the reconstructed Ioway farm site at Living History Farms, a “600-acre open-air agricultural museum” near Des Moines. It is a museum worth visiting. Then he describes the importance of Iowa’s land:

The fertility of the rich soil of Iowa enabled the native populations to settle in permanent or semipermanent villages, to farm and thereby become more independent by not having to rely so heavily on hunting as a source of food. Thus the Ioway combined the farming skills of the woodlands to the east with the hunting skills of the plains to the west.

Fortunately, Bunge also discusses some of the issues of the modern-day Native American:

One of the difficult concepts for white people to understand is that unlike all other groups, many, perhaps even most Indians, do not desire to assimilate, acculturate, or become part of mainstream America. White people, especially if they are the children or grandchildren of immigrants, recall how those new “Americans” wanted to discard their languages and European clothes and become “Yankees” as quickly as possible. Most Indians do not want to do this, and while practically all modern Native Americans realize that certain skills are necessary to cope with the larger society, they wish to remain Indian and are reluctant to give up their values for what are perceived as the Coca Cola and juke box values of the dominant people.

The Indians learned the skills of the white man to help their own people and, yet, they retain Indian values and participate in traditional life. They guarantee that Indians will remain a presence in Iowa as long as the earth, nourished by the sun and rain, endures. For these are the descendants of the “First Nations” of Iowa—a people who were neither “noble savages” nor “skulking redskins,” but rather a people who time and again made successful adjustments to their natural environment, and continue to do so.

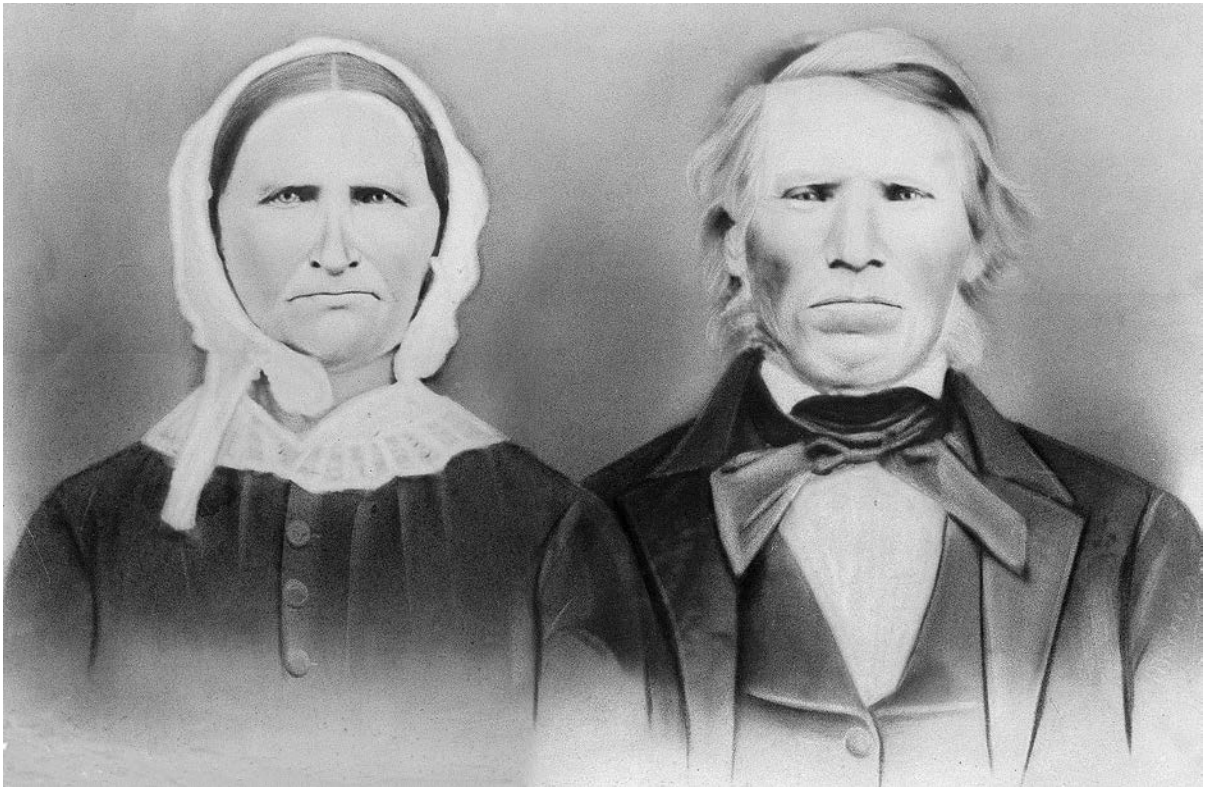
The removal of the Native Americans opened Iowa to the influx of Euro-Americans. The land was a primary reason why the white settlers chose the area to build their farms, homes, and communities. But one must not forget that these new Iowans benefited considerably from the intervention of government and big business. Examples are the federal purchase of the Louisiana Territory; the removal of the Native Americans to the Southwest; the U.S. Land Office survey of the region; land grants to railroad companies to build lines; the establishment of territorial, state, and county governments; and an advertising campaign by the Iowa Board of Immigration, which sent a handbook to people in Europe and Scandinavia about the availability of cheap but fertile land in the state.

The book, *Iowa Past to Present*, talks about the development of Iowa's land:

The prairies are important because they helped to produce the fertile soil for which the state is famous. For thousands of years, season after season, the grasses grew. Their roots filled every square inch beneath the soil surface. When the plants died, their roots decayed and gradually built up a rich black dirt. Soil scientists say that it takes four hundred years to produce one inch of new soil. It was this rich soil that attracted the American pioneers. They plowed up the prairies and planted corn, wheat, and oats where wild flowers and big bluestem had once grown. Corn grows well in Iowa because it too is a giant grass plant.

The settlers thought that the Iowa soil was so deep and fertile that it would last forever. But plowing it up destroyed the plants that had covered the land like a blanket. Without this cover, the land began to wash away. Rains carried dirt down the sides of hills, and rivers became muddy with topsoil.

There is much that transpired between the removal of the Native Americans and arrival of the Euro-American settlers and subsequent tillage of the land. However, it seems it is time to skip ahead to the stories of those families who came to Pocahontas County in the latter part of the 19th century and settled in the area of the road where I grew up.



Unidentified Gunderson ancestors. Circa the 19th century. *The Deane and Marion Gunderson Collection.*

EARLY LANDOWNERS

Farming Yesterday and Today¹

Yesterday

Yesterday the farm was dreary enough looking for the most pessimistic crank the twentieth century has produced. That the farm was the real basis of wealth production then is beyond all question of doubt, and it is a marvel today that the grand structure began in so crude a manner. Let us picture a scene of say forty years ago, and I know that many who read this can remember just how it was across the almost level prairie, stretching farther than the naked eye can reach, the rays of the setting sun make enormous shadows of trivial things, and not one sheltered spot is visible for many miles. The winter snows have been driven from the land, and nature's carpet is assuming the brilliant emerald hues so pleasing to the eyes. From some distant spot there are a couple of conveyances creeping towards the sunset's glow; one is hauled by two heavy draft horses and the other probably has a yoke of oxen hitched to it. As the rays of the sun assume a more horizontal position to the line of travel, the travelers decide to stop for the night. The animals are turned out to crop the fresh young grass that is so luxurious and abundant, and the whole family comes down from the wagons to do their several parts in fixing for the night. The camp fire is a small one in consequence of the scarcity of fuel, but the blood of these pioneers is of the thick and heart retaining kind, and they are too busy to think anything about a possible coolness in the air.

The morning dawns clear, and the air is laden with a thousand odors that are peculiar to the springtime. The animals have thoroughly enjoyed their new pasture, and the family are out to witness perhaps the most glorious sunrise they ever beheld. The whole world seems aglow with the refulgent blaze, and the hearts of the beholders are touched with the mysterious something that is only felt in vast solitudes. Like an inspiration the thought comes to them that here would make an ideal spot for the home they are traveling to locate, and the impression becomes conviction when the richness of the soil is discovered. It is only a matter of exactness of location to them now, and the spot for the future dwelling is readily selected. Down an almost imperceptible slope there is a small stream, and on either side stretches unnumbered acres of virgin soil, ready for the preparation for crops of golden grain. The old tent and wagon covers are taken to the chosen spot and are then put into semi-permanent condition, and the fanning implements are gotten ready for work. In a few days the black soil is turned up to the action of air and sun, and soon the seed has been scattered from the hands of the sowers. At another point the ground has been put in proper shape to receive the seed corn that was carried so far for this purpose. While all this is being pushed forward laboriously, the female portion of the family have planted the garden stuff, till the whole looks as if quite a colony

1. This editorial is from the Christmas edition of *The Reveille*, published at Rolfe, Iowa, in 1908. It was probably written by Joseph Lighter. In 1890, Joseph and Emma Wilhelm Lighter came to Rolfe where he became sole owner of *The Reveille*. The couple had seven children. All the sons went into newspaper careers. One of the daughters, Cora, had a dry goods store in Rolfe. Another, DeElda, married John Gunderson and had a son, Deane Gunderson, who is my father. Joseph died in 1916 at 62. Emma died in 1941 at 85. It would be interesting to see what Joseph would write if he came back today and saw the changes in agriculture. I am afraid he would be overwhelmed by both the progress and loss that has occurred in the last century.

had suddenly settled there. The tools are heavy and cumbersome, and the laborers work from early dawn to deepened twilight in order to accomplish the desired task. After the crops are planted and the preliminary cultivation given, it is decided to build a house where the canvas shelter stands, and the male members start for the nearest timber. After several days of hard work they have cut a large number of trees and gotten them trimmed so it is convenient to load them. The hauling is begun in earnest, and the distance being too great for hauling two loads a day, the one load is brought as early in the morning as possible, the balance of the afternoon being devoted to placing the day's haul on the structure they are looking forward to as their home. The charm that word "home" contains for those first settlers is unknown anywhere, and the tasks these pioneers accomplished puzzle countless thousands. The rude building gets completed before the really cold weather sets in, and the crops are gathered as only first crops are ever harvested, with hearts overflowing with gratitude to the giver of all good gifts. The small grain is cut with the scythe, possibly a cradle is used, but just as likely not. The entire family go to the harvest just as they did when the corn had to be hoed and weeded, and then the threshing is often done by the old-fashioned flail, some being fortunate enough to be near a horse power thresher. Next in order comes the marketing of a part of the grain, and the real work of this undertaking is not half told when one says that it often took three days to haul a load, and then get little more than half what the grain was really worth, much of the pay being compulsorily in trade. The social side of life in those days had its sweetest flavors in the fact that every neighbor was really a neighbor, and every one knew that the hearty handshake was an expression of gratitude for each other's presence in the solitude. The strenuous life was never better exemplified than during the pioneer struggles of pioneer Iowa, and it is largely due to the underworking principles of the first settlers that the stalwart character of our state become hereditary.

Someone has said that those early settlers were contented with what they had, but it seems to me that the statement is not exactly true, else why is there so much evidence of their having striven for something better? They were fortunate who had a fairly comfortable home for themselves, and the rudest kind of straw sheds for their cattle and horses.

Today

The farmer in our crowded sections has made enough money to warrant him in looking for more land, most of them trying to gather enough to give each of the boys a farm of his own, while a few get tired of struggling along on high-priced farms, and make up their minds that a few hundred miles farther west he may get a farm of his own. There is no guess work about the selection of the state to which the land seeker will direct his attention. The topography and climatic conditions are all published long ago, varieties of crops and average yields are known facts to everyone, and the railroad and market facilities are merely matters that a glance will readily put at his command. No very elaborate preparations are needed for a trip that may lie from a couple of hundred to a couple of thousand miles in extent, because he knows he can find hotels and other accommodations on every hand. He goes to the railroad station and buys a ticket for the nearest railroad point to the district selected, and the train takes him with ease and comfort to his destination. He finds luxury or comfort according to his desire or means while en route, and lands at the end of his journey in less time than it took the pioneer to get his camp outfit together. He goes to a hotel and engages a room and makes himself presentable quite leisurely, then calls up the land agent whose advertisement has been the means of bringing this particular district to notice. The agent dashes up in a fine auto, and they are off to look at some particular desirable farm. No need to dig into the soil for evidence of productiveness, green fields are all around being living witnesses as to quality. Should it happen to be a quarter or eighty that has no improvements, it is only a matter of hauling the

necessary material a very few miles, and then engaging the services of the right mechanic to build. When the house is all ready for occupancy the family arrives by rail, and later come the stock and implements by the same route.

The work of getting the seed into the soil is neither long nor laborious, because we have the grain drill and the corn planter, both of which can do ten times more work in their line than a man of the past could. The cultivation of the different crops is simplified and intensified by highly improved machinery. Instead of walking all day behind a plow or cultivator, a man can sit in partial comfort, and a boy can do the work that took a strong male to accomplish in those days of toil, while the horses are not compelled to put forth anywhere near as much effort. The harvesting of all crops is more easily executed, each variety having a machine peculiarly adopted to it. The cutting of and caring for hay is actual pleasure compared with forty years ago, and the threshing of small grain has become a matter of hours instead of days.

The creamery and cheese factory have come in to lighten the burden of the farmer's wife, and it would be a curiosity to see the rows of milk pans of the past, while the hand separator has increased the cream production more than would be readily believed.

The stock on the farm is not a matter of haphazard these days, it has become a science that can be figured down to certainty. Highbred horses, cattle, hogs, sheep and poultry are all everyday occurrence today, and special breeds are really only matters of taste or difference of treatment. Accommodations for all kinds of stock are becoming more and more important every day, and a large farm presents the appearance of a fair-sized village of about forty years ago. The lumber wagon has ceased to be the general family conveyance, and easy riding buggies and carriages, and very often a commodious automobile, are the accepted styles of travel. It is not the rule to see a man in the field until the stars are visible, the day's work being more easily done in less time.

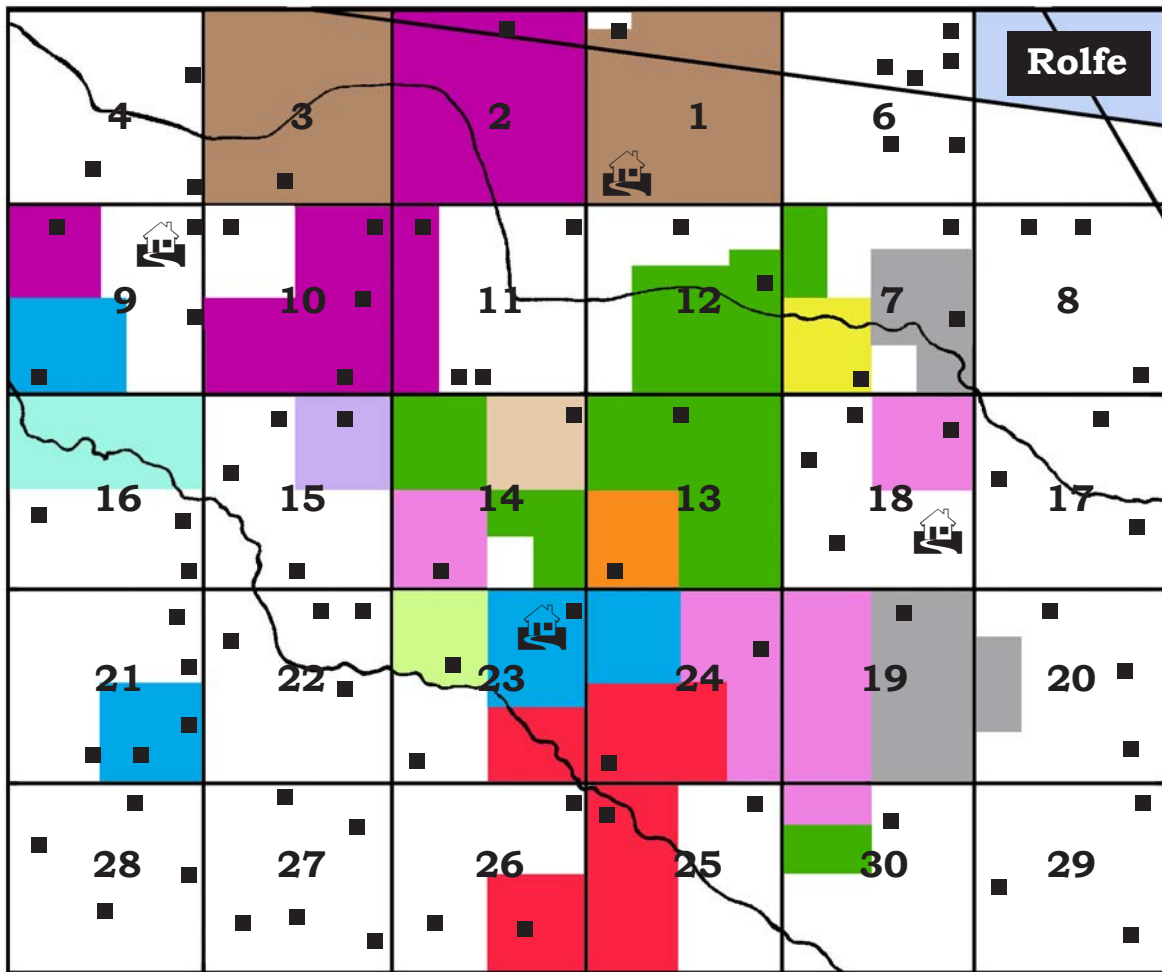
The daily mail delivery has eliminated distances as far as the farm is concerned, and it is now a case of a daily newspaper as an everyday necessity, when the weekly paper was considered a much-desired or prized luxury in the days of yesterday. The telephone has removed the space between town and farm, and all kinds of business has begun to assume the rapidity of the city.

Instead of a few months each year at school for the boy or girl on the farm, we have all grades of colleges with all kinds of special courses, until every prominent faculty of a boy or girl can easily obtain the needed development.

The contrast between yesterday and today, as far as the farm is concerned, reads like an improbable piece of fiction, while the actual fact suggests some spasmodic revolution in its rapidity of consummation, as the farm was the real foundation of wealth production yesterday, we find it has retained that status today in every country, and now shows evidence of being the main support of monetary health of the world.

In these days of trusts and combinations, it seems to me that the day is not far distant when the farmer will be his own commission man, and the world's markets will be governed by the men who produce the material for those markets. When that day dawns, a new era will begin for all the world, and the man that brings the bread, butter and meat to the millions will be recognized at his true value. How this is to be accomplished is not in my province to declare, but I think it will be inaugurated through the medium of cooperation.


Modified 1901 Map



One inch equals one mile.

■ 1901 farmsteads

 country schools


 First century farm along the road. Only grain bins are left. It is owned by Marge Shimon of Pocahontas whose late husband's, Bernie's, great-grandfather, Albert Shimon, bought it in 1892.

 The second century farm was bought by Conrad Laufusweiler of Ft. Dodge in 1894. The family name has changed to Laufersweiler. Both a marsh and Lizard Creek were on the half section. The family never moved to the farm, and it had no building site. It is owned by the heirs of Mary Laufersweiler Fielding who died in 1988.


 The third century farm was purchased by Melvin E. Cornwell in 1895. His great-granddaughter, Joy Cornwell Palmer of Forest City, grew up on the farm and owns it. There are no buildings.


 Hunter homeplace, 1896–1910. It is now owned by the Dahl family. One building is left.


 Zeman homeplace, purchased in 1891. Barbara and Terry Zeman live on this well-kept farm.


 Richard C. and Fannie Grant farm, purchased in 1892. Their son, Casper "Cap " Grant, and Addie Cook Grant bought 80 acres on the north side of Section 15 in 1920 and then lived and farmed there. Cap and Addie's son Don, who was a participant in this project, died in 2001. No buildings remain.


Early Families with Large Land Holdings in the Area


 Osburn J. Shannon, a cattle buyer in Chicago, purchased three entire sections of land plus a few hundred other acres in Center Township from the railroad in the 1880s. He never moved to the Rolfe area, but the Shannon Farms became one of the largest enterprises in the county with 3,302 total acres. Shannon's last descendant died in 1999, and the farms were bequeathed to Berea College, which sold them to an investor.


 In 1882, James Henry Charlton, age 26, moved from Dallas County to the Rolfe area where he had bought 80 acres in Section 11, Center Township. James was manager of the Shannon Ranch from 1887 to 1897 and eventually owned 10 stock ranches, totaling 3000 acres. He had investments in several Rolfe businesses, including the First National Bank, an egg and poultry station, a mill, the grain elevator, and a car dealership. James died in 1912. He had previously sold the bank to Diedrick Brinkman; then his estate sold the elevator to Diedrick, Charles L. Gunderson, and another investor. James's heirs have sold most of their Charlton land; however, some is still owned by the family, although James and his wife, Franc, have no descendants in the Rolfe area.

 Diedrick Brinkman of Michigan bought 160 acres in Section 24, Center Township, from a Civil War veteran. In 1873, Diedrick and his wife, Anna Wiegman Brinkman, moved to the site, built a home, and raised 12 children. The family bought more land, a bank, and a share of the grain elevator. Much of Diedrick's and Anna's land is owned by their descendants. A large clan of Brinkman offspring continues to live in the Rolfe area. The farm where Diedrick and Anna's great-grandson, Robert, and family live in Section 18, Garfield Township, is on the east end of the road where I grew up.

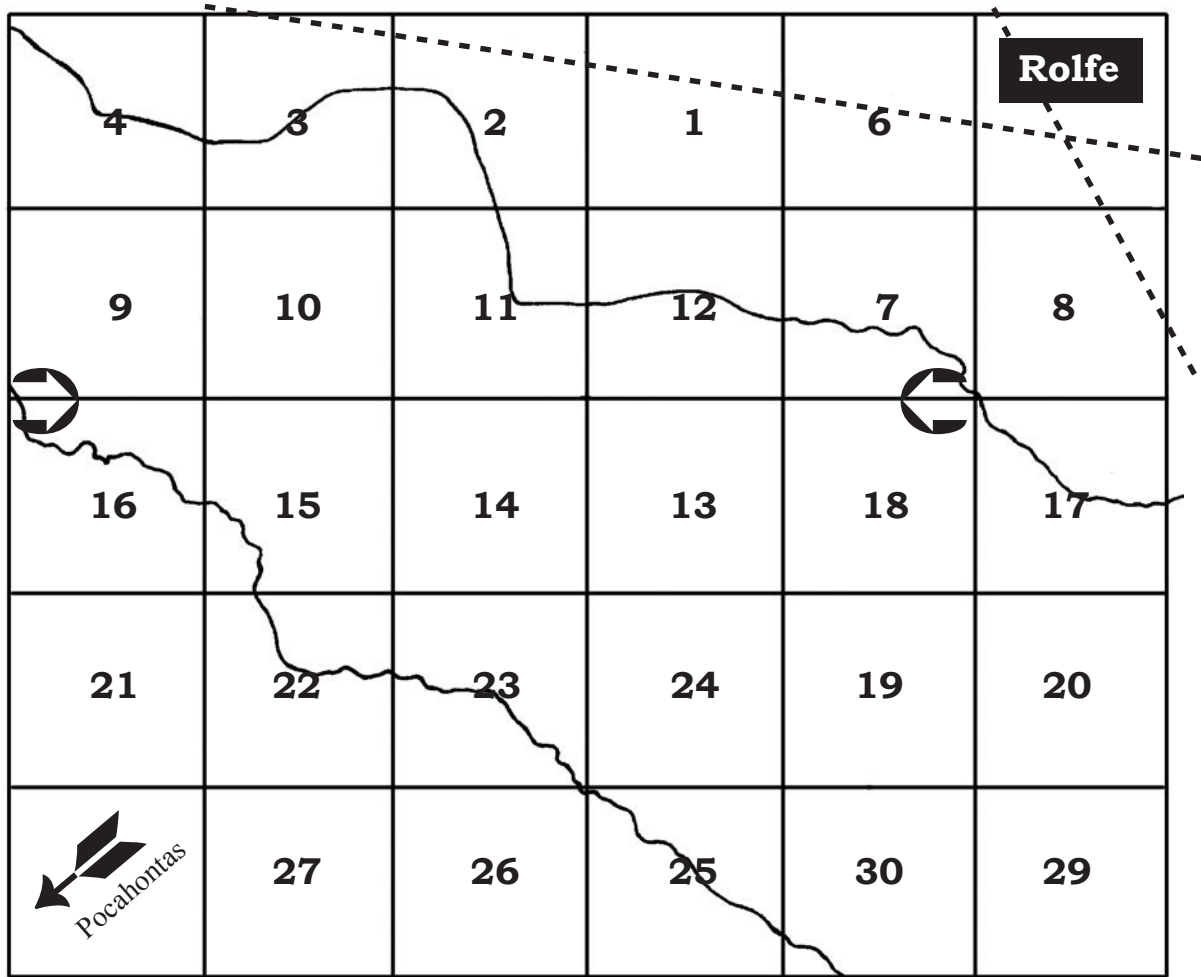
 In 1881, Anna Wiegman Brinkman's brothers, Herman and John, moved to the section where Anna and Diedrick lived. Herman was married to Betsy Clark and later bought 200 acres in Section 9 that he sold in 1913. John expanded his holdings to have enough land to bequeath 160 acres to each of his four children. Neither Herman nor John has any descendants in the Rolfe area; however, John's heirs continue to own land inherited from him.

 In the 1880s, three brothers from Oxford, Iowa, bought land in the area. Morris Ives settled in Section 19 of what was then called Clinton Township. It was later renamed and currently is known as Garfield Township. Morris married Hattie, the oldest daughter of Diedrick and Anna Brinkman. Their son, Arlo, took over the farm in 1931. His children now own the land but live out of state. In 1886, Leon and Louisa Ives came to Section 7, Clinton. Their great-granddaughter, Kathy Dahl, and family live on the farm. Milo Ives bought 160 acres in Section 19, Clinton, but never moved to the county. Instead his son, Robert, came in 1913 with his wife Maude. The place became known as the Maude Ives farm but was sold to Bette Brinkman in 1988.

 David Dady and Rosa Beck moved to Section 13, Center Township, in 1882. They raised cattle, accumulated land, made loans to other families, but had no children. He died in 1916 and she in 1931. Their property has been sold, and their only relatives in the area are a few great-great nieces and nephews of David's sister, Mary Dady Sinek, and husband Frank Sinek.

 Charles and Gunder Gunderson moved to Section 25, Center Township, in 1881. Gunder later moved on to Washington, but Charles married Dena Christensen, also from Wisconsin, and the couple built the Gunderson homeplace farm and had six children. John was the only one to stay in the county. He married DeElda Lighter. They had one son, Deane Gunderson, who married Marion Abbott. Marion and Deane have six children, but only Charles lives in Rolfe; however, family members continue to own 2,935 of the 3,683 acres that the family had accumulated at the height of its land ownership in 1981.

The Area Where I Grew Up



The symbols mark east and west ends of my road.

..... The dotted lines represent rail lines.

1. One inch equals one mile. A square mile is a section of land and contains 640 acres.
2. The left four columns are now in Roosevelt Township, which originally was named Center Township. The right two columns are in Garfield Township, which originally was Clinton Township.
3. There were two railroads. The east-west one was called the Chicago Northwestern. The one that went southeast to northwest was first called the Des Moines-Fort Dodge, then the Chicago Rock Island, then the Minneapolis-St. Louis. Both lines were bought by the Union Pacific Railroad in the 1990s, and the track east of Rolfe was removed. Crooked Creek is the top drainage ditch and Lizard Creek is the bottom drainage ditch. Pocahontas County is one of 99 counties in Iowa. It has 16 townships, each with 36 square miles called sections, which are numbered consistently with the system by which the state was surveyed in the 1800s.

Frontier Families

Introduction

In the late 1800s, many people settled the land and created the rural neighborhood where I grew up. Unless their stories were passed along to their descendants, memories of the people who moved away, including information about their aspirations and challenges, have largely been forgotten. There are few, if any, clues as to who some of those descendants might be and where they might live. Other families are more easily remembered because they are named as landowners on old maps, they wielded great influence, or they had several descendants who populated the area for subsequent generations. However, for most families, the time came when there was no longer anyone living in the area who carried their surname.

It has been interesting to ferret out the stories of some of the families whose names were bantered about when I was a child as I listened to my parents and their friends reminisce about local history. Despite a good deal of research, it is difficult to know much about the lives of even the more prominent families. Much of the information about them simply has not been passed along. Some of the people who I presumed could relay information about the early history of the area had only vague memories; other persons had vivid memories but not ones that matched the factual record or the stories of other descendants. In the end, I pieced together information from paper documents with snippets of people's versions of history to prepare biographical sketches of some of the more-renowned early families.

The Shannon Farms

The 1904 book, *A Pioneer History of Pocahontas County*, reports, "Osburn J. Shannon, a commission stockdealer of Chicago, at an early day foreseeing the future development of Northwestern Iowa, purchased all of sections 1, 3 and 5 and 240 acres on section 7, Center Township, making altogether 2,160 acres."

James (Jim) Craig, who lives near Pocahontas and was manager of the Shannon Farms from 1967 to the end of the twentieth century, supplemented this history of the ranch. He began by saying that the Shannon Farms had amassed a total of 3,302 acres. Jim said that O.B. (the name people called Osburn Shannon) lived in Chicago and was acquainted with a neighbor who was a railroad company president. The neighbor told O.B. that there was good land in Iowa that his company owned but had not yet been plotted. He suggested O.B. should invest in it.

Records at the county auditor's office show that Shannon acquired the land from the Chicago, Milwaukee, and St. Paul Railroad Company with a purchase of a portion of Section 1 in 1881. Included in Section 1 was a site known as Rubens Siding where trains loaded and unloaded before a stopping place and depot were located in the current town of Rolfe. The history book goes on to say:

These sections are enclosed with good fences and with the exception of 300 acres under cultivation, are used for pasturing and feeding the large herds of cattle and hogs that are annually prepared here for the Chicago market. This ranch is one of the largest business enterprises in Pocahontas county, about 500 head of hogs and 1200 head of fat cattle being annually shipped from it. The value of the annual sales ranges from \$60,000 to \$70,000. About 500 tons of hay are made each year, and during last year 100,000 bushels of ear corn were purchased from the neighbors.

According to Jim, Shannon had one daughter, Mary S. Shannon, who married Alford C. Tyler. Mary took over the farms and visited them often in the 1940s. She and her husband had one child, Robert Dixon Tyler, who became an architect in Chicago and began overseeing the farms. He had two children. His daughter Elizabeth died of leukemia at age 12. His son Bobbie became an attorney and was gradually assuming responsibility for the farms. Robert planned to retire; however, Bobbie died of brain cancer in the mid-1980s at age 45. The misfortune meant that Robert, a septuagenarian and the last of the Tyler line, had to continue overseeing the farms. Robert's wife, Helen, died in the late 1980s.

Mary Shannon Tyler had specified in her will that if there were no remaining blood relatives of the Tyler family, the Shannon farms should go to Berea College in Kentucky. Jim says that Robert visited Berea to tell officials the school would receive nearly 3,000 acres upon his death, but the administrators were indifferent. They probably didn't know the value of the land would be five to six million dollars. Robert died in 1999.

Berea sold the farms to James Satori of Florida. He kept the tenants who were renting from the Tyler family, but he gave them cash rent contracts rather than sharing the inputs and proceeds on a 50-50 basis. The properties still have the incorporated name of Shannon Farms. Berea kept the money, stock, and other assets of the farms that Mary Shannon Tyler stipulated be given to the college.

Jim says the Tyler family visited the Rolfe area four times a year to meet with him and the various tenants. However, in the last decade of Robert's life, Jim made all the decisions. He apprised Robert of his actions, but Bob (as Jim refers to the octogenarian) trusted Jim with all matters including grain sales and banking. Jim and his wife Mildred think a lot of Bob and Helen Tyler. He said they were "well-to-do people but as common as could be and supportive of the arts and education."

The Charlton Farms

The 1904 *History of Pocahontas County* tells about the Charlton Ranch, saying, "In 1882, James Henry Charlton, a young man, resident of Dallas County, bought the W1/2 NW1/4 Sec. 11, Center Township—80 acres—and erected some improvements and prepared a home for his father and family who arrived the next spring."

The Charlton family had resided in Ohio before moving to Iowa. James's father, Jesse, was 64 years old and a widower when he and six of his nine surviving children moved to the Rolfe area. James was 26. The book continues:

James embarked in the business of raising corn, hogs and cattle—the corn for feed and the stock for the city market. The profits, from time to time, have been invested in more land, and he is now the owner of 3,000 acres, to the successful management of which he gives his entire time and attention.

This land is in Pocahontas County and Palo Alto County and is divided into ten farms on each of which a house and other outbuildings have been erected. These farm houses are occupied by persons or families who have been employed at an annual salary, with the understanding that they shall board from one to three other persons as occasion may require.

The aim, in their management, has been to mature for the city market each year all the hogs and cattle possible. During recent years about

2,500 head of cattle have been carried and to supply their needs in the summer season it has been necessary to purchase from 60,000 to 80,000 bushels of corn, in addition to the large quantity raised on the farms.

One cannot read the story of the rapid growth of this ranch, whereby in eighteen years it was increased from 80 to 3,060 acres, yielding a gross annual income of more than \$100,000, without being impressed with the thought that its proprietor and manager has found the golden secret of "how to make the farm pay." As a farmer he has certainly found the philosopher's stone—the secret of success—and his wisdom appears in strictly adhering to it. That which has been achieved is a practical illustration of the possibilities of the Iowa farm and the kind of management needed to secure the best results.

It is difficult to read this success story without thinking of James's connection with Osburn Shannon, owner of the Shannon Ranch that James managed from 1887 to 1897, and wondering what opportunities he was able to take advantage of in that position. Nor can one ignore that the 1887 plat map shows that 320 acres of his land was originally listed under the name of W.H. Brenton. W.H. was kin to James's mother, Sara Ann Brenton Charlton, who died in Dallas County in 1868. William H. Brenton and his sons of Dallas County founded the Brenton Bank that continued to be a major bank in the Midwest until the 1990s when it was bought by the Wells Fargo Bank.

In September 1891, James married Franc Otterbein of Linn County. It appears the couple did not reside on the farm for very long but, for the most part, lived in the town of Rolfe. In addition to owning ten stock farms, he became vice-president of the First National Bank of Rolfe and had other investments in the town such as an egg and poultry business, a grain elevator, and an automobile dealership.

James died in 1912 at the age of 56. His share of the grain elevator was sold to three men—among them were my great-grandfather, C.L. Gunderson, and another patriarch of the area, Diedrick Brinkman.

Clyde E. Brenton of Dallas County was the executor of the Charlton estate. In a court document from James's estate files, Mr. Brenton said, "In resume, this executor respectfully represents to the Court that at the time of his appointment, the various farm properties of said decedent were rather heavily encumbered and that in addition to said indebtedness, there were other unsecured obligations of said decedent outstanding and unpaid, including notes given to Brenton Bros. of which this executor was a co-partner, of more than Two Hundred Thousand (\$200,000.00) dollars."

Mr. Brenton believed that had he proceeded immediately to sell sufficient Charlton properties to pay all of the estate's indebtedness, the sale would have exhausted the greater portion of the estate. However, he felt it was in the best interest of the estate to defer payment of the estate's debt until it could be paid out of the rentals, earnings, and profits of the estate. Mr. Brenton was required to sell only four of the Charlton farms—a total of 814 acres—in order "to pay off all debts and claims against said estate and in addition thereto, all mortgage indebtedness on the remaining lands and properties belonging to said decedent."

Mr. Brenton ended his petition, saying, "It is therefore with considerable, and he believes pardonable, pride that this executor is able to relinquish and terminate his said trust, leaving intact in the hands of the said widow and surviving children of said decedent, some twenty four hundred acres of farm lands, as well as other real property, and more than Fifty Thousand (\$50,000.00) Dollars in personal property consisting of grains, life stock,

machinery, etc. on said lands all free from indebtedness or encumbrance of any kind or nature whatsoever.”

James and Franc Charlton had four children: Lucile B., Shannon B., Frank B., and Clyde B. None of their descendants live in Rolfe. However, Dennis Callon, who graduated from high school with me in 1963, is a great-grandson of James’s sister, Martha Charlton Callon.

The heirs of James and Lenore have sold a substantial amount of the family’s once large holdings, including their land along the road where I grew up in Sections 10 and 11 of what had been Center Township and is now called Roosevelt Township. Clyde B. Charlton sold 560 acres of that farm in 1951 to Maynard Grossnickle, a cattle farmer from Curlew, some 20 miles north-west of Rolfe. Maynard rented the farm to tenants, including Russel Jordan. In 1966, the Gunderson Trusts (created for my siblings and me in the 1950s after the death of my grandfather) bought the land from Maynard’s estate. Then in the 1970s, some of my siblings and I bought nearby parcels, totaling 240 acres, from the heirs of Lucile B. Charlton Hall. I recall buying 20 of those acres for \$3,000 per acre in 1980 when land values reached their height prior to the farm crisis of the 1980s. None of us Gundersons have lived on or farmed the land but have rented it to tenants. In 2003, my next younger sister, Martha, was forced to sell 240 acres of her land. It sold for \$2,725 per acre.

Other heirs of the Charlton family sold 160 acres in Des Moines Township north of Rolfe in about 2001. They have only a 345-acre farm left. It is custom-farmed by Larry Pedersen.

The Brinkman Clan



Anna Mary Margaret Wiegman Brinkman, David (Diedrick) Brinkman. Circa late 1800s. *The Kyle Brinkman collection.*

The 1904 county history book reports on one of the better-known early patriarchs of the Rolfe area:

Brinkman, David, (Diedrick) resident of section 24, Center Township, was born near Hamburg, Germany, in 1843. At the age of twenty-three, having learned the carpenter trade, he crossed the ocean in a sail boat that was seventy-two days on the voyage. He located first in Michigan, where he worked at carpentry. On Feb. 28, 1871, he married there Anna Wiegman, and on April 18, 1873, located in Pocahontas County, first in Clinton Township, and the next year on his present farm.

According to a family history book written by Diedrick and Anna’s heirs, Diedrick bought his first 160 acres from a Civil War veteran named Reverend Brown, who had obtained title to

the land from the federal government for his service to the country. Diedrick paid four dollars per acre for the land, and the deed he received indicated the farm was marked by a rock and some deer horns. The county history tells more about David's story of settling in the county:

He is one of those hardy pioneers who were not frightened from the frontier by early hardships, and his splendid success on the farm places him in the front rank as a farmer. When he came to locate on the frontier his brother-in-law accompanied him, leaving their wives at Fort Dodge. They set out on foot at Manson to walk the distance to their new homes—twenty miles—and had to carry their clothing in their hands when they waded the Lizard. A few days after they returned to Manson, they sent for their wives and families and took them out with an ox team. A few days before harvest that year the grasshoppers came and destroyed thirty acres of wheat and ten of oats, a loss that left David in the fall of the year with ten dollars and thirty bushels of potatoes for the support of himself and family during the winter. When the corn was ripe he went east of the grasshopper district, husked corn on the shares and survived that winter by making his home in a cellar and living on potatoes, cornbread and water. In 1874, the grasshoppers devoured the small grain again, but not the corn, and he fared better; but that fall and again in 1881 his crops and improvements were saved from prairie fires only after the most heroic efforts. In the fall of 1874 he got lost and had to remain all night alone on the prairie. In the winter of 1881, while returning from Humboldt in a sleigh, he was caught in a blinding snowstorm, passed within three rods of his home, but did not know it or discover the fact until he had gone two miles further, and ran against the walls of a deserted sod shanty. When he reached his home he was nearly frozen to death. His brother-in-law, after one year's experience on the frontier, returned to Michigan.

As the years have passed, David Brinkman has added acre to acre so that his home farm, which he has improved with fine buildings, contains 540 acres, and he is the owner of two other farms in the vicinity that contain 300 acres more. He keeps from 25 to 30 cows for dairy purposes and in August 1894, began to use the Delaval cream separator, the first one in Center township. The result of its use has been so satisfactory that he would not think of dispensing with it while keeping cows. He aims to keep a sufficient amount of stock to eat all the grain raised on the farm, and has met with good success in feeding both cattle and hogs. He is a highly respected citizen, was a trustee of Center township in '77-78, president of the school board in '76-77 and assessor in 1884. When Diedrick and Anna were married in 1871, he was 27 and she was 21. They had 12 children: Hattie, Caroline, Henry, Dora, Jessie, John, William, August, Anna, May, Glyde, and Idella. Hattie was born in Michigan in 1872, and the others were born on the Brinkman homeplace farm.

Kathy Dahl, mother of the Dahl girls whose skill in farming I admire, is the granddaughter of Dora Brinkman Ives. Phil Brinkman, a farmer in his 70s, is one of Diedrick and Anna's

grandsons and lives on land Diedrick acquired across the road from the original Brinkman homeplace. Phil claims that Diedrick gave each of his five sons their own 160-acre farm but that the boys were to share part of their profit from working the land with their sisters. Phil added that some of the brothers shared fairly with their sisters and others did not.

The farm Diedrick gave to his son Henry is in the northeast corner of Section 18, Clinton Township (now Garfield Township). That farm is along the main north-south road that goes into Rolfe. It is now a paved highway, and is at the east end of the gravel road where I grew up. H.D., as Henry is commonly called, and his wife Nellie lived on the farm and bought another 160 acres in the same section, including a home where their hired hands could live directly to the west. Wanda Peers Hodgell and Lavonne Howland Page are two people I interviewed who were members of hired hand families and spent part of their formative years on the Brinkman farm.

Phil Brinkman also tells about Diedrick buying the First National Bank of Rolfe. Diedrick purchased a half interest then the sole ownership from James H. Charlton. The bank was incorporated in 1894 but had its origins in the Bank of Rolfe that was established in 1882 after its building was erected in 1881. According to the county history book, it was the oldest building in Rolfe.



David (Diedrick) Brinkman and his 12 adult children, arranged from the youngest on the left to the oldest on the right: Dolly Brinkman Freeman, Glyde Brinkman, May Brinkman Caffery, Anna Brinkman Vaughn, August Brinkman, William Brinkman, John Brinkman, Jessie Brinkman Welstead, Dora Brinkman Ives, Henry Brinkman, Caroline Brinkman Olerich, Hattie Brinkman Ives, and Diedrick Brinkman. Circa early to mid-1930s. *The Joanne and Robert Brinkman collection.*

Phil claims that his dad Gus, who was one of Diedrick's sons, advised Diedrick that it was wise for a man to stick with investments in his own area of expertise—in this case, farming—and not risk investing in other enterprises. Gus further encouraged Diederick to buy an entire section of land that was available near Rolfe for \$50 per acre. Instead Diedrick invested in the bank and eventually turned the bank over to his sons. John managed it and was assisted by the other brothers who were on the board of directors. However, their bank failed on April 4, 1928. The sons paid 80 cents on the dollar compared to the 50 cents per dollar that most bankrupt banks paid their creditors. The reason for this high payment was in part a sense of family ethics but perhaps even more the fact that the Brinkman boys owned land and the

expectation in the community that they pay their share. Subsequently the Brinkman boys mortgaged their land to get through the hard financial times. All the sons were able to retain ownership to their property except John who lost his farm.

When I was growing up, I was aware of the extensive Brinkman clan in the Rolfe area. In fact, there were so many Brinkman cousins—including Kathy Ives Dahl whose family farms the first farm along the road—in the Rolfe High School class of 1965 that it was difficult for them to find prom dates who weren't their cousins. The Brinkmans were also known for holding large picnics on the Fourth of July. The Gunderson family tree is more sparse than the Brinkman tree, and my grandparents were our only relatives living in the area. We had no aunts and uncles or cousins to celebrate with, and it seemed unfair that the Brinkmans were privileged to hold large gatherings of their clan and have so much fun. Apparently the last Brinkman Fourth of July picnic was in 1999, and the event has been discontinued; however, several descendants of Diedrick and Anna Brinkman continue to live in the Rolfe area.

Currently, Robert Brinkman, grandson of H.D. and Nellie, and Robert's wife, Joanne, live in the large house on the highway at the east end of my road where H.D. and Nellie once lived. The west farmstead where the hired hands and their families lived has been cleared. Robert and Joanne have three young boys: Jacob, Thomas, and Sam.

The Wiegman Family

The account of Diedrick Brinkman in the county history book speaks of him coming to Pocahontas County in 1873 with a brother-in-law. The name of the brother-in-law is not specified; however, Diedrick's wife, Anna Wiegman Brinkman, had two brothers who eventually settled in the county, Herman F. and John F. Wiegman. I talked with Joy Cornwell Palmer, who is Herman's great-granddaughter and has a collection of material about the Wiegman family compiled by her late aunt, Frances Cornwell. When I asked about Herman's migration to the United States, Joy told a story similar to what the book said about Diedrick—one of a young man crossing the ocean in a sailboat in some 72 days. She also said several Brinkman and Wiegman families had lived in the same area in northern Germany. Because Diedrick was born in 1844 and Herman in 1845, it is conceivable that they were good friends as well as brothers-in-law and sailed to America together in 1866 when Diedrick was 22 and Herman was 21. John Wiegman, on the other hand, was born in 1853 and would have been only 13 when Diedrick and Herman sailed to the United States.

I talked with one of John's grandsons whose name is also John Wiegman. I will refer to the grandfather as John F. and the grandson as John. There are incongruities not only between what John and Joy reported about the family history but between their versions and what is represented in official courthouse records. I'll do my best to synthesize the material as fairly and accurately as is possible.

John F. Wiegman was the youngest of 10 children and lived in Germany with his parents, Heinrich Wiegman and Dorothy Schierholz Wiegman. At the age of nine, he began herding sheep and helping his father in the shoemaking trade. John F. then came to this country in 1871 as a stowaway on a steamship at the age of 18 to escape the kaiser's draft. He then worked for several years as a farmhand in Illinois for a dollar a day, according to one source, or \$145 a year, according to another source. German was the only language spoken in the community where he worked, but the young immigrant wanted to live where English was spoken. The only English word he knew was hamburger. He had a German-English Bible he read every day that he used to teach himself English. In 1880, at the age of 27, he moved to Pocahontas County where he worked for his brother-in-law, Diedrick Brinkman.

Herman Wiegman was living in Michigan with his wife, Elizabeth (Betsy) Clark. Before Herman emigrated to the United States, he had helped his father in the shoemaking trade,

and when Herman came to the United States, he worked several years in New York before moving to Michigan. Betsy Clark was born in 1851 in England and, at the age of 19, came with her parents to a farm in Michigan. Herman and Betsy were married in September 1872 and had their first child Ed in April 1873. That meant that if Herman was indeed the brother-in-law who came with Diedrick in 1873, he was already married and had one child when he arrived in the Rolfe area. The county history reports that Diedrick and his brother-in-law, that is Herman, after leaving their wives in Ft. Dodge and walking from Manson to their property, went back to Fort Dodge and brought their wives to the county with oxen. The question remains whether Herman and Betsy brought their son with them. Diedrick and Anna's oldest child Hattie was born in Michigan and was one at the time of the move.

Assuming that Herman and Betsy were indeed the couple that came to Pocahontas County with Diedrick and Anna, they then returned to Michigan where they farmed and Anna gave birth to three more children. However, in 1881, Herman obtained the title to the northwest quarter of Section 24, Center Township, just west of the farm where Anna and Diedrick had started their homeplace farm. Herman and Betsy came back to the township with their four children, began their own farm, and had another child in August of 1881. Perhaps when they first arrived, the couple and their children stayed with Diedrick and Anna.

In 1884, another newcomer to the area, Cyrus Manley, purchased the east half of Section 23 just west of the Wiegman and Brinkman farms. He and Mary Ellen Altizer were married in 1869 in New York before heading to the Midwest. When they arrived in Pocahontas County, their oldest child, Almina known as Miney, was 14 and had three younger sisters. A fifth sister was born in 1886, a brother in 1888, and a sixth sister in 1891.

In 1888, John F. married Almina, and they made their home on the 160 acres in Section 24 that Herman had originally purchased for \$680. Herman had sold the west 80 acres to John F. in 1882 for \$340 and the east 80 acres to John F. in 1887 for \$1,360. Then in 1888, Herman gained title to 160 acres in the southwest quarter of Section 9, Center Township—a few miles northwest of the farm where John F. and Almina would build the homeplace for their branch of the family. In 1890, Herman bought another 40 acres in Section 9.

There was also another Wiegman relative who came to Pocahontas County. Herman, John F., and Anna had an older sister by the name of Sophia in Germany who married Henry Draeger. Their son, Fred Draeger, who was born in 1860, came from Germany to Center Township in about 1882 and worked for Anna and Diedrick. In 1893, Fred bought 80 acres in Section 21, Center Township, in the vicinity of his aunt and uncles. He eventually acquired a total of 160 acres in the section, but in 1927 he moved to Hollywood, California. However, he continued to hold title to the land.

According to Joy (Herman's descendant) the farm Herman bought, and where he and his wife Betsy lived in Section 9—at the very west end of the road—was the Willow Farm. Herman and Betsy had five more children in Iowa for a total of 10 offspring; however, one girl died at birth in 1883, her twin sister lived a long life, and a boy died at the age of one in 1887. Herman and Betsy moved to Pocahontas in 1910, when Herman was 65 and Betsy was 59. They sold the farm in 1913. The couple's fourth child, Dorothy Frances, born in Michigan in 1879, married Wesley Cornwell in 1901. In 1915, Dorothy and Wesley bought a farm near Morton, Minnesota, where they established their home. Their son, Irving, after graduating from the University of Minnesota, came back to Center Township to the Cornwell homeplace on the northeast corner of Section 14 to help his uncle Will Cornwell farm. Irving started buying parcels of the land from his relatives and finally in 1946 obtained title to the entire 160-acre homeplace that his grandparents, Melvin Cornwell and Helen Bebe Cornwell, originally purchased in 1895. Both Irving and his wife Velma are deceased. Joy is their only child. She owns the Cornwell land but lives in Forest City in north central Iowa.

When John F. and Almina married, he was 35 and she was 18. They had four children: Henry, Lena, Roger, and Floyd. Unfortunately, Almina died due to complications from a tubular pregnancy at 37. John F. continued to live on the farm, but at 75, he moved to town and lived with his son Henry when young John was 10 years old. Henry died two years later, but John F. lived long enough to enjoy a celebration of his 90th birthday with the Wiegman-Brinkman clan and friends of the family.

John F. accumulated enough land to leave 160 acres to each of his children. One of his early acquisitions occurred in 1898 when he paid his father-in-law Cyrus Manley \$7,000 for the remaining 200 acres that Mr. Manley owned in the northeast corner of Section 23. That property and the Wiegman homeplace in Section 24 were bequeathed to his sons Roger in California and Floyd in Chicago; however, the property was given only in life estates with the offspring of the two sons eventually getting ownership of the land. John F. also had 320 acres north of Rolfe that went to his son Henry and daughter Lena. They both resided in the Rolfe area.

In researching the Wiegman history, I heard some colorful stories about Roger, who was John F. and Almina's youngest son. According to Roger's nephew, John, Roger was a real daredevil. John said his uncle imported liquor from Canada during the Prohibition years and that Roger once drove a car used for bootlegging into a haystack to hide it from federal authorities. Phil Brinkman, a man in his 70s and the grandson of Diedrick and Anna Brinkman, said Roger was a character and ran around with another character, Roy Zeman. The two had gone to country school together and got into bootlegging. The car they used was a green Pontiac with overload springs that provided a gentle ride and were perfect for hauling their five gallon containers of moonshine. One time when the Feds were after him, Roger stopped at the farm of his cousin, Caroline (Brinkman) Olerich, who was the second oldest of Diedrick and Anna's 12 children. Roger told Caroline that things were getting hot, so she hid his car in a machine shed and housed him in an upstairs bedroom and fed him for two weeks. People who know Caroline's propriety would be surprised to know she provided sanctuary for a bootlegger, but when family members challenged her actions, she said, "It's OK, he is blood and kin, and we've got to do something [to help]." Later, Roger went to his partner Roy and said, "This car is hot, and we've got to do something with it." Roy assured him, "Don't worry, I'll take care of it." Roy's barn, like many in those days, had a sling and set of ropes and pulleys for lifting bundles of hay off a wagon into the haymow or upper level of the barn. Roy ingeniously used the same set of equipment to hoist the Pontiac into the haymow where he covered it with hay. According to my father, the car would have weighed much more than a ton while a load of hay would have weighed much less than a ton. The vehicle remained hidden in the haymow for two years before Roy brought it out and drove it again. After various close encounters with the law, John F. Wiegman took his son, Roger, to the train station and sent him to Chicago to live with Roger's brother Floyd, who was nine years older than Roger and an attorney.

Roger eventually moved to San Bernadino, California, where he became a respected businessman with an upholstery, drapery, and cleaning business. Roger died in 1972, and in 2000, his widow established a trust account at the Rolfe State Bank that provided for a \$1,000 scholarship to be given each year to a graduating senior of Pocahontas Area High School who resided in the Rolfe area.

Henry, the son who remained in Rolfe, married Marie Hauck. Her father, George O. Hauck, was one of the founding co-owners of the Weible-Hauck General Store in Rolfe. He later left the partnership and began Hauck's Grocery Store, which was active through the 1950s. Henry managed some 2,000 to 3,000 acres of land: his own farm, property belonging to his father (John F.), land belonging to the Hauck family, and the Charlton farms. The families who lived

on those farms and farmed them were not tenants in the usual sense of the word where a farmer rents the land, makes the decisions, and does the farm work. Instead, the farmers were salaried employees, working for Henry and paid monthly. Each morning, Henry called the tenants with their instructions for the day, and then he drove around the countryside to check up on their progress. Henry also owned the stockyards in Rolfe along the Minneapolis and St. Louis rail line. There was another set of stockyards for the Chicago and Northwestern Railroad. Henry also co-founded the Rolfe State Bank in 1934. The bank continues to operate in Rolfe.

There are no Wiegman descendants living in the Rolfe area; however, the heirs of John F. continue to own land inherited from him.



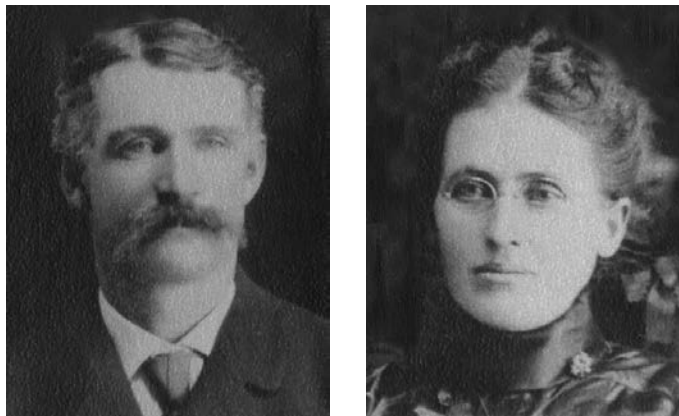
John F. Wiegman's 90th birthday party. The guests included members of the Wiegman clan as well as several friends of the family. A photo was taken of him with the women guests, and this one was taken of him with the men guests. Front row, left to right: Johannes (Hannes) Olerich, Otto Alberts, George Wiegman, Floyd Wiegman, John F. Wiegman, Roger Wiegman, Charles L. Gunderson, Bert Young, John Carlson. Middle row: Earl Ives, Harry Spencer, Casper (Cap) Grant, John Wiegman, Jean Wiegman, Henry D. Brinkman, Don Henderson, Arlo Ives, Orvan Olerich. Back row: William Brinkman, David Brinkman, Ellwood Olerich, Gerald Firkins, Russel Ives, Carl Hertz, unidentified man, Russel Sawin, Bob Shelgren, July 1943. *The Marjorie Hertz collection*

The Ives Family

In the mid-1800s, Warren and Maria Ives lived in New Haven, Connecticut, where he was a fish merchant but doing poorly in the trade. At one point, Warren joined the '49er movement and traveled west to seek gold in California. Having little luck, he returned to New Haven. In 1863, Warren and Maria and their young children—four sons and a daughter—left the East Coast, traversed the country, and settled near Oxford, Iowa, where they established a farm. In the 1880s, the two oldest, Morris and Leon, moved to Pocahontas County.

Morris, born in 1857 and the second son, was the first to come to northwest Iowa. In 1881, he came to Calhoun County—just south of Pocahontas County—where it is said he bought a threshing machine that he operated for two seasons. In 1883, he moved to the Rolfe area

where he traded the rig for the northeast quarter of Section 19, Garfield Township. However, official records at the courthouse show it was not until 1886 that he gained official title to the 160 acres of prairie land.



Leon Ives and Louisa Ditto Ives. Circa 1890. *The Velma Ives collection.*

Leon, born in 1856 and therefore the oldest son, married Louisa Ditto of Clayton County in eastern Iowa in 1882. He was 26 and she was 19. In 1886, they and their two oldest children moved to Pocahontas County, where it is quite possible they stayed with Morris. In fact, Leon and Louisa bought the east half of Morris's quarter section in April 1887; however, they sold the 80 acres back to Morris in October 1889. Then in 1890, Leon and Louisa purchased a quarter section on the east side of Section 7, Garfield Township, one and a half miles directly north of Morris's farm. Interestingly in 1893, Louisa's mother, Minnie Ditto, purchased 40 acres in the southeast corner of the same section where Leon and Louisa settled. Both parcels of land, totaling 200 acres, are still owned by the family today.

Milo, born in 1859 and the youngest of the three surviving sons, followed an Ives' tradition whereby the youngest surviving son remained on his family's homeplace to farm and take care of his aging parents. Thus, Milo lived the rest of his 94 years in Oxford on his parents' farm. However, frontier life had its appeal, and in 1888, Milo purchased the quarter section in Pocahontas County just south of the quarter section where Morris lived. Then in 1898, he purchased 40 acres just east of his farm, giving him a total of 200 acres in the county. Apparently Milo had Morris farm the land until 1913 when Milo's son, Robert, and his wife Maude moved to the area. Robert gained legal title to the farm in 1927 but died of a brain tumor in 1929. The title then went to Maude. Although she moved off the farm within a couple years following Robert's death, she continued to manage the farm and had some eight different tenants before she died. Neither of Maude's two children, Russel and Mary, remained in the Rolfe area, and in 1988 her estate sold the farm to Bette Brinkman. Bette and her husband Phil live on the farm that Phil's grandparents, Diedrick and Anna Brinkman, owned. It is in the same section as the farm that had become known as the Maude Ives farm.

The farm where Morris settled was just east of Diedrick and Anna's farm. The first-born Brinkman child, Hedwig Anna Maria, known as Hattie, was 11 when Morris moved to the area in 1883 at the age of 26. Eight years later, in 1891, Morris and Hattie married. He was 34, and she was 19. The story is that Diedrick and Anna had required Hattie, as oldest of the 12 Brinkman children, to perform many duties: doing farm chores, serving as housemaid, and caring for her siblings. Instead, Hattie, a spirited young woman with the intent to get away from what she considered to be slave labor, eloped with Morris.

Family historian Peggy Ives has collected several stories about the family and published a two-volume book about the Ives clan in the United States. She says that Hattie told the account of her marriage to several family members, especially Hattie's grandchildren, who in later decades would recount nearly identical versions of how she and Morris eloped. Peggy thought the story about their eloping was such a good one that she had to include it in the book. Hattie's grandson, Dallas, who was born in 1945 when Hattie was 73, also remembers the story. He says:

Hattie told me hundreds of stories as a kid. She was so hard of hearing that I couldn't really hold much of a conversation with her, but I would go to visit and she would just talk, always telling stories of the old days. Of course I remember absolutely none of them, except for the story of her marriage, which I remember as if it were yesterday.

Another of Hattie's grandchildren, Jim Ives, had the presence of mind to write down verbatim what Hattie said one time when he was visiting his grandmother and she was regaling the family with stories of the olden days. Dallas has heard Peggy's and Jim's versions of the story about Hattie's marriage and says that some of their information is, "exactly the same version that Hattie told me, right down to the quote." However, Dallas also said, "Strange thing is that there are also a lot of details I remember differently. I guess that's part of what makes family history fun."

According to Peggy, "As a girl, Hattie spent a lot of time herding cattle on the open prairie in the area. It is not hard to imagine her meeting her neighbor, Morris, in the course of her duties." Dallas says Hattie became aware that Morris was interested in her because he often stopped to chat with her when she worked in the fields. She decided that if Morris ever asked her to go on a buggy ride or perhaps, even more daringly, might ask her to marry him, she would accept the offer.

Both the Brinkman and Ives families were members of the Presbyterian church where friends and neighbors often stopped to talk in the churchyard after services. According to Hattie:

One Sunday morning when we were leaving church I got in Morris's buggy, and Father came over and tried to take me out of the buggy. Morris gave me the reins while he untied the team. Father came to my side of the buggy and grabbed my arm. I couldn't believe he would try that, because I was so strong from working on the farm. Anyway, I pulled away, and he slipped and fell down in the mud. I looked over the side and said, "He's clear of the wheels, Morris, let's go."

Hattie and Morris then dashed away in the buggy. Hattie says, "It wasn't long (meaning minutes, not days) until we were engaged." At that point, they started talking about what they would do since she could not go home.

The couple could not marry that day because it was Sunday, so Morris took Hattie to the home of his brother Leon and sister-in-law Louisa where Hattie spent the night. Morris then went to Walt Hersom's farm, which was halfway between Leon's and Morris's farms and left his horses in Walt's barn. Early the next morning, Morris drove Walt's team to Pocahontas to get their marriage license. Meanwhile, Diedrick went looking for Hattie and stopped at the Hersom farm where he expressed his chagrin. However, Walt simply said, "Mr. Brinkman, I think Hattie needs a husband, and Morris needs a wife." Diedrick, in his exasperation, replied,

“Well, I don’t know what I’ll do without my helper.” The couple was married later that day. The marriage certificate is signed by a local pastor. However, no one knows the details of the event—whether it was a small affair at Leon and Louisa’s home with only the two couples and the pastor present, if it was held in town, or if other family members and friends were invited.

Following the wedding, Morris brought Hattie to his home. It was 12 by 15 feet with a stairway to a simple loft. He showed her the utensils and dishes for cooking and told her to make him a pie. She baked the pie, set it on the table to cool, and then went outside. When she came back, Morris had eaten all the pie except for one piece that he said he had left for her. She started eating it, but he grabbed and kissed her, using that as subterfuge to get another bite of the pie. As Hattie told Dallas, “Well, that was the first time he kissed me.”

The Brinkman and Ives families lived as good neighbors for many years, and Hattie often related, with a smile, that her parents accepted her marriage graciously. They were the young couple’s first visitors.



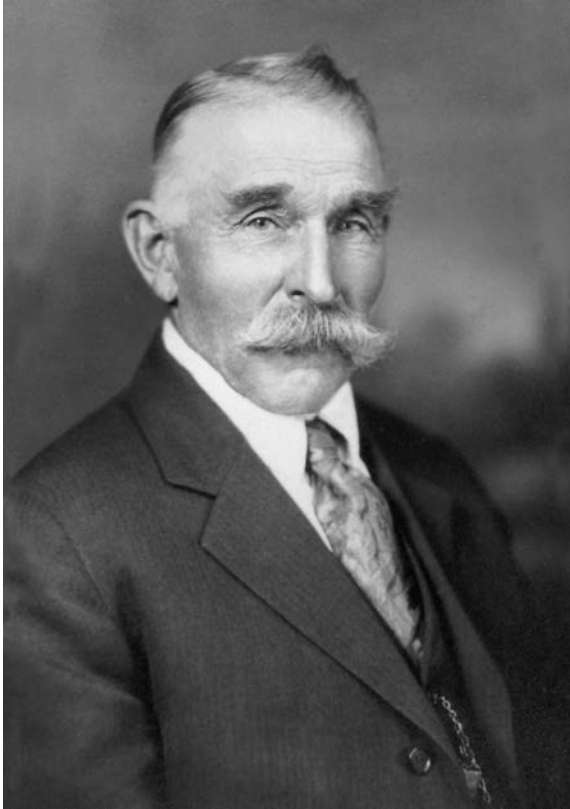
Morris Ives and Hattie Brinkman Ives, 1891. *The Sally Ives Quigley collection.*

Hattie and Morris raised their first six children in their rudimentary, small house before building a new home on the same farmstead. The couple ended up having a total of 11 children between 1882 and 1915. One daughter died when she was only a month old, and another died at the age of 15. The other nine grew into adulthood.

Morris had a history of borrowing money to expand his holdings. In fact, even in 1886, he borrowed \$846 from the Farmers Loan and Trust Company in order to pay the purchase price of \$1,120 for his first quarter section of land. The loan was to be repaid by 1896 at 6 percent interest. Morris paid off the loan and the company released his mortgage in 1896. He maintained a similar pattern of borrowing from institutions such as the State Savings Bank of Rolfe, New York Life Insurance, and Collins Mortgage Company.

According to his granddaughter, Sally Ives Quigley, Morris was on an ambitious campaign to buy enough land to give each of his four sons a farm, and in the 1910s and 20s, he was well on his way toward the goal. Sally says, however, that Morris mortgaged his homeplace in order to purchase other land. That was a critical mistake.

Although the national economy was generally booming during the 1920s, the farm sector was depressed. The First National Bank of Rolfe had already been closed in 1928. However, on March 2, 1929, Morris and Hattie took out a mortgage of \$13,500 from the State Savings Bank of Rolfe. Then on October 30, 1929, the Wall Street stock market crashed, and the entire nation was plummeted into dire straits. On March 20, 1931, Morris and Hattie sold their homeplace farm to their daughter, Blanche Ives Sorenson. The deed included the phrase “except for the encumbrance of record which encumbrance the grantee does not assume or agree to pay.” Blanche was their fourth child, who lived in Estherville some 60 miles away. She was 34 and married to a photographer.



Morris Ives and Hattie Brinkman Ives. Circa 1926. *The Dallas Ives collection.*

At this point, the historical record gets extremely complex. On June 7, 1932, the State Savings Bank was also foreclosed, and the state superintendent of banking became the receiver for the bank. Then a year later in June of 1933, the Equitable Life Assurance Society of the United States sued Morris and Hattie, the State Savings Bank of Rolfe, the state superintendent of banking, and Blanche for the sum of \$14,853 at 8 percent interest.



Arlo and Mildred Taylor Ives. Circa 1936. *The Sally Ives Quigley collection.*

Sally says that her father Arlo Ives, who was Morris and Hattie's youngest son and a 1928 graduate of Rolfe High School, was a pre-medicine student at the University of Iowa when his parents were faced with foreclosure. Arlo left school and returned to the farm where he worked to pay off the debt on the homeplace. Apparently, he and the other siblings who remained in the Rolfe area worked together to save the place. On September 5, 1933, Arlo's brother, Glen Ives, petitioned the court, saying he was the legal tenant of the farm and that the crops were his and should not be part of the suit. It is probable that Glen, age 25, and Arlo, age 22, were farming with their father. Their older brother Earl, who was 40 and farmed nearby, probably assisted not only with the farm work but by borrowing money to help the cause. Then on September 4, 1934, Blanche and her husband sold the quarter section to Arlo. Eventually, the family petitioned the court—based on acts of the 1933 and 1934 General Assemblies of Iowa—and had foreclosure of their farm delayed until March of 1937.

Meanwhile in August of 1935, the court ordered the state superintendent of banking, as receiver for the State Savings Bank of Rolfe, to accept a compromise settlement of \$1,000 for the \$3,800 that Morris, Earl, and Earl's wife Ethel still owed the bank. The court claimed the settlement offer was "highly advantageous to the receivership." Finally, on November 22, 1935, the receiver for the State Savings Bank accepted the compromise settlement, and the Equitable Life Assurance Society dismissed its suit against the family.

The family's slate of credit must have been cleared because on November 35, 1935, Arlo obtained a mortgage of \$13,000 from the Equitable Life Assurance Company and in 1942 was released from the mortgage.

It is interesting that the Ives' tradition of the youngest son taking over the family farm and caring for his parents played itself out again with Arlo. In 1936, he married Mildred Taylor, an elementary school teacher. Mildred was born in Idaho but then moved to Wall Lake, Iowa, where she graduated from high school, then earned a teaching certificate.

The young couple lived on the farm with Morris and Hattie. Morris died in 1939 at the age of 82 while living on the homeplace farm. Hattie eventually moved to Rolfe where she had her own home. She died in 1964 at the age of 92.

Sally senses from things she heard from Mildred about the years from 1936 to 1939 that Morris displayed symptoms of what today would be classified as Alzheimer's disease. Mildred told Sally that Morris had become a "grouchy old man" and that the financial crash also crushed him emotionally. This view is supported by an entry in Peggy's family history book that says, "The Depression after World War I struck savagely at Morris's ambition, and his financial loss contributed to his failing health."

Arlo died in 1974 at the age of 63. Mildred moved to the West Coast, and after several years in Arizona and southern California, ended up in Eugene, Oregon, where Sally lived. Mildred died in 1998 at the age of 88; however, her funeral service was in Rolfe and her gravesite is next to Arlo's.

Arlo and Mildred had three children: Carolyn, Sally, and Dallas. Dallas and I are the same age and were in preschool Sunday school together, then elementary, junior high, and high school. We graduated from Rolfe in 1963 and went to Iowa State, graduating from there in 1967. Although we saw little of each other during college, we were paired together at the university's first computer date dance. The pairings were based on 20 simple questions answered by each participant several days before the event. Most likely, our match had more to do with the fact that both of our families were Presbyterians, Republicans, and farmers from a similar heritage than it was an indication of our being a good match for dating. Carolyn died of cancer in 2000. Sally, who lives in Eugene, and Dallas, who lives in Houston, continue to own some of the land they inherited from Arlo and Mildred. However, they have sold other parcels, including 80 acres of the property once known as the Willow Farm at the west end of the road to their tenant, Paul Harrold.

Although most branches of the family tree begun by Morris and Hattie have planted themselves elsewhere, the pioneer couple does have one great-grandson living in the area. Jeff Ives, who graduated from Rolfe in 1975, farms north of Rolfe and has three children. He is Arlo's great-nephew.

Leon and Louisa had four children. Their son, Andrew, married Dora Brinkman—one of Hattie's sisters. Figuring out the Ives and Brinkman family lineages has always been difficult, but here it is: Andrew married his father's brother's wife's sister.



Andrew and Dora Brinkman Ives. 1907 and 1957. *The Velma Ives collection.*

Andrew and Dora built a home a quarter mile south of Leon and Louisa's homeplace on the 40-acre parcel that Louisa's mother Minnie Ditto had purchased along Crooked Creek. Andrew and Dora then had three children who survived to adulthood. Their son, Norton, went to Iowa State where he met his wife, Velma Gygi, who was from northern Wisconsin and majoring in dietetics. They returned to live on the south farmstead while Andrew and Dora moved to the north building site.



Norton and Velma Ives. 1980. *The Velma Ives collection.*

Norton and Velma had eight children. Their fourth child, Kathy, graduated from Rolfe in 1965, then went to Iowa State where she met Gary Dahl from southwest Iowa. The two married and eventually returned to live on the family's north farmstead.

Norton went back to Iowa State and earned a doctoral degree in agricultural engineering in 1959 when he was 41. He continued farming until his death in 1992 at age 74, but he also specialized in crop-drying technologies and traveled to many countries as a consultant. Gary and Kathy have eight children. Dawn, Heidi, and Anna are the oldest and have moved away. Mercy, Betsy, Caroline, Luke, and John are still at home. Along with their mom, they are the only descendants of Leon and Louisa in the area.



The Dahl family. Back row, left to right: Betsy, Anna, Gary, Kathy, and Luke. Front row, left to right: Mercy, John, Dawn, and Carolyn. Heidi not present. 2001. *The Gary and Kathy Dahl collection.*

David and Rosa Dady

David Dady and Rosa Beck, were married in January 1882 by a police magistrate in Rock Island County, Illinois, just across the Mississippi from the state of Iowa. Their marriage license says David was 24 and Rosa was 19. He was the son of Irish-born Catholic farmers, and she was the daughter of German-born Lutheran farmers. David and Rosa moved for a short while to the cattle country of Audubon County in southwest Iowa. Then in September 1882 David bought land in Section 13, Center Township, in Pocahontas County from a man who had bought the property from the Chicago, Milwaukee, and St. Paul Railroad. David and Rosa built their home in that location and established a farm.

In 1883, David's mother, Bridget Dady, bought land a few miles away in Section 20, and it appears that Bridget and David's siblings moved to Pocahontas County. Although the ages entered in the 1880 census for the Dady family members, then living in Rock Island County, are inconsistent with ages reported elsewhere, the census information does provide insight into the family. It says Bridget was 52 and single, and her occupation was that of keeping house. Margaret was listed as Maggie and was 24 with no specified occupation. David was 22 and listed as a farmer. Mary was 13 and a school student, and James was 15 and listed as a farm laborer. It is probable that David had become the male head of the household, and his mother and siblings initially lived with David and Rosa when they arrived in Pocahontas County in 1883.

In David's obituary in 1916, *The Rolfe Arrow* said, "Mr. Dady was typical of this prairie country. He saw its possibilities, and as fast as financial conditions permitted, accumulated land. The feeding of stock attracted his attention in an early day, and realizing the profits to be derived therefrom, he thrived financially and died possessed of a half million dollar's worth of property."

Rosa and David raised Hereford cattle, amassed 1,230 acres of land, but had no children. Interestingly, the 1887 plat map shows a dashed line between Pocahontas and Rolfe, which went through the center of the property that the Dady's accumulated. The line could have represented a potential rail line. David and Rosa may have anticipated they would be able to load cattle directly from their farm onto train cars headed for market; however, a railroad line never materialized between the two towns.



David and Rosa Dady's tombstones in the Clinton-Garfield Cemetery near Rolfe, Iowa. Circa 2000.

Probate records show that when David died, his estate—in addition to the land he owned—included 37 Hereford cows, two red cows, 28 spring calves, one bull, one yearling heifer, 35 shoats (young hogs less than one year old), one mule, five horses, 1,000 bushels of ear corn, 250 bushels of oats, 90 tons of wild hay (about nine big stacks), 36 shares of stock in the First National Bank, deposits in banks at Rolfe and Pocahontas, and two lots in Rolfe. Rosa died in 1931, and the records for both David's and Rosa's estates show that the couple made generous loans to other farmers in the area, almost as if Rosa and David had their own independent bank.

David's obituary in the *Rolfe Arrow* describes his willingness to loan money to his friends.

David B. Dady was as square as men are made financially. His word was as good as his bond. He was four-square in all his business transactions. Few men have possessed to a greater extent the confidence of their neighbors. His friendship and confidence were worth accumulating. A friend did not appeal to him in vain, even though it meant financial backing, for one whom Dave Dady trusted need never want for financial support. He was of the sort it was a pleasure to call a friend. When the committee was soliciting funds to erect a hospital in Rolfe, Mr. Dady was one of the most liberal contributors. He was public spirited on all occasions. He will be greatly missed in the community.

My father says that Roy Zeman, an old-time farmer in the area, described David as being a short Irish man who loved whiskey and would leave his flask hanging on a nail by the screen door on the porch to the house. Phil Brinkman, a septuagenarian farmer in the area, added that even though there were many other Catholics in the township, most were Bohemians and didn't like David because he was Irish Catholic.

David's obituary goes on to say, "In death, as in life, Mr. Dady was a pioneer, being the first one laid to rest in the new Catholic cemetery south of Rolfe." His obituary is incongruent with the one for Rosa that says her funeral was held at the Methodist church and that she was buried in the Clinton-Garfield Cemetery used by the Protestants. I visited the Protestant cemetery and found the Dady tombstone. It is a large one inscribed solely with the name Dady but has a small, ankle-high stone on the left for Rosa and a similar stone on the right for David.

I asked Dad about the the newspaper report claiming David was buried in the Catholic cemetery and my finding the Dady tombstone in the Clinton-Garfield Cemetery. Dad remembered a story about a widow who had her deceased husband dug up, moved, and buried again, but Dad wasn't sure of the details. I then called Phil about the puzzle of David's burial. Phil recounted a story about Rosa disagreeing with St. Margaret's priest over financial issues and that she exhumed David's casket and moved it to the Protestant cemetery where she was buried in 1931.

Finally, I called Lucile Taylor of St. Margaret's Parish for clarity. When I asked if she was indeed the person in charge of Catholic burial records, she energetically answered, "Yes, and I am having a dickens of a time finding one person." I asked if the missing person was David Dady, and she said, "Yes, I have walked all over that cemetery trying to find that man, and he isn't there." Lucile wanted to solve the mystery of David's burial because the parish was preparing for its centennial, and she planned to publish a small history book.

David died at age 60 from rheumatism and chronic nephritis but left no will; however, Rosa emerged as administratrix of his estate. She was supported by a handful of area farmers and businessmen, including Diedrick Brinkman and my great-grandfather, Charles L.

Gunderson, who stepped forward with funds to secure a court-required probate bond of over one hundred thousand dollars.

It appears Rosa was a capable farm woman, and that by today's standards, the land David owned would be listed equally in his and Rosa's names. Evidence of her partnership in the farm appears in Rosa's obituary in 1931 in the *Rolfe Arrow*.

Mr. and Mrs. Dady lived on the farm southwest of town and gradually added to their acres until at the time of Mr. Dady's death they were among the heaviest land owners of the county. In all the years of accumulating this estate, Mrs. Dady did her part, both in the management and labor, often carrying the work of a farm hand in addition to her household duties.

Although there were tracts of land in the early part of the century that listed women as the titleholders, that was not the case with the Dady properties. When David's estate was settled, his half of the land went to Rosa, who continued to live on the homeplace farm they built. The rest of David's half of the property was divided among his siblings. In David's probate records, Margaret is listed as being age 63, Mary 51, and James 49.

Margaret (Dady) Russell inherited the north half of Section 14, but she and her daughter met foreclosure in 1922. The farm was sold at a sheriff's sale. The buyer lost the place in 1933 to the Metropolitan Life Insurance Company who owned the farm until 1939 when it was bought by Marian and Harry Howard. Their descendants continue to own the land but sold the acreage in 1998. Margaret has no descendants living in the Rolfe area.

Mary (Dady) Sinek inherited a large portion of Section 12 and 80 acres directly east of it in Section 7, Garfield Township. When Mary's husband Frank died in 1924, she continued farming with her single son Roy and her widowed daughter, Veronica Harrison. However, they went bankrupt, and the land was sold in June of 1928 via a sheriff's deed to J.G. Hildebrand, a dentist from Cedar Falls. Dr. Hildebrand rented the land to Mary's son, Leon, and his wife Margaret. The couple farmed there until moving to town in the early 1950s. Then their son Paul and his wife Esther rented the farm and moved there where they raised a family. Dr. Hildebrand died, leaving the land to his only heir, a son living in the eastern part of the United States. The son offered to sell the farm back to the Sinek family. Subsequently, in 1956, Paul and Esther, with help from Leon, bought the place. A few descendants of Mary and Frank Sinek currently live in the Rolfe area.

James Dady inherited the land in Section 12 just north of the Dady homeplace. He and his son ran into financial difficulties and were unable to pay \$18,438 of a \$20,000 mortgage to First Joint Stock Land Bank of Chicago. So the family sold the farm in March of 1929 to Lee Reigelsberger. Lee agreed to assume the mortgage and pay \$24,150 for the farm, which consisted of some 247 acres. The average price per acre appears to have been \$98. The Reigelsberger family continues to own and operate the farm with Lee's grandson, Mick Reigelsberger and family living on the place. James Dady has no descendants living in the Rolfe area.

Rosa's single brother, Gottlieb, came to the Rolfe area after David's death and lived with her on the farm. The two moved to Rolfe a few years before Rosa died in 1931 when she was 72. Gottlieb executed his sister's estate, a task that was exceptionally difficult during the heart of the Depression. Some of the attorneys that Gottlieb hired to work on the estate died in the years between 1931 and 1934. Then there were families who had borrowed money from Rosa who could not repay the full amount of the loans that they owed her estate. And

finally, land values were so low that Gottlieb had to petition the court to wait to sell Rosa's land until "such time as the fair and reasonable value of said real estate can be obtained." It was not until 1940 that Gottlieb completed the sale of all his sister's property and settled the estate.

Although this may have been a frustrating decade for Gottlieb, the annual records he prepared as administrator for the court provide an interesting source of information about farming. For instance, in October of 1932, he got only 12 cents per bushel when he sold 1,165 bushels of the 1931 corn crop to the Rolfe elevator. This shows how low the farm economy had sunk. In 1933, he got a loan of 45 cents per bushel on 2,600 bushels of corn from the newly created Commodity Credit Corporation, reflecting the 1932 election of President Franklin Roosevelt and implementation of the New Deal and agricultural subsidy programs. In 1937, as further evidence of the federal government's involvement in agriculture, Gottlieb received the farm's first soil conservation check. The records also show that wheat—a crop no longer common in Iowa—was grown on the farm throughout the 1930s and that soybeans were introduced in 1938.

Gottlieb rented the Dady homeplace farm on a cash rent basis to Fred Baade, who lived there and farmed it. There were also neighboring farmers who rented smaller portions of Rosa's land. Leon Sinek, her nephew on David's side of the family, farmed 64 acres of Rosa's land in the southeast corner of Section 14. In 1939, Leon bought the land from the estate.

Another of the renters was Phil Brinkman's father, August (Gus) Brinkman, who was one of Diedrick and Anna Brinkman's sons. Gus and his wife, Grace, were one of the couples who had borrowed money from Rosa. It was in the form of a 1926 promissory note for the sum of \$2,400 with interest set at the rate of 6 percent per year. The note was one of several to various families, and Rosa's estate held a total in \$12,000 in outstanding loans. In December 1931, Gottlieb petitioned the court, objecting to the inheritance tax appraiser's valuation of the various notes, claiming the appraisals were excessive for several reasons. Then Gottlieb listed the circumstances of the families who owed money, including the following: "That the appraisement of the A.A. Brinkman note in the sum of \$2,400 for the full amount of \$2,400 is excessive for the reason the said note is long past due and the deceased in her lifetime was unable to collect the same, that the property of A.A. Brinkman is encumbered and that his debts and obligations are not confined to the secured debts." In September 1934, Gottlieb began a suit against Gus and Grace to collect the \$2,400 but returned to the court, saying Gus and Grace had offered "the sum of \$1,000 as a full and complete settlement of said note and interest." The court ordered that Gottlieb be authorized to accept the compromise settlement. Similar arrangements were made with other families who held notes.

Interestingly, Gus rented 80 acres of land in the northwest part of Section 30, Garfield Township, from the Dady estate throughout the 1930s. In July 1936, Gus bought the 80 acres from the estate for \$5,800. He paid \$1,000 at the time of signing the contract and \$4,800 when the final settlement was made. Possession was given on March 31, 1937.

I couldn't understand how, in 1934, Gus and Grace were able to pay back only \$1,000 of their \$2,400 loan to the Dady estate but, in 1937, they were able to complete the purchase of 80 acres for the sum of \$5,800. I called their son, Phil, in 1995 and asked about his parents' turn of fortune. He said that although the times had been tough for farmers, the reason his folks were able to buy the land was that Gus had been a veteran of World War I. Phil explained that in 1936, "Roosevelt gave all the guys who served in WWI a \$1,000 bonus. And since Dad had been overseas, he got an extra \$200. He stuck his neck out and made a down payment with the \$1,200 bonus. Years later, I admired his foresight and guts." Phil went on to speak about the history of land prices. "My analysis is that in my lifetime, I saw the 80 bought from the Dadys for about \$60 per acre—with some of it virgin land—when I was

10 years old. When Dad passed away in 1951–52, it was worth around \$350, a conservative figure. It had gone from \$60 to \$350 then peaked over \$3,000 and now back to \$1,750 in only 50 plus years.”

My father once told me about a time when he was a boy and went along with Grandpa to visit Rosa at her home. It was a cordial business conversation with Grandpa expressing interest in purchasing some of the land that she owned just east of his farm and south of the Brinkman farms. However, Rosa told Grandpa that she intended to sell the piece of land that he wanted to Gus Brinkman. Rosa added, though, that some day she would sell Grandpa her north farm—the Dady homeplace farm in Section 13. In the decade after her death, her wishes were carried out. Gus Brinkman got his 80 acres in Section 30, and Grandpa bought the land in Section 13, which eventually became the farm where I grew up.

Grandpa had rented some 74 acres of wild-hay land in the southeast quarter of Section 13 throughout the 1930s—first from Rosa then from Gottlieb. In October 1938, Grandpa bought the land from Rosa’s estate, signing a contract with Gottlieb and making a down payment of \$500 on the east half of Section 13 (320 acres) for \$22,700. The balance of \$16,200 was paid on March 1, 1939, when Grandpa took possession of the property. He also executed a mortgage of \$6000 at 4 ½ percent interest that was to be paid to Gottlieb on or before March 1, 1945. Then in February 1939, Grandpa signed a second contract, this one to buy the northwest quarter of Section 13 (160 acres) from Gottlieb for a total of \$16,400. Again, there was a down payment of \$500 at the time of the sale. Another \$6,000 would be paid on March 1, 1940, when possession of the land changed hands. There was also another mortgage—this one for \$9,900 at 4 ½ percent interest per year and due within eight years. If my calculations are right, Grandpa paid an average of \$81 per acre for the 480 acres he purchased in Section 13 in 1938 and 1939.

Grandpa arranged for Fred Baade to continue renting the Dady homeplace in Section 13; however, the Baade family was asked to move when my parents, my two older siblings, and I moved to Pocahontas County in 1945. At that time, I was five months old, and we began our residency on that farm. Dad still lives there. Mother moved from the farm to the Rolfe Care Center in 2003.

I have heard stories and seen photos that indicate the building site was run-down. In fact, in Gottlieb’s petition to the court in December of 1931, he challenged the inheritance tax appraiser’s \$20,000 valuation for the northwest quarter of Section 13, saying, “The above described piece of land is untiled, the fences are in bad condition, the buildings are old, rundown and not in a state of repair. The land has been farmed for a long period of time without any fertilization and without crop restoration.”

Regarding the northeast quarter of the section, Gottlieb claimed that “Said land is unimproved, that it is only partially fenced, the land is untiled and only about 50 acres of the entire quarter is under cultivation, and it is partially underlaid with peat.” Gottlieb used a similar argument when he described the southeast quarter but added, “The entire quarter is unbroken and in the present condition is of no value except for pasture or hay, and the land is wild-hay ground.”

Today, the land Gottlieb referred to as wild-hay ground is called prairie. It was probably perfect for a large Hereford cattle operation but not conducive to the emerging row-crop mentality. In the 1940s, my family tilled all but two acres of its more than 160 acres of prairie. As a youth, I occasionally walked across the section to explore that small bit of prairie, but I was not conscious of the significance of prairie in the history of the plains states with its great diversity of plant and other native wildlife. In the 1980s, my parents’ tenants, Dan and Roger Allen, cleared that vestige of Iowa’s natural heritage.

Rosa's estate was divided between Gottlieb, age 66; another brother, John Beck, age 76; and 11 nieces and nephews. All but Gottlieb lived in Illinois. When Gottlieb closed the estate, he returned to Rock Island County where he died in 1966 at the age of 101.

In 1995, I traveled to Rock Island to see what I could find out about David and Rosa Dady. After going through the excitement and drudgery of a genealogical search at the courthouse and historical society, I knew little more about the couple than before I started the trip. However, hoping that some distant kin might remember a morsel of information about their great uncle or aunt, and perhaps—if I were really in luck—have a photo of them, I called a few of the people whose names showed up in my research. No, they did not have any photos of Rosa or David. I should not have been surprised since the couple left the Rock Island area in 1882 before photography was common, and the two apparently had little contact over the years with their relatives in Illinois. Yes, the relatives I talked to knew of David and Rosa but not much more than the fact that the couple had gone to northwest Iowa. Interestingly, the kin were more familiar with Gottlieb because he lived with nieces and nephews when he returned to the Rock Island area before taking up residence at Oak Glen, the county home.

When I asked two of his grand-nieces what kind of person Gottlieb was and whether he was rich or poor, I got various responses. One woman said he was a cranky old bachelor. The other said he was shy. One thought he was a shyster, but the second said that people, including some of his nephews, "took Gottlieb for everything he had" and he died penniless. According to her, Gottlieb bought property and rented it out; then people didn't pay, and he died without money except the small amount set aside for his funeral. In the end, the county provided him with room and board and a pauper's grave. Apparently, family members wanted to be able to give money to help him, but they were told that then they would have to claim him and take care of him.

I am intrigued by the fact that someone such as Rosa once lived on the farm where I grew up. Both her and David's obituaries say she was good out and about the farm. I wonder—did she love farming? How much was she involved in management decisions? Was she an early feminist who not only was capable of being a farmer but was proud to be one? Or did she prefer a more domestic life but instead was required to work hard on the farm because she and David had no children, and her labor was necessary for the 1,230-acre cattle business they operated? Was she tough and wizened from the outdoor work? How does the part of her personality reflected by hard work on the farm jive with a further account in her obituary that described her devotion to homemaking. It said:

She belonged to the type which we now call old-fashioned, loving her home above other things and always being found attending to her duties. She was retiring in disposition, but had a wide circle of friends. Faithful, loyal, honest, she was a devoted wife and homemaker. She would have made an excellent mother, but children were denied Mr. and Mrs. Dady.

What can be made out of the small clues in a claim against her estate from a merchant named Isaac Mikel for payment of an unpaid bill? The itemized list of goods she procured in May of 1931 included three silk bed spreads, two silk scarves, four yards of silk fabric, 24 English goods at 25 cents apiece, and six pounds of tea? Unfortunately, she probably had little opportunity to savor those supplies since beginning on June 20, 1931, she had a least one doctor's visit a day, including trips to the Lutheran Hospital in Hampton, until her death due to cancer on August 10, 1931.

I wonder if Rosa was someone I would like to have known. Would she have been a good role model or mentor? Would she have cared about me or have had little time for me? I'll never know. Much of her life is a mystery, and there are no records nor people who can give further clues about her personality. However, it was peculiar this afternoon, when I left my house to run an errand—after several hours of writing about Rosa and David—that when I stopped at an intersection, the small white car ahead of me had personalized license plates that read, “Rosa B.” Perhaps Rosa Beck Dady and others of the early settlers are present in more ways than we can comprehend.



The house where Rosa and David Dady lived. Rosa added the left section after David's death in 1916. Fred Baade and family lived in the house and farmed the Dady farm from the late 1920s until Helen and her family moved there when this photo of renovating and blowing insulation into the walls of the place was taken. North side, Section 13, Roosevelt Township. This house was moved when a new one was built in 1956. 1945. *The Deane and Marion Gunderson collection.*

The Gunderson Family

George and Helena Gunderson, Norwegian-born Lutherans who were farming near Boscobel in southwest Wisconsin in the mid-1800s, had six children. Their youngest boy, George, stayed on the homeplace with his parents and eventually raised his own family on that farm. However, in 1881, the two oldest boys, Gunder, age 24, and Charles, age 22, set out for new ground in Pocahontas County where George, their father, had bought the west half of Section 25, Center Township, in 1878. Gunder and Charles took the train across northern Iowa to the town of Ruthven. According to family legend, the two brothers then walked some 35 miles to the land where they began breaking the prairie sod and building a farm. The 320 acres they settled on were in the section just south of the Brinkman and Wiegman families.

In a letter to his father on April 11, 1882, Gunder writes about some of the challenges he and Charles faced on the prairie:

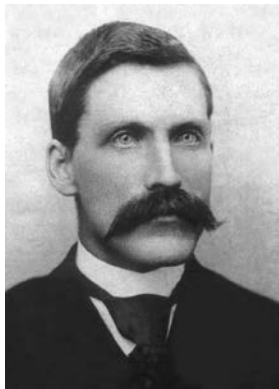
Pocahontas, Iowa
April 11, 1882

Dear Father:

Your postal received yesterday, and we see that you have not received our last letter dated March 29. I am astonished to find out that you are not going to send out a team as we need one very bad, and to hire a team out here and pay \$3.50 per day is impossible and here is no teams to get after all, that is the worst. We never dreamt but what you was going to buy another team because you can not spare those you have got; you need two teams where you be. We thought you would have bought another team long ago. We can send you \$175.00 if you should buy another team. We can send it in one week if you need it. We should at least break 50 acres for ourselves and sow 25 acres of the same to flax which will be impossible if the tram don't come until after springs work. Our farming with one team on so much land is of little value not make much.

They are now breaking, they can break as soon as the frost goes out. Plowing comes about the 1st of April but not so much rain that sowing and plowing has been little of. Don't you think you can hire a team down there and send it out here about the 25 of April. We want just little of the Bohemian oats for seed because these oats out here are so poor. Oats out here are .55 per bu. If we don't get a team until after springs work is over then a team will be of no use then there is no work for more than one of us and we can not rent the land. We will lose lots of money by not having another team. I can get the school next summer and I suppose I will have to take it. I can also hire out for \$20 per month. Now write right away and tell what to do as I must soon know about taking school. Last winter is when you should have bought a team and not waited until too late.

Yours respectfully,
G.B. Gunderson



Gunder Gunderson. Circa 1900

In July of 1884, Charles returned to his hometown and married Dena Christensen, age 18 and the oldest of nine children in her family, in the Lutheran church. She was a high school graduate with two years of teaching experience. The couple came back to the frontier farm Gunder and Charles had been cultivating and made their home on the place. Gunder had already begun teaching school in the northeast corner of Section 23—a bit more than a mile north of the Gunderson home. The spring after Dena arrived in the area, Gunder hired her to teach at the same school.



The Charles L. and Dena C. Gunderson family. Front row, left to right: Charles, Martha, Ruth, Naomi, and Dena. Back row: George, Art, and John. Circa 1907. *The Deane and Marion Gunderson collection.*

As reported in the history of the Wiegman family, Cyrus and Mary Manley were newcomers to the township in 1884. He had purchased the entire east side of Section 23 except for the bit of ground belonging to the school. Although they were married in New York, they too had lived in the Boscobel area before coming to Iowa. Their oldest child, Almina, who was known as Miney, was born in 1870, and by the time her family left Wisconsin for Pocahontas County in a covered wagon, she had three younger sisters.

The Manley home was on a direct route between the Gunderson farm and the school. It would have been natural for Gunder, Charles, and Dena to be good friends of the Manleys as former residents of Boscobel, as neighboring farm families, and through school activities.

Stories in the Gunderson family suggest that Gunder had a courtship with one of the Manley girls, most likely Almina. She was 14 when she arrived in the area with her two younger sisters. However, Gunder was not the only single man in the area. The Manley farm and the school were just west of the land where Herman and Betsy Wiegman settled and not far from the Brinkman farm where John Wiegman was working as a farmhand for his sister, Anna Wiegman, and her husband, Diedrick Brinkman. John was 28 and only four years older than Gunder. One could speculate that there was competition between the two for the affection of Almina and/or her sisters. The Gunderson story says that Cyrus planned to sell half of his land—160 acres—to Gunder, but when the alleged courtship was broken off, Cyrus, out of spite, decided to sell only 120 acres to Gunder. To add insult to injury, the land he sold Gunder was the worst part of the Manley property with Lizard Creek winding its way diagonally through the center of the land. Gunder moved to the state of Washington sometime between 1884 and 1889, but he completed payment on the land he bought from Cyrus and gained official title to it in 1891. Meanwhile in 1888, John Wiegman, then 35 years old, and Almina Manley, age 18, were married. Ten years later in 1898, John bought the remaining 200 acres that Cyrus owned in Section 23 just north of the land which Cyrus had sold to Gunder. Almina died at the age of 35, and John lived into his nineties.

Gunder continued to teach when he moved to Washington, and then became a principal and superintendent. He also served as a representative to the state legislature and worked for a newspaper. Gunder was married in 1903 in Washington. Unfortunately, in 1904 at the age of 47, he died from a disease that began as lip cancer. The story is that while setting type at the newspaper, he often held pieces of type with his mouth, much like some people would hold a pencil or paper clip with their lips. The lead contained in the type was the carcinogen that started Gunder's cancer.

Charles—known simply as C.L. to many people—and Dena stayed on the farm in Section 25 and made it the Gunderson homeplace. They had six children. Charles bought more land, including 360 acres that belonged to Gunder, and accumulated a total of 840 acres before selling his property in stages to his third child and youngest son, John.

John was born in 1889. He was the only one of Charles and Dena's children to stay in Pocahontas County, and the only one of the siblings who did not graduate from college. Three of his siblings ended up in southern California, another in Everett, Washington, and another in Orange City, Iowa.

John quit high school after his sophomore year to begin farming. He wanted to be by himself rather than live with his parents and siblings, taking up residence in a little house in nearby Section 26. On Christmas Day of 1917, at the age of 28, he married DeElda Lighter, who was 24. She was the daughter of the newspaper editor, Joseph Lighter, who had died the previous year, and Emma Lighter. DeElda had worked in her sister Cora's variety store in Gilmore City and, in 1915, had become the cashier and bookkeeper for Hauck's General Store in Rolfe. John and DeElda moved to the southwest corner of Section 24. Their one child, Deane Gunderson, was born in 1918 in the house on that farm. He is my father. Then in 1919, the family moved to the homeplace farm after Charles and Dena moved to Rolfe.

The 1904 *History of Pocahontas County* says of Charles:

He is now one of the most highly respected and substantial farmers of Center Township—he served six years as a trustee of Center Township, 1890–92, '95–97; six years as a justice of the peace and was secretary of the school board in 1898. He is recognized as a man of sterling integrity, a staunch Republican and a firm believer in the cause of prohibition.



C. L. Gunderson. 1919

Charles was a founding director of the Pocahontas Mutual Insurance Company in 1890, became its president in 1909, and was one of the founders of the Grinnell Mutual Reinsurance Company that was incorporated in 1909. According to the company's web site, "The Grinnell Mutual's roots can be traced back to the mid-1800s. As settlers moved to the Midwest, they sought protection from the ravages of prairie fires. Working together, these pioneers banded together to protect each other. They discovered that working together was necessary for survival. When fire struck, neighbors pitched in to help with labor, materials, or money. There was no thought of profit. It was a way of people helping people." The story is that C.L., as president of the county insurance company, got 10 cents for each signature on a policy. Also, when farmers needed to have changes made to their policies, they simply stopped at his farm home, and he made the changes for them. In 1923, he was elected president of the State Mutual Insurance Association. Additionally, he was a trustee of Buena Vista College, vice-president of the Rolfe State Bank, which was founded in the 1930s, and a member of the Masonic Lodge. He also enjoyed playing the violin.

Charles was a representative to the Iowa legislature from 1919 to 1922 where he voted to ratify the women's suffrage act in 1919. The only mention in *The Rolfe Arrow* newspaper of his participation in this milestone was a short entry in the "Arrowettes" social life section on July 10, 1919. It reported, "C.L. Gunderson went to Des Moines Tuesday to be present at the special session of the legislature on Wednesday, at which time he assisted in making a man of his wife and every other woman of legal age and proper qualifications. The legislature passed the suffrage constitutional amendment almost unanimously with just a few conscientious objectors. Without a doubt enough states will ratify in time to permit women to participate in the next presidential election, but we hasten to assure the ladies in advance that the treats will be scarce next time."

Little has been published about Dena; however, some stories have been handed down by word of mouth. Although she and Charles were baptized and married in a Lutheran church in Wisconsin, she wanted her children to be part of a church where English was spoken. That precluded the family from belonging to the two Lutheran churches in Rolfe where one spoke Norwegian and the other was a Danish-speaking congregation. Instead, she and C.L. joined the Presbyterian church where Dena regularly taught Sunday school. It is also said that when she was on committees to plan church dinners and was asked to recruit a dozen people to make pies, Dena would make all the pies herself. In addition, she and C.L. were staunch believers in the temperance movement. Dena was also a charter member of the Rolfe library.



Dena Gunderson. 1919

Even through the depths of the Depression, the couple was financially stable. A man named Sam Zickefoose, who taught school in Rolfe in the 1920s and 30s, told me the economy then had gotten so bad that the school board could not pay its teachers. Instead, the staff was paid in paper script distributed by the county. The idea was that if the economy got better, the teachers could redeem their script for the amount of their salary plus interest. Of course, that meant the potential for hardship in the meantime. Fortunately, according to Sam, the teachers were able to go to C.L., who paid them cash in return for their script.

I asked my father, Deane, how his grandparents, Charles and Dena, had become so affluent and able to buy the script from the school teachers. Deane said C.L. was frugal and self-sufficient on the farm and had some good years right before the Depression. Also, C.L. had rented his land to John, who was a very good farmer. As a result, C.L. had his landlord's share of rental income from the land plus the money John was paying him to buy land.

Deane also told an example of his grandparents' frugal lifestyle that he once heard from the late Slim Davidson, a Chevrolet dealer in Rolfe decades ago. Apparently, when C.L. and Dena came to town one day to run errands, they observed people sitting in a restaurant. C.L. commented to Slim, "Look at these farmers, they're drinking coffee. No wonder they're going broke. Ma and I—we bring our own lunch to town."

Deane earned degrees in mechanical and agricultural engineering at Iowa State College, where he met Marion Abbott, an applied art major from Ogden, Utah. Then he began work at John Deere Tractor Company in Waterloo in 1940 while she completed her degree. The two were married in July 1941 in Ogden. However, in September 1945, the couple and their three children moved to the Rolfe area and made their home on the farm, the one that John owned on the north side of Section 13 where Rosa and David Dady once lived. I was five months old, my brother Charles had turned two in May, and my sister Clara had turned three in July.

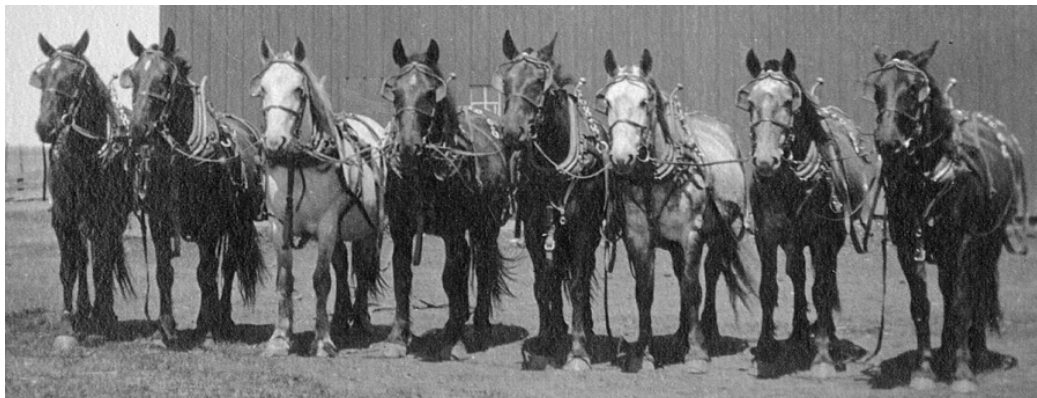
Mother has often told me I was the “apple of C.L.’s eye.” Perhaps that was because I was the first infant in the Gunderson family to live in the Rolfe area since my father was born in 1918. Although I recall little about C.L., I feel a fondness for him and wish I had known him better. He died on December 31, 1946 at the age of 87, when I was 20 months old.

I knew Dena a little more than I knew Great-Grandpa. I recall that she crocheted dish clothes for Mother. I also recall visiting Dena’s home when I was four years old. Mother was taking Charles to his first day of kindergarten and left me with Dena for several hours. I recall sitting at the kitchen table with Dena, who had been a math teacher. She taught me to use a pencil and a jelly jar glass as a guide for drawing circles and creating geometric, floral patterns. Dena died the following winter in March of 1950 at the age of 83. I wish I had known her better, too.

Dena had been active in the Women’s Christian Temperance Union (WCTU). Her ardent influence against drinking carried all the way to my parents’ lives in the 1950s. If our family was having dinner at home and Mother and Dad were enjoying a beer or Canadian Club whiskey with 7-Up, they would scurry to hide their drinks if they heard Grandma and Grandpa’s car coming up the gravel lane to our house for a visit.

I often visited my grandparents, John and DeElda, by myself at their farm—the homeplace—three miles from the farm where I grew up. Grandma grew hollyhocks and hydrangeas—I called them snowballs—near the house, apple trees in the yard, and a large vegetable garden on the edge of the farmstead. Her kitchen had cherry-colored cabinets and a pass-through counter between the kitchen and dining room. It was where the pecan, minced meat, and pumpkin pies sat while waiting for the dessert course of a holiday meal.

Grandma and Grandpa hosted Christmas dinners for my family and invited her single sister, Cora Lighter, who owned the Rolfe Dry Goods Store, and her single brother, Art Lighter. He had a substantial garden in town, grew popcorn, sold it at summer band concerts on Main Street, and was a linotype operator for the Rolfe *Reveille* newspaper. It had been owned by Grandma’s parents, J.H. and Emma Light. I am grateful to have Art and Cora as models of single living. Those Christmas dinners at the homeplace seem—in hindsight—to be icons of hospitality.



Helen’s grandfather’s draft horses. Circa 1920. *The Deane and Marion Gunderson collection.*

Grandpa and I both loved horses, and he even worked with a team up until the time of his death in 1956. He let me tag about the farm with him while he did his chores, whether milking cows or working in his shop. He would tease me and tousle my hair. After the noontime meal, we would snuggle on the couch while Grandma stayed in the kitchen and did the dishes.

I doubt if Grandpa ever put two-and-two together, nor did I realize until I turned 40 and was working with a California therapist, that he and I were both the third of six

siblings. Also, in each family, the three oldest siblings had been born within three years. No wonder he and I resonated so much with each other. He probably would never appreciate an intellectual or psychological discourse on the significance of birth order in a family, but at some level—maybe unconsciously or spiritually—I believe he was aware of the similarities in our circumstances.

Through talking with old time farmers from the area, I have discovered that although Grandpa was deemed to be an honest and fair person, he was a determined farmer who got all the work he could out of his horses and men. Dad says that one of the reasons Grandpa worked so hard was because he wanted to be able to buy all of Great-Grandpa's 840 acres of land. Perhaps the advantage I had as a child was that Grandpa had grown older and more gentle and could show a side of himself to me that he did not show to other people.

John Christian Gunderson (Grandpa) had a stroke at the age of 67 on the homeplace farm late in the afternoon of October 17, 1956, at the end of a day of harvesting corn. He was rushed to a Fort Dodge hospital where he died that night. I did not know he was ill nor that he died until I was called to the principal's office the next day at school where the rest of my siblings were gathered. Mother told us the news of his death. His estate included 2,073 acres of Pocahontas County farm land.

I wish I had been closer to Grandma, but although I had a deep respect for her, we did not share the chemistry that I had with Grandpa. I think of Grandma in her twenties, moving from town to a farm that was seven miles from Rolfe and six miles from Pocahontas, having one child, then after he left for college, living in the big Victorian house with just her husband John. I think of her watching over me when I visited them and her being extremely apologetic when I got a bad sunburn while playing in a plastic wading pool at their home. One of her apple trees still stands today. Although it is not very healthy and has sections that no longer bear fruit, it continues to produce wonderfully tart Wealthy apples that are especially good for baking pie. My father says the tree was planted when he was seven years old in 1925.

Going through genealogy materials as an adult, I realized that Dad's birthday on September 16, 1918, was a week short of nine months after Grandpa and Grandma had married. My father was defensive when I asked him about the timing. Perhaps my grandparents had been proper and waited until marriage to conceive a child, but why would they not have had more children? It is not hard to imagine that theirs became a platonic marriage. It is also not hard to wonder where Grandpa and Grandma may have been on the spectrum of sexual orientation. Grandpa most likely was a loner. In contrast, by looking at old photos, it is clear that she had close women friends. I would call them chums. The most interesting photos were of mock weddings. Such events were common when Grandma was young. A group of women would gather for a party and play all the roles of a wedding with some of the women dressing in men's formal attire.

Grandpa and Grandma had separate bedrooms. Hers was more organized and aesthetically pleasing than his. She and I would sometimes sleep together. Hers was a double bed with a mattress atop springs. I would start the night, lying far to my side of the bed, but by morning had rolled up against her back as she lay close to the other side of the bed. I wish I could have savored the closeness to Grandma, but instead, I felt awkward.

I have wondered what kind of loneliness Grandma may have experienced living at the large homeplace house, which was in the country seven miles from Rolfe to the northeast and six miles from Pocahontas to the southwest. Considering she had worked at her sister's dry goods store in Rolfe, I imagine Grandma knew most of the women in the area and most likely, she hosted friends and some women's groups at her home. Also, she had the help of people such as Wanda Hodgell, who lived with husband Merle, one of Grandpa's hired hands, in the little house across the driveway from the big house in the early 1940s. Merle told me Grandpa

was known to work hard and long hours, for instance, being in the field from the break of dawn to the setting of the sun to plant corn with his workers bringing fresh teams of horses to him throughout the day.

A year and a half after Grandpa died in 1956, Grandma moved into a modern, high quality, small home in Rolfe designed by John F. Wiegman's grandson, John Wiegman, a talented architect who had graduated from Rolfe High School. John had designed the house for his mother, Marie Wiegman, but she died, and our family was able to buy the place.

Grandma had cancer when I was in high school and college. Occasionally I visited her at her small home with Dad. He would sit beside her, but because there was little space on the far side of her large bed, I would sit at the foot of it, not knowing what to say or do. One time when Dad and I visited Grandma, her in-home nurse, Bertha Cordes, took Dad aside to another room and told him that DeElda had prayed out loud the previous night for God to please take her away because her pain had become intolerable. DeElda Lighter Gunderson died at the age of 72 in January of 1964 when I was a freshman at Iowa State. I regret that I never thought to take her hand and simply hold it—even if I had not been able to think of anything to say.

I would love to know more about Grandma's life in general and what it was like for her to live at the homeplace. For that matter, I would also love to know more about Grandpa's life. Whatever Grandpa and Grandma's circumstances, secrets, and interior lives were—I hope my presence was as important to them as their hospitality was to me.

When Grandpa died in 1956, there were six children in my family. His land went to Grandma and my father, and they established trusts for us. When I was 31 in 1976, the land in the trust was distributed, and the trust was dissolved. Five of us, along with our parents, continue to own the family land; however, my brother is the only one of us six siblings who lives in Rolfe. He is an attorney and farm manager but does not farm. Actually, today none of the descendants of Charles and Dena are farmers. Dad retired from active farming in 1975, and although as an octogenarian he continues to do projects around the farm, he is far less active as a farmer than in the first 25 years of his retirement. And he certainly is not the active farmer that he was during the many years when he oversaw 3,200 acres for the family—land belonging to him and Marion as well as his mother's property and his children's trust.

I live just north of Ames in the small town of Gilbert, less than two hours from Rolfe. As a single person, I am happy to have inherited a portion of the land that my great, great uncle Gunder—a single man—owned in Section 23 next to Lizard Creek and just up the road from the Gunderson homeplace. As a person concerned about the environment and who is learning more about the need for restoring prairie remnants, I am glad that a piece of land I own northeast of Rolfe contains a hilly pasture that has not been tilled nor grazed for at least 25 years and where there are numerous native prairie grasses and forbs. I call the place "DeElda Farm" in honor of Grandma.

When a Neighbor Dies

by James Hearst

Safe from loneliness, safe from storm,
Here he lies in his earthly form.
Here he in his last array
The neighbor who calls us in today.
He is our neighbor, he goes without
The grieving flags and the public's shout;
He is our neighbor and so he goes
Served by us in our solemn clothes.
This is his house, it was his home,
This is his land and its sandy loam
Has known him better than you or I
But he was our neighbor who came to die.
These fields of corn that line the road
Follow the fields his father sowed.
The gate is wide for his team and plow
But he must follow his father now.
What can you say to folks he knew
Of what he had done or tried to do?
What can you say that is the truth
Of a man you have known to age from youth?
We stand by the side of our neighbor dead
And only half hear what words are said.
We try to remember what he had been
And nod to a neighbor coming in.
He was our neighbor, we only know
That his hands were large and his temper slow.
We simply say as we stand and wait
That his fields were clean and his fences straight.

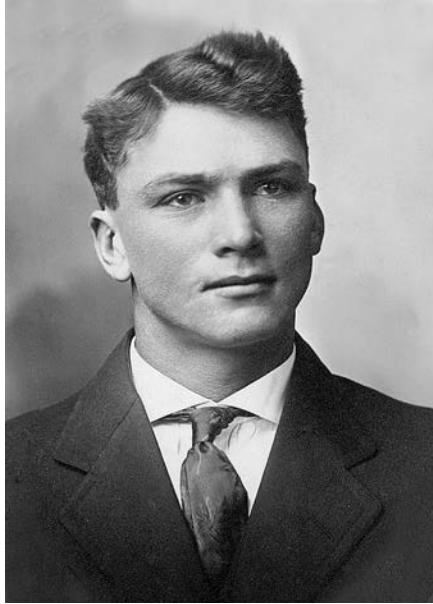
"When a Neighbor Dies" by James Hearst was published in a book of his poetry, *Landmark and Other Poems*, in 1979. Used by permission from the University of Northern Iowa Foundation.



Helen's father feeds corn to chickens at the Gunderson homeplace farm. Circa 1924. *The Deane and Marion Gunderson collection.*



Helen's parents, Marion Abbott and Deane Gunderson, met at Iowa State College where Marion owned a car. Circa 1940. *The Deane and Marion Gunderson collection.*



John Gunderson, circa 1908, and DeElda Lighter Gunderson, circa 1916. *The Deane and Marion Gunderson collection.*



Four generations of women. Left to right: grandmother DeElda Gunderson, infant Clara Gunderson, mother Marion Gunderson, great-grandmother Dena Gunderson. Circa 1942. *The Deane and Marion Gunderson collection.*



Left photo: Four generations of Gundersons. Left to right: grandfather John Gunderson, father Deane Gunderson, infant Clara Gunderson, great-grandfather C.L. Gunderson. 1942. Right photo: Clara, Charles, and Helen with their Gunderson great-grandparents. 1945. *Both photos from the Deane and Marion Gunderson collection.*



Young pigs suckle milk from their mother. Circa 1970s.

A STORY ABOUT BABY PIGS¹

A year ago, I wrote an essay for a writing class that began, “I want to tell a story about pigs—about a project I had as a kid—but it is difficult to give voice to that story.” I shared the essay as a work in process but never finished it. It is a simple story, but in the five pages I wrote, the only reference to pigs was in that opening sentence. I wandered, writing about Mother and some family history. I spoke about a letter she had written to us children, asking us to write something reminiscent of her round, oak, kitchen table. It is the table where she does her letter writing and some genealogy projects, the one where our family gathered and occasionally still gathers for meals.

It is time to tell about the baby pigs. My heart would break to think I would never give voice to those incidents. But it is hard to build up the nerve without first wandering around the back 40. This time, I will not dwell on Mother or the Gunderson farm heritage. No. It is time to describe my life on that northwest Iowa farm and tell the story of the baby pigs.

It is difficult to pinpoint the date. It was after the time in third grade when Mother was gone to some event and Dad was in charge of getting us kids ready for school. I was slow, as was often the case, but this time, when I ran out of the house and headed down the lane, the school bus had already gone. I was scared and excited but didn’t dare tell Dad what had happened. I hid behind a shed until he got in his car and drove away. Then I went to the house, made a peanut butter and jelly sandwich, got a blanket, and went to hide in the hay loft in the cattle shed. I built a small fort with the bales and looked forward to the adventure of spending the day in my secret place. But soon I got cold, lonely, and scared. I went back to the house, wondering what to do by myself. I decided to crawl under a bed to wait out the long day. Soon I heard someone at the front door. I was nervous until I realized it was Mrs. Jordan, one of my favorite neighbor women, whose farm was two miles west of ours. Her daughter Pam and my sister Clara were close friends and classmates in sixth grade. Clara, being the oldest of us kids, and having that natural big sister posture of taking care of everyone, had arrived at school, realized I was not on the bus, and called Mrs. Jordan to check on me. Mrs. Jordan wasn’t scolding or threatening. She was gentle and firm. She took me to school. I was only a little disappointed that Clara had squealed and ended that secret day on my own on the farm.

That was third grade. The event with the baby pigs was later but before I was in sixth grade—a year I can’t forget. Dad, who was the main disciplinarian in our family, had agreed in September to be the campaign chairman for Governor Hoegh and traveled throughout the state during the fall—Hoegh lost the election. Also in September, my dog Dandy died. I was beginning a terrible sixth-grade year with Miss Eva Mae Corsair and those old-fashioned desks where the back of one and the front of another are bolted together on wooden railings. They allowed no room to squirm.

Miss Corsair and I had our power struggles. Finally, one day in October, when our conflicted situation was extremely tense, she called Mother and asked her to come to school. I was surprised Mother came. I knew she was hosting an important women’s meeting at our house. Now all those women that she left behind would know about my bad behavior. Mother arrived, and we stood in the hallway where I tried to justify my behavior. She showed no sympathy, but simply said, “The teacher must be right.”

1. A 1991 perspective from St. Helena, California.

A week later, a messenger came to the sixth-grade door and told Miss Corsair I was wanted in the principal's office. It was the place where students were sent when they misbehaved. I was perplexed. Mother and Clara were there, and so was my brother Charles, who was a year ahead of me in school, and perhaps a younger sister. Mother told us that Grandpa had died. Grandpa, dead? Grandpa—my buddy who lived on the homeplace three miles from our farm.

The details of that day in the principal's office and later of Grandpa's funeral are fuzzy. It, however, became clear as I turned 40 that I had not done the grief work I needed to do around his death. In November of that sixth-grade year, I got a "red F" in deportment. Miss Corsair handed out report cards at the end of the day, and I pulled mine out of the envelope and saw the mark. I was scared, very scared. I kept to myself on the bus going home; then I sheepishly went into the house and handed the card to Mother, who was in the kitchen. She mumbled something about having to wait until my father got in from the fields. I went to the recreation room in the basement and sat on the couch. I was too sullen and scared to do anything, not even watch TV. I heard Dad come in the house, exchange a few words with Mother, then come down the steps to the basement. I was afraid he would spank me, but he merely said I had suffered enough already and had learned my lesson. Then he went back upstairs. I was relieved but also wondered how to deal with my shame and how to face the family at dinner or my classmates at school the next day.

Unfortunately, the image of that red F remains with me and seems to have represented my youth and obstreperousness. I used to laugh about it and how I detested Miss Corsair. I could tell tales of my battles with her and my contempt for those rigid desks. But in remembering only the bravado of those years, I have held a distorted image of my childhood as well as a warped self-concept of being a troublemaker. No one took time to console me or ask how I felt about losing Grandpa, who was my best friend. I never realized my behavior might have had something to do with my family and buried grief for Grandpa.

A year later, just before I started seventh grade, there were already six kids in our family—five girls and a boy. Don't ask how we arrived. We never talked about sex, and I was never aware of Mother being pregnant. It simply seemed that a new child would arrive. This time, things were different. It was the night of August 15, 1957. Dad whisked Mother off to the hospital in Fort Dodge, 45 miles away. Clara was at Okoboji for a few days with Pam. Charles, my younger sisters, and I remained at home. We didn't know exactly what was happening, but Charles and I had been in Mother's and Dad's bedroom and had seen the bedding pulled back, revealing a vibrant red stain on her white mattress cover. Whatever the situation was, we knew it was serious. Charles stayed by himself in his room while we girls crawled under the covers of Peggy's bed. We were already nervous. Then we thought we heard someone downstairs and became even more afraid. However, Charles said the noise was merely a figment of our imagination and ignored us. We cuddled closer and finally fell asleep. In the morning, we were glad to see Dad and tell him our fears. He said that when he came home in the middle of the night, one of the neighboring farmers was in the kitchen, inebriated and looking for booze. Dad gave the man coffee and visited with him, then sent him home.

Mother was still in the hospital when Dad got us kids to dress in our best clothes the following day. He took us to the cemetery where a group had gathered for graveside rites. I was puzzled at the time, but I gradually figured out what was going on. Christian, who would have been the seventh child (and second boy) in our family, was born at 12:50 a.m. on August 16 and lived five minutes, long enough, by my parents' standards, to justify a funeral. Christian arrived two months prematurely and weighed a mere three pounds and nine ounces.

I must not digress. I need to tell about the baby pigs; yet, it seems important to place the event and pinpoint my age. The event was after third grade when I was eight. Perhaps it was

after we got our two horses when I was nine. Maybe it was after we moved into our new house that we built on the farm when I was 10, and where my folks still live. Maybe, after all, it was in sixth grade when I was 11. It seems like Clara was in high school and busy with musical activities after school, and Charles was at junior high football practice. Martha, my next younger sister, would have been in third grade.



Helen standing near hog pen on farm where she grew up. Circa 1950.

By now you probably want to hear about those darn pigs. Well, I am going to tell you. But first some context about my history with pigs. When I was a youngster, our farm was more diversified than it is now. Dad grew corn, soybeans, oats, and hay. He also had cattle, pigs, and sheep.

One time, when I was at odds with myself and looking for something to do, I went to the hog house to check on the pigs. I had on a new, plaid jacket, but I got hot and hung it on a nail at what seemed like a safe distance from the pen. When I went to the house for lunch, I forgot the jacket. Later, when I went back to retrieve it, the pigs had deviously gotten it off the post and into their pen where they shredded it. Mother and Dad said I was irresponsible. I could not convince them that I used what I thought was good judgment and hung the jacket in a safe place. I am not sure how I was disciplined. It is easy to cut off those kinds of memories.

Another time, I went to the farrowing pasture where there were miniature metal huts inhabited by pig families. I walked around, making a curious but friendly visit. I noticed a dead piglet on the periphery of its family, seemingly forgotten by the sow and others. Feeling responsible, yet cautious, I picked up the dead baby pig and threw it over the fence into a field of six-foot-tall green stalks of corn. It was my way of tidying up the pasture. However, the sow, protective of her offspring, charged after me with such speed that I was utterly scared and could hardly run. My heart was pounding. Fortunately, an old black dog, so ordinary we merely called it Pup, headed off the mother pig while I ran for the gate and scrambled over it just in time.

Another time, I went to a hog pen where Dad, other men, and my brother were conducting what seemed like important business. I sidled up to the fence alongside some of them to watch. The activity had something to do with castrating young pigs, but I didn't have long to observe what was happening. My brother or one of the men told me it was not something that girls should see or know about.

I don't recall being exposed to the birth process either, yet I do remember seeing a bloody discharge in the straw next to the mother pigs after they had delivered new litters. The farrowing house was dark, lit only by the red glow of the heat lamps. The sow was in a rough wooden stall, and the baby pigs presumably had slid out of its rear end, one at a time.

A couple of years ago, I visited a farm and watched newborn pigs. I was amazed at their instinct. The moment they were born, they began the arduous journey to find the mother's nipples. It did not matter that their eyes were covered with mucus. It did not matter that they were tiny and stumbled awkwardly over clumps of straw. It did not matter that there were already four or five other piglets, scrambling to get milk and ignoring a new sibling. It did not matter that when each one finally found a vacant nipple and began to suck milk, the next baby pig would slide into the world and begin its own journey to seek nourishment.

Finally, I am ready to tell the story I set out to tell about baby pigs. It had to have been between third and sixth grade, but closer to sixth grade when I was no longer a child but not yet pubescent. There were litters of baby pigs in the hog house. The dimly-lit building was divided into pens, each with a sow and her young ones. Dad said that one of the sows would roll over on her piglets when they came to suckle from her teats. She had already killed one or two, and her remaining litter was in danger. Dad had taken them away from her and put them in another pen. He made me a deal, saying that the orphaned pigs could be mine if I would feed and take care of them. I was proud and grateful that he trusted me with the responsibility.

Each day, I endured school, then took the bus home and had the farmyard to myself. Dad was in the fields combining beans or plowing. Clara and Charles were busy at their school activities. Clara was not the farm type anyway and would never have been around the farmyard. My two younger sisters were in the house with Mother, who would have been making dinner. As a city-bred woman, she had no interest in doing farm chores.

There I was after school, in charge of the farmyard. I walked from the house across the yard to the hog house, opened the door, and reached high to find the light switch. My pigs were in the first pen to the right. The wooden fence around them was knee high. I stepped over the board, got the round, faded, metal trough for their food, and cleaned it out. Then I grabbed a bucket and headed back across the farmyard in the cool, gray blue air of dusk to the water hydrant under the yard light. I filled the pail with water, then carried it back to the hog house. I was big enough, strong enough and grown up enough to carry the bucket; but I was still young, and it was hard work. I set the bucket down several times to rest my arms. When I got back to the piglets and their pen, I mixed the water with a powdered formula to make synthetic milk; poured it in their trough, and put clean straw in their pen. I would hang

around and watch the little critters and also check on the pigs in other pens. I was in charge and was somebody, even if just to a litter of baby pigs. They began to grow. No longer were they delicate babies but were robust and playful pigs about seven inches tall.

One day I came home, changed my clothes, and headed for the hog house, looking forward to seeing my pigs, doing my work, and feeling in charge again. I opened the door, reached for the light switch, and discovered that the orphaned pigs were gone. What had happened? Who could I talk to? Where could I turn? I hung around out in the shadows of the farm buildings as long as I could to avoid going in the house. When Dad came in from the fields, he told me he had sold the pigs. When the family gathered for dinner around Mother's round oak table, I finally went in, my head low, my heart full of sorrow yet pounding with rage. I managed to express a meager portion of what I was feeling by barely whimpering, perhaps not fully aware of the intensity of my feelings and afraid I would not be heard. But I did attempt to express myself, saying that it was not right, that it was not fair that Dad had sold my pigs. Mother simply said, "Your father had a business decision to make, and you should not feel that way."

My God, I did feel that way, and it did not make any difference that Dad offered me a share of the check he got for the pigs. It is not that I thought the baby pigs would be mine forever. I wasn't naive about the reason for raising hogs. I was a farm girl. I knew that little pigs eventually become meat on somebody's table. But there was something wrong with the fact that Dad had not consulted me before sending them away. There was something even more wrong in Mother's response. It discounted my feelings and dismissed the issue. The father does not have to be the only one taken seriously. There can be more than one will in a family. Money for my share of the pigs was not sufficient to make reparations for what had happened. Not only had Dad sent those pigs away, but in many ways, I felt I had been sold out. Is it any wonder that I struggle to give voice to the story about the pigs or that I feel a mixture of love and disdain for my rural heritage?

I am afraid this story is unfinished. It is not comfortable to leave it here, but this is where it stands for now.

A Postscript to the Baby Pigs Story

I recall the time in 1992 when I sent an abridged version of my baby pigs story to Mother and Dad. I also sent them a videotape from a panel discussion about the value of writing memoir that was held at the State Historical Society of Iowa. One of the speakers was Curtis Harnak, author of the book *We Have All Gone Away*. It is about memories of his childhood days on a northwest Iowa farm. Harnack's remarks resonated with me, and I hung on every word he said. I assumed Mother had also been impressed by the talk and would have gained an appreciation of the value of writing in depth about personal experiences. Sending the video seemed to be a good way to remind her of the program. I also thought it would help her and Dad have a framework for understanding the importance of what I had written, even if they found parts of it uncomfortable to read. Part of what Harnack said was:

I think a memorist tries to get a feeling of a time. It is not something that can be found by going to a library, although some parts of it may be there, or by going through newspaper files that tell about a particular period.

I think the best time to write a memoir is when you are sufficiently removed from what you have to say to be able to tell it with some perspective, and yet you are close enough to the events described to be able to remember details. If you wait until people who might be hurt or made uncomfortable by what you put into print are dead, very likely the urgency and the glow of the material will fade on you.

The important thing is that the reader has to feel that there is some naked truth right here spilling out upon the page. You may not have all the facts and dates quite right, but you may still be right in terms of what you are saying.

I think writing has a therapeutic side. You exorcize a lot of ghosts and you come to grips with things bothering you or that have fascinated you. And you lay to rest certain notions and investigate nagging questions about one's self, about one's family, and one's world. And by writing it down, you come to decisions regarding the meaning of this material which is the very material of your own self. So writing a memoir frees the author from the claim the past has upon him and often frees him to move on. So in a sense, it is a sort of therapy.

Of course, there is always the problem that the author has in relation to the reader. What is it? What is this for? Why should a reader be interested in this stuff? Why are you doing it? And why should anyone else read it?

Well, the author of a personal account does it because he or she feels he must. It's an urgent thing to do and that no one else could. And if he doesn't do it, the tale might be lost forever, and that loss would matter. So in the end, you have to come out with some kind of contribution to history and society, and that's why you are doing it.²

Mother eventually responded to my baby pigs story with a short note simply saying she and Dad were disturbed by what I had written and asking for love and understanding. I called and assured her that she and Dad did have my love and understanding.

I also remember a conversation that I had with Dad in 1995. I had mounted an exhibit about the road project at the Memorial Union at Iowa State University. Everything was set up, but the show was not scheduled to officially open until later in the week. I wanted to add samples of drainage tile. So I called Dad, an expert in finding such things tucked away in a grove or the sheds on his farm. On his next trip to Ames, he brought a fine collection of clay, concrete, and plastic tile.

We met in the middle of the afternoon at the Country Kitchen in north Ames. Dad had already stopped by the university for a sneak preview of the exhibit. He said he was proud of

2. These remarks are from an abridged transcript of Curtis Harnack's presentation given as part of a panel discussion at the Iowa Time Expo held in Des Moines on June 13, 1992. The event was sponsored by the Iowa Humanities Board and the State Historical Society of Iowa. He is the author of a book about growing up in rural Iowa, entitled *We Have All Gone Away*. Used by permission of Mr. Harnack.

my work, and I could see an extra gleam in his eyes that reflected his respect for the project. I had intended that our meeting be quick—a simple rendezvous to hand off the tile from the trunk of his car to the trunk of mine. However, we sat across from each other in a booth at the rather empty restaurant and talked at length. I had calico bean soup and whole wheat toast, and he had a cup of coffee. I reminded him of the story about the baby pigs I had sent him and Mother and how she had responded that it was disturbing for him to read it. I went on to assure him that my feelings toward my rural heritage had mellowed as a result of being back in Iowa and working on my project. He was happy to hear about the softening of my feelings and was more understanding than I had anticipated. It was also the first time that I looked him directly in the eye and told him that I loved him. Dad said little, but through our eye contact, I assumed we both knew a shift was happening in our relationship and that we cared deeply for each other. In fact, there are ways in which we have always cared deeply for each other, but life has its challenges, and there are complex feelings that our family has seldom, if ever, expressed. Dad and I changed the subject to less emotional topics; however, that was not the last substantive and poignant conversation the two of us have had about our rural upbringing and family dynamics.



Young pigs at feed troughs at the Faber, Marjorie, and Paul Harrold farm. 1989.



The road between sections 7 and 18, Garfield Township. Circa 1949. *The LaVonne Page Howland collection.*

INTRODUCING THE ROAD¹

I grew up on a farm in Pocahontas County in northwest Iowa, an area that prides itself on having some of the most productive agricultural land in the world. Like a lot of people, I used to think that the landscape was flat. Now I realize it rolls gently like the subtle and sensuous curves of a human body. These undulations were created as recently as 12,000 years ago when glaciers moved across the Midwest, leaving behind wetlands and tallgrass prairie.

In order to find the road where I grew up, you have to drive two miles south of my hometown of Rolfe and go west—or perhaps I should say, turn right. The road consists of four straight miles of gravel then a mile of dirt that ends at a T-intersection.

It is difficult to imagine what the area was like in the 1940s when I was a toddler, but there were 11 farmsteads along the road, an average of 2.2 farms per mile. Each place had a family that lived on it and farmed the land. Some families, like ours, owned the farms where they lived. Others were renters. Others were there because their fathers were, what we called in those days, hired hands for other men. Each farm was nestled in a grove of trees with buildings such as corn cribs, barns, or silos. Each had animals such as Hereford cattle, Hampshire hogs, Shropshire sheep, or Leghorn chickens. Each had a dog or cats that would hang around when the cows were milked.

It was rare, but our farm still had 100 acres of prairie that produced wild hay that could be fed to the cattle or horses. Many of the places had windmills that pumped water for farm and household use. Most of the families had large vegetable gardens. The women canned peas, corn, tomatoes, and string beans and stored them in cellars for use during the winter. Rural people were more isolated than today, and the main forms of mass media available on farms were basic things—magazines, newspapers, and the radio.

Farmers in Pocahontas County grew corn, oats, soybeans, alfalfa, and clover. They were completing the change from using draft horses like Kit and Kate or Mabel and Molly to using International Harvester and John Deere tractors to do fieldwork.

Farmers still joined together in crews called threshing rings to harvest oats. But as the 1940s ended, they began using mechanical combines pulled by tractors and driven by one man to harvest oats and beans.

Farmers were planting hybrid seed corn, taking advantage of breakthroughs in genetic research done in the 1920s and 30s.

It is no coincidence that commercial fertilizers, herbicides, and pesticides first began to appear on farms after World War II. During the war, the nation had built large industrial plants that produced ammonium nitrate that was used in making explosives. At the end of the war, these same companies used ammonium nitrate to produce fertilizers, and farmers were encouraged to use them.

The pesticide DDT was also used on a large scale during the war. The military sprayed it on troops stationed in the Pacific Islands to protect them from mosquitos and malaria. After the war, farmers used DDT to kill flies around barns, and in the 50s, they used it to kill bugs, cornborers, and grasshoppers. DDT is now banned in the United States.

As part of its wartime research on biological weapons, the United States government instituted a crop research division in the early 1940s. Its mission was to develop chemicals that

1. This description of the road was originally prepared for the introduction of a video that Helen produced in 1997 about the road. A full version of the video has not been completed. In 1998, Velma and Verle Howard moved from their farm along the road to a home in Rolfe and sold their acreage to Brian and Brenda Slama. In 2003, Marion Gunderson moved to the Rolfe Care Center.



Corn picking at the Adolph and Agnes Sefcik farm. 1940. *The Agnes Sefcik collection.*

would destroy plant life. By the end of the 40s and in the early 50s, a derivative of this research called 2,4-D became popular among farmers who used it for killing broadleaf weeds. It is still used in small quantities today with other agricultural chemicals. Had our government not ended the war with Japan with the atomic bomb, the precursors of 2,4-D might have been dropped on Japan's fields to destroy its crops and starve its people.

Many men who grew up along my road served in the war. Don Grant was a radar expert with the Air Corps in England and France. Verle Howard ran power plants for the Air Corp communications network in Italy and Africa. Milton Harrold was in the infantry in the Aleutian Islands, and Joe Reigelsberger was a Marine building roads in China. Roger DeWolf was also a Marine and served with the occupation forces in North China at the end of the war.

My father, Deane Gunderson, grew up three miles from the road where I grew up, then graduated from Iowa State College, and was an engineer at John Deere Tractor Company in Waterloo, Iowa. He supervised the department that made Grumman aircraft parts for the Navy's Hellcat fighter.

The nation was under the leadership of Harry Truman, who became president following the death of Franklin Roosevelt on April 12, 1945. A week later, Marion Gunderson entered Allen Memorial Hospital in Waterloo and gave birth to her third child. Meanwhile, halfway around the world from where I was born on April 19, the Allied forces stopped the Nazi regime and Adolph Hitler committed suicide. Germany announced his death on May 1 and signed an unconditional surrender on May 7. Then on August 6 and 9, the United States dropped atomic bombs on Nagasaki and Hiroshima, and Japan surrendered.

In September, when I was five months old, my family moved from Waterloo in northeast Iowa to the farm where I grew up in Pocahontas County. During the 1950s, there were

so many children from my road that we filled over half of a bus that went to the Rolfe Consolidated Schools.

Today, the township where I grew up is radically different. Two of the farms along my road have only a lone crib or a set of grain bins to mark the spot where a family once was part of the neighborhood. Five building sites have been completely cleared and cultivated. There is no prairie except remnants along the railroad tracks and in road ditches. Almost all the tillable land is in corn and soybeans, the so-called cash crops. There are no more horses, dogs, sheep, or chickens. Only one farm raises cattle and hogs.

Only four families live along the road where I grew up. There are two retired couples—my parents, Marion and Deane Gunderson, and Velma and Verle Howard. Marjorie Harrold lost her husband, Faber, in 1989. He died of cancer. She continues to garden, manage the home, and help with the fieldwork. Her son Paul is in charge of the cattle, hogs, and crops. It is unlikely that descendants of these families will ever move back to this road.

In 1992, Mick and Sue Reigelsberger and their twins moved from town to the farm where Mick had grown up. Joseph and Kaitlin were three at the time and the first children to live along the road since 1980 when Mick and a neighborhood friend graduated from high school. Mick's parents, Joe and Norine Reigelsberger, retired from farming in 1992 and moved to town.

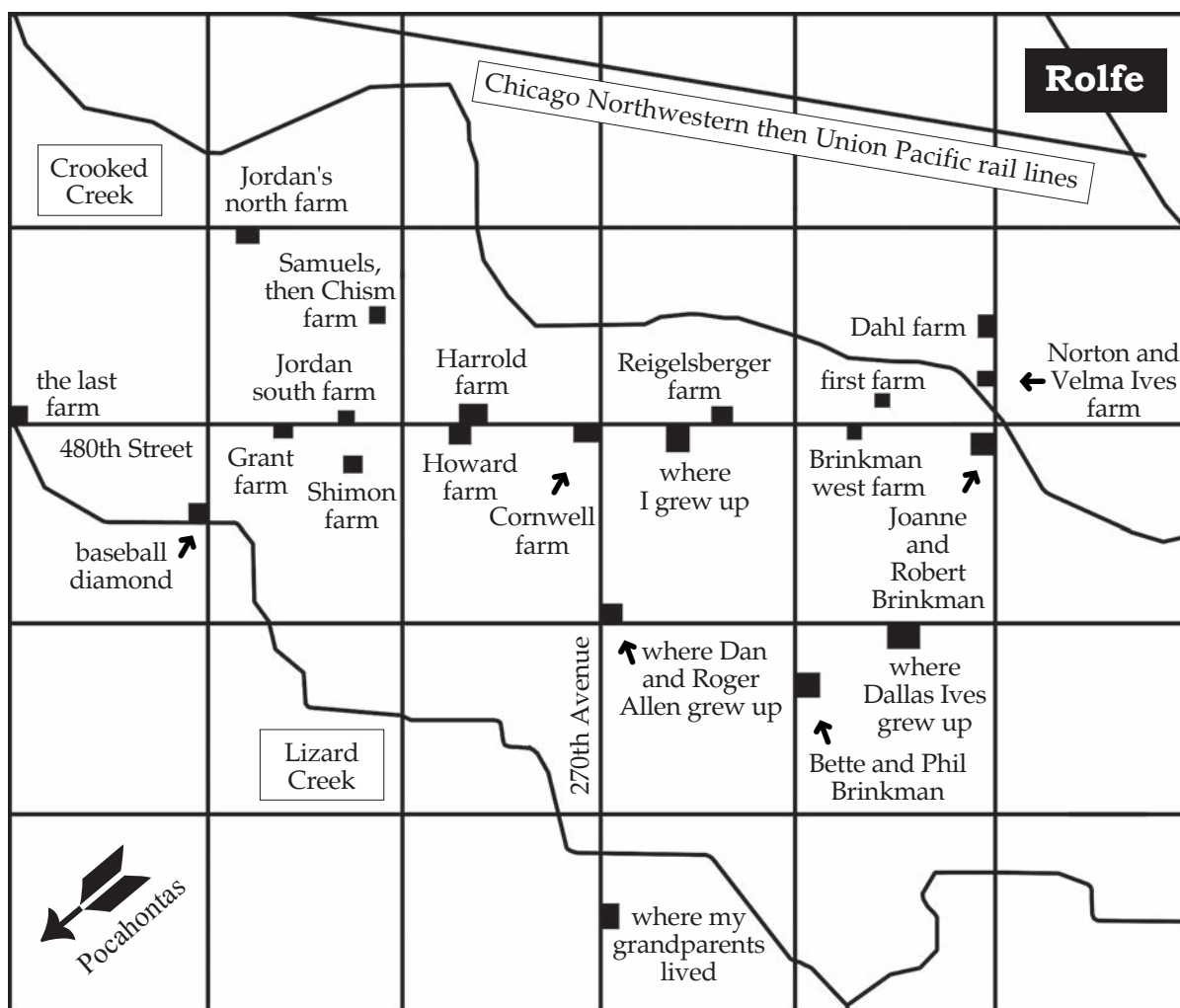


There were no street signs in the rural ares of Pocahontas County until the emergency 911 system was initiated in the 1990s. This sign stands at the corner west of the Gunderson farm in front of a field of maturing corn. The road Helen grew up on is now designated as 480th Street. 1995.

People and Their Places

West four columns are part
of Roosevelt Township.

East two columns are part
of Garfield Township.



The left four columns are in Roosevelt Township. The right two columns are in Garfield Township. Each square represents a square mile, which is also called a section. A section contains 640 acres. This illustration was drawn using a 2002 USDA aerial photo as a template.



Abandoned corncrib and shrub located in a field of beans on the left and of corn on the right. The property belongs to the Kathy and Gary Dahl family and is in the south side of Section 7, Garfield Township. 2001.

THE FIRST FARM ALONG THE ROAD



The Lyman and Arlene George family who rented the farm on the south side of Section 7, Garfield Township in the 1940s. Back left to right: Norma Jean, Willard, Lorene, and Bertha Ellen. Front left to right: Ada Marie, Arlene, Lyman, and Marjorie. Circa 1948. *The Marcia Smith collection.*

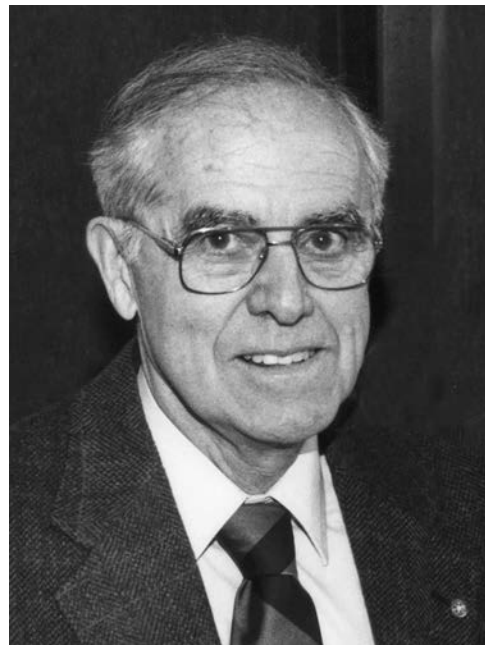
My earliest memories of life along the road are ones of Mother and Dad stopping at Lyman and Arlene George's place on the way home from town. I had thought my parents were picking up some staple such as baby formula, but when I asked my parents what they remembered, they were surprised I could recall something from so long ago. They could not remember stopping at the George farm. They said, "Perhaps we may have bought milk, eggs, or cream from Mrs. George." Although I cannot prove the events happened, I have this image of being a toddler, riding in the back seat of the car as my folks drove up the long lane to the George house hidden in a huge grove of trees. The George family lived there from 1941 to around 1958.

Lyman and Arlene died several years ago; however, I located two of their granddaughters in Minnesota who loaned me the originals of some of their family photographs to copy. Their mother, Ada Marie Colee, who had collected the shoe box of photographs, died the year before. The granddaughters also gave me phone numbers and addresses for their aunts. When I called one of them, Marjorie Simonson of Des Moines, who is Lyman and Arlene's youngest daughter, I did not know quite what to say but told her my name and asked if she knew who I was. She said, "Oh yes, I used to babysit you when you were an infant." Perhaps that is why my parents stopped at the George's—to pick up the babysitter.

Roger DeWolf and his sisters, Beverly Wiegert and Phyllis Thompson, also grew up on the farm. Their parents, Jim and Carrie, moved to the place as newlyweds in 1920. Roger was born in 1922, stayed home to farm for two years after graduating from high school, then went to Iowa State in 1941. It was the same year his folks moved away from my road after buying

a farm a few miles farther south that Lyman and Arlene George were renting. The result was that the DeWolf and George families swapped places.

After college and serving in the Marine Corps, Roger returned to the Rolfe area and farmed with his dad for 11 years, but he felt more like a hired hand than an equal of his father. I asked Roger about the phenomenon of farm boys becoming hired hands for their fathers, while their fathers governed the farm and accepted little input even after their sons had become grown men. As an example, I explained to Roger that when I was a child, I thought Dad was in charge of what was done on our farm such as the decision to build a new barn and corncrib. In later years, I learned the place belonged to my grandfather, and Grandpa was the one calling the shots. Roger sighed in recognition of what I was driving at and said the matter was prevalent but not something many people were willing to discuss. He believed that the problem stemmed from being in a rural culture where many of the men had not been brought up with good communication skills. He also said that fathers and sons did not know how to reconcile their differing perspectives. Roger and I agreed an entire sociological study could be conducted regarding this pattern. The only choice some sons had in a situation with a strong-willed father was to wait until the father died in order to be involved in the farm decision-making or to move.



Roger DeWolf. Left circa 1939; right, circa 1995. *The Roger and Helen DeWolf collection.*

Roger eventually moved from Rolfe to Eagle Grove where he owned a small but successful company that manufactured ventilation and other accessories for livestock facilities. He was on the school board when I taught physical education there beginning in January 1974. It was one of the most difficult times of my life.

I had graduated from Iowa State University in 1967 with a degree in physical education for women. After that, I taught successfully for four years at a junior high in Duluth, Minnesota. Next I went to graduate school in instructional media technology at the University of Wisconsin–Stout and then did some traveling before taking the Eagle Grove teaching position in January 1974.

I was torn between staying in physical education and seeking a job in instructional media. During the early part of the 1970s, there were times when I stayed with my parents. Dad had a bit of farm work for me, such as driving a tractor and pulling a wagon to haul grain at harvest time, but he and his hired hand, Johnny Zeman, managed well without me. Besides, Dad was starting to hire Joe Reigelsberger, who lived a quarter of a mile away, to plant some of his crop. Dad was turning 55 and moving toward full retirement from active farming, which he completed in 1976. During that era, my heart ached and I was deeply depressed, perhaps because there was no real role for me on the farm, perhaps because I was single and lonely and felt like a misfit who couldn't propel herself into life, perhaps because I really didn't want to work in a public school again, or perhaps because I wanted to be a photographer but had not yet developed the artist's inner eye.

In December 1973, I heard that a physical education job would become available that January in Eagle Grove. The town was about 40 miles southeast of Rolfe, and I had interviewed there when I was a college senior. Even though the school had an extremely well developed physical education program at that time, I balked at staying in my home state. I was torn between my affinity for its rural landscape and a desire to escape its flat cornfields. I took the job rather than drift with more graduate school, travel, or time on my parents' farm.

It was difficult to begin a midyear teaching assignment. I often felt like I was stepping on invisible land mines. Much of the problem was related to the sudden December departure of the former physical education teacher, Mrs. Abrahamson. There was a huge contrast between us. She was petite and blonde, wore a pony tail, and was a buddy of many students. I was taller, was heavier set, had short brown hair, and was unknown at the school. On the first day of the semester, when I walked through the long hallway toward the steps that led to the girls' locker room, several boys skulked by their lockers and grunted, "Huh, huh, huh. There goes the woman shot-putter." Neither ignoring nor confronting them helped.

I had been warned that Eagle Grove, a trucking and wrestling town, was a tough place to teach. Many fathers were on the road and not home to consistently discipline their children. Wrestling was the dominating sport, one that warped people's priorities. I was often frustrated and angry with the preferential treatment given to it and the boys' physical education program. In addition, I had to advise the high school cheer squad, even though I have always had a disdain for cheerleading. There were other problems. The sophomores who entered high school during my second year had held a middle school reputation of being extremely difficult. With the unruly sophomores and insufficient disciplinary support from the administration, things went from bad to worse. Also, many of my bright curricular ideas and innovations that were readily accepted in Duluth met resistance.

At the end of the school year, the administration announced the school would have a girls' basketball team the next year. Mr. Baretich, the principal, asked me to coach the program, something I was only partially qualified to do. I did not anticipate that the girls and their parents would have such high expectations for their first year of basketball; but they did, and when those expectations were not met, I became a scapegoat.

If I had not been so depressed or ambivalent about my career, I probably would not have taken the job in Eagle Grove. On the other hand, if I had possessed more confidence, perhaps I would have been successful there. In the spring of my second year, I was offered another contract. I promptly signed and returned it. I should have realized things would not improve for me in that teaching situation. It was only a few weeks later when Mr. Baretich called me to his office. He explained that in light of new state laws regarding teacher tenure, the administration was going to cancel my recently signed contract. Instead of fighting the decision, I decided to walk away at the end of the school year. The Eagle Grove experience convinced me that I never wanted another teaching job. A door had closed, but others would eventually open.

Not long after resigning, I got a call from Roger saying that as a board member, he was not supposed to be calling me, but that he felt a personal obligation, as an old family friend, to do so. He said he felt sorry for the way I had been treated and that he cared about my well-being. A call such as his is better late than never, and his quiet, albeit after-the-fact, support helped me heal from the hurt of that year and a half I taught in Eagle Grove.

I reconnected with Roger in the early 1990s and conducted a preliminary interview with him but without a tape recorder. I wish I had recorded him, but my normal style is to schedule a preliminary meeting to get to know persons connected with the road, find out what they remember and how well they are able to articulate their experience, explain my project, and hope to make them comfortable with it. Roger told some great stories that day, but I have only scribbled notes from the conversation. By the time we arranged another meeting in 2000, Roger had Parkinson's disease and had moved to the Green Hills Retirement Community in Ames. With his diminished health, Roger's thought process had slowed, and he spoke softly and haltingly. However, there was a hint of humor and mischievousness, not only in the twinkle of his eyes, but in a few deadpanned puns and some irreverent remarks about big-time agriculture and university officials. We talked some about the years that I taught in Eagle Grove. I could tell he was still troubled by how unfairly I had been treated and perhaps felt guilty that he had been ineffective in altering the situation. The good news, in looking back, is that my experience in Eagle Grove convinced me I did not want to work in public school education again. It also helped me gain a better grasp of the adage that says, "When one door closes, another opens."

Because of Roger's limited conversational ability, our time was more focused on being together than my collecting lots of information and stories. What I remember most is exchanging soft and kind remarks and ending with a hug. He was now the frail one, and I the strong one who wanted to convey my concern about his well-being.

Roger died on November 15, 2003. His wife, Helen, resides at an assisted living facility in Des Moines, the city where their daughter Ann lives. Roger's sister Beverly lives on a farm near Rolfe, and sister Phyllis lives on a farm near Hayfield, Minnesota.

I promise not to give a detailed history of the ownership of each farm along the road, partially because I'm not an expert when it comes to understanding land abstracts and partially because much of the information is tedious. There are a few instances where the land has gone through only two or three transactions from the federal government's control in the mid-1800s until now; however, understanding the abstracts for other parcels of land is like trying to find one's way into and out of a maze. The history of ownership for this first farm is particularly interesting, or should I say confusing. It begins with three lineages or, perhaps more legally speaking, three claims to the land. To complicate matters even more, not only for this farm but many others in the area, there was a lineage of ownership for the land that led to extensive litigation.

In 1850, through a swampland act, the federal government gave Iowa title to all swampland in the state. Subsequently, in 1853, Iowa turned around and transferred the swampland in Pocahontas County to local control. The county, until it was later tiled and drained to become tillable land, consisted of many marshes and other wetlands. In fact, there were "old-timers" who claimed that in the springtime, they could row a boat from Rolfe to Fonda some 20 miles away. One would have to have a wild imagination to envision such a boat ride today. In 1859, the county contracted to give all of its swamp and overflowed lands to William E. Clark in return for constructing a bridge over the Des Moines River and a new courthouse for the county. In those days, the county seat was on a high spot at what is now called Old Rolfe and not at its current site in Pocahontas. In 1860, Clark assigned his contract to John M. Stockdale, and a deed from the county authorized the "conveyance of 76,250 acres of swampland" to

Stockdale. Legend has it that the county never meant for Stockdale to be given so much land but that he went out in the springtime—the wettest season of the year—to determine what lands should be his even though some of the property had already been claimed by other people. A Pocahontas attorney, Don Beneke, who is a student of the history of the county, pointed out that the 76,250 acres is only some 20 percent of the total 368,000 acres in the county, probably a plausible amount of land. However, he also said that a lot of fraudulent behavior was involved and that for a number of years, Stockdale was selling deeds to land he did not actually own. Stockdale's behavior caused a great deal of difficulty and resulted in considerable confusion regarding the rightful ownership of many farms in the area. The controversy seems to have been resolved on May 3, 1872, when the Iowa General Assembly approved an act that legalized and confirmed "the sale and conveyance of swamp lands of the county which are not patented to the county." That act also said the sale could not affect lands "claimed by any preemptor homestead settler or anyone claiming a grant from the railroad when same may conflict with the current grant."

A second lineage of ownership began on October 13, 1865, when the federal government gave a portion of the land to Harmon Sealy. Perhaps he was a Civil War veteran. The records show that he got an official patent for 80 acres of the farm from the State of Iowa in 1881 and another 80 acres in 1885. However, the transactions acknowledge that the same lands had already been granted to the railroads through an act of the 17th General Assembly of Iowa. The railroad lineage began in 1867, when the federal government gave land to the state, which in turn gave it to railroads. The rail companies then sold the land to raise money to build rail lines. This may appear to have been an unfair support of the railroad corporations, but the arrangement also benefited the government by making it possible for the nation to tap into the rich agricultural resources of the Midwest. It was through this kind of scenario that the state deeded this parcel of land, the first along my road, to the McGregor and Missouri Railroad in 1871. Then that rail company sold the property in 1880 to the Chicago, Milwaukee, and St. Paul Railroad for one dollar. CMSRR sold all but a 100-foot-wide strip for a railroad right-of-way to a person named L.C. Coffin in 1889.

The documentation recorded in the land abstract is peculiar. It suggests that Robert Hunter purchased the farm twice. In 1896, he bought 160 acres (nearly all the farm) from Harmon Sealy, who had been granted the property after the Civil War. And in 1901, Hunter bought the same 160 acres plus another 40 acres from L.C. Coffin, the man who had purchased the land from the railroad. By then there was no more record of the lineage of ownership that had gone through Mr. Stockdale, who sold his portion of the land in 1862.

Robert and Mary Hunter made their home on the farm and had six children. She died in about 1908 when their youngest child Bobby was nearly 11 years old. Robert's second wife, Rose, did not want to live on the farm that had become known as the Hunter homeplace, so Robert sold it in 1910 to H.L. and Viola E. Everson, and the Hunter family moved north of Rolfe to a farm near West Bend.

Bobby Hunter was a prominent businessman in Rolfe when I was growing up. He had initially studied dentistry in Chicago but came back to Rolfe and started a creamery business. He then had the Maytag store, which he expanded to sales of other appliances. A 1941 newspaper clipping reports that the Maytag district manager had written a column for the Maytag Company's magazine commending Bobby on his 17 years of "Maytagging" and claiming Bobby was still going strong and that "during the summer, golf and fishing are his hobbies and he is adept at both. Seldom does he require more than par on the local golf course, but in fishing some of the big ones always get away." The manager also said Bobby had built up a good trade because of the fine service rendered to customers and that Bobby occasionally received letters asking him to bring out a new Maytag to a person whose parents

bought a machine from him 12 or 15 years before. "One of Bob's favorite bets," the manager wrote is that, "He will give you \$5 for every person entering his store who does not have a Maytag if you will pay him \$1.00 for every Maytag owner who steps in during the day."

I remember Bobby as a jovial man. In about 1961, Dad came home in a green 1951 Chevrolet he had bought from Bobby for us siblings to drive to school. Dad and Bobbie had seen each other on Main Street earlier that day, and Bobbie asked Dad to make an offer on the car. Dad said he would give \$50, and the transaction was completed with a handshake.



Bobby Hunter at his creamery station in Rolfe. Circa 1921. *The Mary Jane Hunter Dow collection.*

Bobby's daughter, Mary Jane Hunter Dow, lives in Utah. She remembers her dad also as having a good sense of humor and said that in 1973, just as his funeral service was ending at the cemetery, a cow ambled over to the area and mooed. She figures her dad would have laughed. Mary Jane also said Bobby had unpleasant memories of the Hunter homeplace and only drove her by the farm once. Mary Jane said that life on that farm was extremely difficult. She also speculated that perhaps Bobby's mother died due to exhaustion from childbearing and hard work as a farm homemaker.

In 1920 when Jim and Carrie DeWolf moved to the farm, they rented from the Eversons who had bought the farm from Bobby's dad, but the Eversons had large mortgages both with the New York Life Insurance Company and the State Savings Bank of Rolfe. By 1925, the Eversons had conveyed all their land and mortgages to the State Savings Bank, and management of the farm was assigned to James Bruce, one of the bank's directors. On June 9, 1932, the superintendent of banking for the State of Iowa went to court and claimed the State Savings Bank to be "insolvent and unsafe" and that "the interest of the creditors demands its closing" and that the said bank was "voluntarily closed by its creditors." By Christmastime 1932, with

a deed for one dollar, the land was given to Mr. Bruce. He continued to rent the farm to the DeWolf family but moved to Des Moines where he died in 1947. His will stipulated that all his property would go to his wife, Ruth Bruce. She remarried and became Ruth Killingsworth. In 1955, she sold the farm to my grandfather, John Gunderson, who continued to lease the farm to the George family, who had moved there in 1941 when they swapped farms with the DeWolf family. My grandfather died in 1956, and ownership of the farm eventually ended up in the hands of my mother, who bought it from my father, who had inherited it from my grandfather's estate.

Following Grandpa's death, our family had to pay \$16,631 to the State of Iowa and \$73,020 to the Internal Revenue Service in inheritance and estate taxes. Because of the huge sum of taxes, an amount that perhaps would have been less had Grandpa done better estate planning, my father and mother became well versed and active in estate planning. They developed trusts, one for each of us siblings, and arranged for my grandmother, DeElda, to put land in the trusts. During the next two decades, the trusts (under my father's management) purchased more land, and my parents gave land to other trusts for us siblings to lessen their holdings and the eventual inheritance taxes on their estates. When my youngest sister, Louise, turned 21, the trusts were divided equally with each of the six of us being given land in our own names. The trusts were then dissolved.

In an unfortunate turn of events in the farm crisis of the early 1980s, Louise and her husband, Bill, who farmed in the Rolfe area, ran into financial difficulties. Dad sought out area farmers to buy some of Louise and Bill's property in order to liquidate their assets, pay off creditors, and avert bankruptcy, but his efforts produced too little revenue too late. They ended up using Chapter 11 of the federal bankruptcy code to reorganize their finances but lost all the land she had inherited. However, they did sell (in an indirect manner that involved land trades and the exchange of money) part of the farm that my grandfather had purchased from Ruth Bruce to Blanche and Wesley DeWolf, who was a nephew of Jim DeWolf, and another part of that farm to Gary and Kathy Dahl, her siblings, and her father, Norton Ives.

Anyone who has read Jane Smiley's Pulitzer prize-winning 1991 novel, *A Thousand Acres*, about a farm dynasty in north central Iowa, or who is otherwise familiar with the social mores of farming communities, knows that land can be an extremely important part not only of a farm family's financial prosperity but of its identity. I was raised with full knowledge that the Gundersons had large land holdings—as much as 3,000 acres at one time under my father's management. Land was part of the core identity of who we were and are. I assume I am not the only one who has felt an admonition not to sell or lose inherited land. Such values might not be central to every farm family, but they were impregnated in our family psyche. Knowing our inherited mindset, I can only imagine how difficult it was for Louise and Bill and other family members involved in the bankruptcy to endure and survive the process.

It is interesting to trace the price paid per acre of land in the early days of white settlement of the 1800s to now. The task does take an extreme amount of attention to detail to tell exactly what particle of land was being sold. The property descriptions are part of a daunting shorthand language (SW1/4 and SW1/4 of SE1/4 of Sec. 7 translates as the southwest quarter of Section 7 and the southwest quarter of the southeast quarter of Section 7, with a section being one square mile).

In the scribbled notes I made in 1989, when Norton Ives let me look at the abstract for this first farm along the road, I wrote as thoroughly as possible and drew a little square for each transaction to show the entire section of land and shaded in the described parcel. Unfortunately, the task of deciphering those notes and drawings sufficiently to determine the price per acre for every purchase is beyond the scope of my skills and this book. In general, from my calculations, I'll take a stab at portraying the evolution of prices paid for the farm.

It appears that the 1889 transaction from the railroad to the first investor, L.C. Coffin, was for little more than a dollar per acre. By the time he sold it to Robert Hunter in 1901, the price had risen to \$10 per acre. When Robert sold it to Henry Everson in 1910, the price was \$87.50 per acre. Then after a long and complex period of ownership, my grandfather bought the farm in 1955 for \$210 per acre. After that, there are no specific prices quoted in the abstract; however, I know that land escalated to at least \$3,000 per acre, because in 1979, I paid that amount to purchase a 20-acre parcel of land. A chart of land values published by the Iowa State University Extension Department shows that the average land price in Pocahontas County reached a peak of \$2,905 in 1981, then sank to \$995 in 1986, gradually rose to \$2,437 in 1997, slipped back to \$2,257 in 2001, and climbed to \$2,762 in 2003.

Roger DeWolf remembers losing his fortune in 1932 when he was 10 years old and his family lived on the first farm along the road. He was in the field, driving a team of horses and harrowing (i.e., tilling) the ground. Here is the story in his own words:

What I remember is my mother walking across the field. The fields in those days had more clods than today, big hard clods. She walked clear across that field to talk to us. My dad was in the same field doing another part of the tillage, and she came out and told us both that the bank in Rolfe was closed. I thought I was wiped out, because I had some 37 dollars and some cents. But it was gone. The news was a blow to my parents. So part of my tears were in sympathy for them, but most were for losing my fortune.

Roger's dad Jim was paid to be a part-time rural mail carrier. He drove his route with a team of horses and went as far as the town of Plover. In the winter, when the snow was bad, he would pull a bobsled. It used to be that citizens had to pay a tax to be eligible to vote, but they could contribute work in lieu of paying the tax. For his poll tax, Jim graded the mile of road that went by his place to keep it as passable as possible. For the job, he built a contraption that he pulled with horses. It consisted of a curved steel bar that was about three feet high and five feet wide and served as a blade to smooth the dirt road. There was a board mounted on top of the blade that Jim stood on while driving the horses.

Roger also said his dad used to pull other peoples' vehicles out of the mud and that the worst stretch of road was a quarter mile west of the highway. The road in that area was low and the ditches on both sides were often both full of water, especially in the spring time. Roger is not the only person associated with this project to note difficulties with that portion of the road. I can recall, even in the years after it was better engineered and surfaced with gravel, when there were muddy springtime ruts and driving was treacherous. The best strategy was simply to hang onto the steering wheel—perhaps pray—keep moving, and hope to stay in the ruts left by other drivers and not slide into a ditch.

Roger claims his dad was one of the first farmers in the county to grow soybeans and use hybrid seed corn. Apparently Jim planted beans for the first time in about 1933 or 1934. His harvest was less than desirable. As Roger says:

I can remember that the bean crop had kind of a disastrous result in most cases. When it was growing it looked so nice and green, you know those big green leaves. But no one knew what to do with it at that time, and my dad thought it would be a good idea to try and make hay out of it. We cut it and tried to pick up all that tangled mess of stems. By the time we got it piled in the lot, the leaves had all fallen off, so we stacked

the stems. But the livestock didn't much care if they ate it or not. And now beans are used in livestock feed but it's a processed feed. And it's necessary to be processed for the animal to get much good out of it.

I asked if the salesman, who had talked his dad into buying the bean seed, had also told Jim how to harvest and use the crop. Roger replied, "Well, knowing my dad, they might have told him, but he might have thought they didn't know what they were talking about."

Roger also talked about the introduction of hybrid corn seed:

Dad was one of the first—seemed to us he was the first one, but I'm not sure of that—to buy seed corn at five dollars a bushel. In the past, you know, they just picked big ears in the fall and stored them someplace and shelled them out and planted them in the spring. That was the difference between open-pollinated and hybrid corn seed. And this was in the hot, dry drought summer [1936]. I remember that the hybrid corn was standing up, green and straight, and that the open-pollinated corn was down and tumbled all over. It was hard for farmers to accept the results because the hybrid corn didn't have big ears. It had smaller ears that were all the same size and well-formed but not big long ears.

I asked, "So your dad's risk paid off?" And Roger said, "Well, it was the first time most of us had seen 50 bushel corn [per acre]—then as things developed year after year, farmers got more than 50 bushel."

Once, Jim rented 40 acres of slough land from Rosa Dady on the east side of Section 13 of Roosevelt Township where my parents live. When he tried to plow the native untilled land, he discovered it was peat and accidentally triggered a fire that smoldered under ground for a year, with smoke rising like a genie from the snow in the winter.



Jim DeWolf. Circa 1936. *The Phyllis DeWolf Thompson collection.*

The DeWolfs had more chickens than most families. They operated a kerosene-powered incubator upstairs in a storeroom of their house, where they hatched chickens for Pat Wood's hatchery. Roger's mom stood on a stool and turned the eggs by hand. She also promoted 4-H, and Roger and Beverly became state officers. At home, Roger had a calf project. In order to weigh his steers, he would lead them to the Brinkman place a mile away where there was a livestock scale.

When I interviewed Roger's younger sister, Phyllis, I began by showing her a 1950s aerial photo of the farm and asking her to tell me what she saw and remembered about it:

There's the trees, and the double corncrib and the hen houses. There's the great wind break in the back. There's the plum trees and mulberry trees.

It was home. All three of us kids were born there. We were in 4-H, and the folks were in Farm Bureau and extension work. I think it was either the third or fourth Thursday of every month that was Farm Bureau night. You would go to the different homes. The parents would have their meetings downstairs, and the kids would be playing upstairs in the bedroom, not doing the best of things up there sometimes. I was talking to one of the gals, and she says she can remember trying on all those hats. Of course she remembered Lucille White was the pianist and they sang songs and had programs. You had your country school and were together then, too. The threshing crew definitely brought people together. Roger tells about the times he got to blow the whistle on the steam engine. One summer when there was a little baby in the house, he couldn't because he would wake the baby up, and that was me.



Left to right: Beverly, Carrie, and Phyllis DeWolf. Circa 1936. *The Phyllis DeWolf Thompson collection.*

I remember getting ready for the threshing crew. It was my job to set up the work bench and the basin for water, to hang the mirror in the lilac bush, and to hang the towels all over for the guys when they came in to eat the big dinner that was cooked on a wood stove. The threshing crew always came on my birthday. I decided we should make that a holiday because we could never celebrate my birthday when they were threshing. That wasn't fair.

There were no [chemical] sprays in those days, just old-fashioned farming: making hay with the dump rake and loading hay in the barn with the forks. Milking a few cows, feeding some cattle. One of my favorite things to do as a kid was to drink warm milk: go out and get it right as Dad was milking. Oh, that was so good. I don't know if I would do it today, but I really enjoyed it as a kid.

I also recall the 4-H projects. We fed lambs during the winter and would take them up to Spencer. We had to do the chores before we went to country school. Sometimes I would drive the pony on a buggy, or I would ride the pony, or I would ride a bicycle. The school was a mile away. We had to do the dishes before we went. Of course school didn't start until nine o'clock so we had plenty of time to do that. We walked most every day. I don't remember ever being driven to school. Of course, we would see all kinds of things along the way. I remember the time that they were going to start paving Highway 44. They had the counter across the road and we used our ball bats to make a really lot of traffic go by.

I asked Phyllis about how she felt seeing the farm now when only a lone corncrib and shrub are left standing. She replied:

You're sad, very sad. We had a lot of fun. We hated to move, but that farm wasn't big enough. It was only 160 acres, and we moved onto a



Phyllis DeWolf Thompson. 2001.

bigger farm when I was in eighth grade. As an adult I can see why the folks wanted to move. They had reached a milestone in their life, ready to move on to a bigger challenge. And that was during the war. It was twice as big of a farm. Machinery was hard to get. Labor was hard to get. You couldn't get anything. I do think Dad got his name in and got a new 15-foot disc. The tractor I learned to drive was an old 1020 tractor that had lug wheels. I think it took about 40 acres to turn around in. And I remember having the drag behind it, and of course, I didn't turn soon enough and got caught in the fence with the drag coming up on the lugs. But I survived. You see, Beverly had gone off to college and Roger was in the service, and I was the only one home.

I dream many times about the farm—the creek in the back. We went wading back there many times. We had a couple come from Sioux City, who set up beehives there because Dad raised sweet clover. They set up a trailer house in the grove.

We had a lot of accidents. People tell about the time they were making hay along the road in the ditch. I was swinging on the back of the hay rack, and the horses backed up and my foot was underneath. I didn't break any bones, but I still have a nice scar from where that happened.

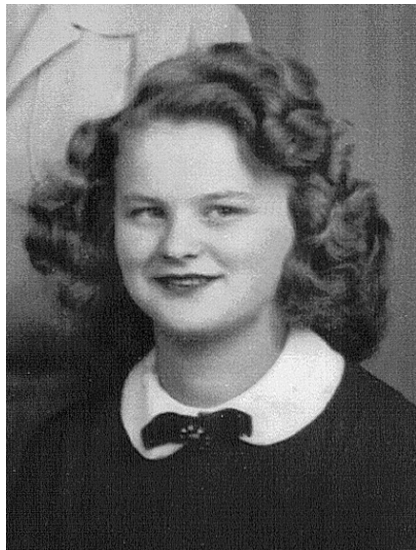
I was thinking about the time I had scarlet fever, and Dr. Fuller White came and tacked up the quarantine sign. Roger was shipped off to Uncle Billy and Aunt Maude's place. I don't remember where Beverly went to stay for six weeks. So Mother and I were together. Dad was in and out. He could be there. I was in bed about half a day—the rest of the time, I was out playing around. I wasn't sick.



Farm where the DeWolf family and later the George family lived on the south side of Section 7, Garfield Township. Circa 1950. *The Marcia Smith collection.*

Marjorie George Simonson, who was a teenager when her family lived on the farm in the 1940s, also has a fondness for the place. She talked about some of her memories:

We had the long driveway, and it was lined with trees. The trees made an umbrella over the whole driveway. I remember there were lilac bushes and yellow roses, wild ones, out by the gate and that when we went to town on Saturday night—to fix ourselves up—we always took a yellow rose and put it in our hair. My mother was not one who paid much attention to flowers. But there were lilies of the valley all over. And there were window boxes in the kitchen, and she liked pansies, so she always put pansies in those. Then there was a lane that went back through the grove that we used to ride the pony up and down. But that pony really wasn't much of a pony because if it wanted to go back in the barn, it just stopped. You would go over headfirst, and the pony would take off. Then if you went on farther north, there was a creek, out in back with trees. We used to like to take a picnic sack and go out there. That was like a party. We didn't do it very often, but it was really pretty back there. I liked the place better than the other farm we lived on because there were so many more trees and more personality. Now they have taken all those trees down. My husband says that's the biggest mistake that they have ever made in this farming country because the trees stop the erosion and the wind and dirt blowing and everything. He thought it was terrible. I can just remember that was a neat place. A neat house, even though it didn't have a bathroom in it. The yard was pretty. The lane was pretty, you know, going up and down there.



Left photo: Marjorie George. Circa 1940s. Right photo: Marjorie George Simonson. 1990s. *From Marcia Smith's and Marjorie's collections.*

My dad never raised cattle as such, but he had cows and they had calves in the spring. And a lot of times they were back in that creek area, and you would have to drive them up to the building site. Usually

you didn't do that until the hottest time of day in the evening. Now I never did that much milking. My sister, who was just older than me—she milked, maybe one cow; but she helped with the chores so that meant I had to do the work in the house. I never quite thought it was fair. I used to think, why don't I go out and milk the cow and make her stay in and wash the [cream] separator and make the bed because we never would go to school without having our bed made and the folks' bed made, too.

We always had a big garden. We had a potato patch, and the weeds had gotten so tall, that Dad told me he would give me a dollar if I pulled those weeds out. I can remember pulling on those weeds and ended up sitting on my hiney because they were so hard to pull. He thought I was doing such a great job that he said he would give me a dollar a row instead of a dollar for the whole patch. We had a huge strawberry bed. There was a man who lived on the way to Rolfe, and Dad would hire him to come over and help pick strawberries. I don't know if we took them to town or if somebody stopped to pick them up.

Mother liked to cook. In fact, I didn't really know that much about cooking when I got married for the simple reason—and I have thought about that a lot—I could peel the potatoes or something like that but as far as the meat or the gravy, Mom never taught me that. But back then you probably couldn't take the chance on some kid making a mess of your meal, so she did that part. When my grandmother came, we had these wonderful, wonderful cinnamon rolls. My mom didn't do that much bread baking, but she could really make a pie. And she never measured anything. She just dumped. This, that, and the other. My brother's favorite thing was when Mother would make date loaf cake, and then we would whip cream and put it on the top. And I asked her, I don't know how many times, "Mother, I would love to have the recipe for your date loaf cake." She never could write it down because she just dumped.

My daughters had a special fondness for my mother. They say that Grandma George was a woman ahead of her time—in her thoughts and what she was going to do. Whether anybody liked it or not—it didn't really bother my mother. She didn't really follow the leaders. She did her own thing. And sometimes, I think that was a problem for my father because my mother was very strong-willed and he was too. I used to think they had some horrendous go-arounds. If my mother wanted to have a beer she would have one. Now women back then didn't do that. If she went to town and somebody asked her to go to the tavern, she might go to the tavern. Well you know, that was unheard of, but I wouldn't say she ever abused it. But that's just the way she was, and she loved to be outdoors more than she liked to be in the house. I used to say she just liked to follow Dad around.

My mother also liked to have a clean house, and she used to say, “Well, that’s what I’ve got you girls for.” So we kept the house up because she liked to have it clean. And I can remember when she lived on your grandparents’ place, going out and shooting squirrels. My husband couldn’t believe she did those kinds of things. And she loved to fish. So there were different things about Mother. I don’t believe I am being critical of her at all, but that was just the way she was, and we all loved her.

My dad had every magazine there ever was: *Saturday Evening Post*, *Collier’s*, *Reader’s Digest*, *National Geographic*. You see, my dad only went through the seventh grade, but he was a self-educated man and an avid reader. I think he educated himself through his reading. But we were never to touch those magazines until after Dad had read them.

I don’t ever remember going without food to eat or clothes on my back. The things we had weren’t necessarily the nicest, but they served the purpose. My sisters and I have talked about that. We didn’t know we were poor. It just seemed like everybody was poor. My father had more or less been raised like an orphan, and he wouldn’t go into debt unless he absolutely had to. I think Dad could have been a bigger farmer and owned the land himself, but he didn’t take that step. I don’t know if that’s a criticism or not because when he retired from the farm, he had enough until he died. I think I have adopted that philosophy. I don’t need a lot. Things aren’t that important to me. I especially remember the people who lived in the house where your folks moved to. The father was a hired hand, and the family hardly had anything. But I remember, I think her name was Margaret, a girl who was close to my own age. She was always so happy-go-lucky and her parents were too. We had a lot more than they did.

I asked Marjorie if her parents would have voted for the Equal Rights Amendment in Iowa if they had still been alive in 1992. Marjorie replied tentatively and with long pauses, “I don’t know. I don’t think so. My husband wouldn’t have either. And I don’t know if I would either because—oh, I don’t know—I would have to do some serious thinking about that.”

“What do you think would be the pros and cons of it?” I asked.

“Well I think there are things women can do just as well as a man, but there are things they can’t do, too, and you just as well be realistic about it. I really think there are enough laws on the books already without doing any more.”

Lyman and Arlene George moved from this first place along the road that they rented from my grandfather to our family’s homeplace after Grandpa died in 1956 and Grandma moved to town in 1958.

Then Hank Baade signed on as a hired hand for my parents from about 1960 to 1962 and lived on the first farm with his wife, Marie, and their children Karen, David, Joyce, and Susan. Next, John Schurr became a hired hand for our family from 1963 to 1971. He and his wife, Katherine, and their daughter, Elaine, lived on the farm. Then when Dan and Mary Allen were first married, they rented the acreage and lived there from about 1971 to 1976. Dan, who graduated from Rolfe in 1968—five years behind me, has a long history with the road. In his toddler years, he lived on the farm on the far west end of the road where his dad Les was a hired hand for the Arlo and Mildred Ives family. Then the rest of Dan’s growing up years,



Lyman George atop a load of ear corn in a horse-drawn box wagon. 1942. *The Marcia Smith collection.*

he lived a mile south of my road where his dad rented a farm in the same section where my parents lived. After Dan graduated from high school, he went for a short time to an art school in Omaha, met Mary, and returned with her to the first farm along the road. During some of those years that they were on the acreage, I would often visit my parents and go jogging along the gravel road. However, it was a fearful challenge to get past the Allen's long lane since they had a mean, lean Doberman pinscher, who, if it sensed my presence, would threaten to run me down. That era was a difficult one for Mary, a city girl from Omaha now living on an isolated acreage with little job training. Eventually she earned her college degree and worked two jobs for several years—teaching in the town of Manson some 20 miles from Rolfe and serving as a counselor for troubled youth in Fort Dodge some 40 miles away. Currently, Dan and Mary live at a home he built in Rolfe where he and his brother Roger have a splendidly renovated barn. Dan has also created novel landscape art such as “the world's largest rocking horse”—a Clydesdale statue on huge rockers. Dan and Roger operate approximately 1,500 acres of land in the Rolfe area, owning some but renting other property, including large tracts for my parents and sister, Martha, along the road.

Gary and Kathy Dahl, along with her relatives, now own the land where the first farm once stood.



A lone corncrib stands in the middle of a field of windrowed hay. The crib is the only building left of the farm on the south side of Section 7, Garfield Township, and the hayfield is the last on along the road. The land is farmed by the Dahl family. Circa 1995.



Wealthy apples from the Gunderson homeplace farm. 2002.

BLUE RIBBON MEMORIES

Kathy Dahl is the great-granddaughter of two pioneer couples: Anna and Diedrick Brinkman, who came to the area in 1873, and Louisa and Leon Ives, who settled in the neighborhood in 1886. Kathy was two years behind me in school, one of my peers on the school bus, and the fourth of eight children in the Norton and Velma Ives family. Their farm was along the highway at the east end of the road. Norton was a farmer with a PhD who specialized in crop drying and traveled to many countries as a consultant. He continued to farm until he died in 1992 at the age of 74. Velma still lives on the same farm. Kathy and her husband Gary also have eight children. They live on the first farm north of Velma's place. Their house is an extension of the one that Leon and Louisa Ives moved to in 1890 when they bought the farm. The last major new wings of the house were built in 1953 and 2003.

Gary and Kathy met as students at Iowa State University. Gary came from a farm near Shelby in southwest Iowa and earned a degree in farm operations. Kathy majored in child development. They were married in 1969 at the Presbyterian Church in Rolfe. He wanted to enlist in the Air Force but was rejected because of a broken shoulder that had not fully healed. Gary and Kathy then attended Grace Bible College in Omaha and worked for Campus Crusade for Christ. Their ministry took them to Nashville, Tennessee, and then they lived in Denver, Colorado, where Gary worked as a finishing carpenter. Kathy was a stay-at-home mom. The couple returned to Iowa in 1975 to raise their children in a safer and more wholesome environment. Gary lined up a carpentry job, but there was a period of time before he was supposed to report to work. Norton suggested that in the meantime, the family could live on the north farm and Gary could help with the farming. One thing led to the next. Gary stayed on with farming, and the family made their home on the Ives' homeplace farm.

The Dahls certainly march to a different drummer than most other farm families do. They are often among the last farmers to complete planting or harvesting; yet, it doesn't seem to bother them. They are still able to get some of the better corn yields in the area, using the wealth of knowledge that has been passed down from Norton. Their farm equipment is neither the most modern nor the biggest. They use Norton's combine and corn planter, which was top of the line in the 1970s when Norton and his neighbor, LeRoy Rude, bought it together. The Dahl barn was in fragile condition for many, many years, and it finally had to be torn down in 2001. In its place, the family put up hoop houses, structures that are part of a sustainable system of raising hogs.

The Dahl children are home-schooled. Their instruction emphasizes compassion and cooperation as opposed to materialism, wealth, or other conventional forms of success. Often when I drive past their place, I see the family in the front yard playing volleyball, in the garden working, or in the open field along the highway walking the short quarter mile to Velma's home.

Gary taught his daughters Betsy, Dawn, Carolyn, Heidi, and Mercy about farming. A sixth daughter, Anna, suffers from allergies that limited her farming activities. Over the last decade, I have often seen the girls—now young women—in the fields baling hay or doing other work such as planting and combining, work that has been typically done by men. Perhaps the situation might have been different if Norton, who had traditional attitudes about gender roles, were still living or if the only two boys in the Dahl family, John and Luke, had not been the youngest of the eight children. Regardless of the reasons, the Dahl sisters have been active in farming, and I am envious. Their father taught them more than the specifics of how to drive

a tractor or do chores. He has taught them about agriculture in general and has given them the confidence to make decisions.

I have often thought that the Dahl family would be a great focus for a documentary project; however, Gary and Kathy maintain a deep respect for privacy. I have been welcome to photograph their children while they do fieldwork but, generally speaking, I am not allowed to photograph them at their home or farmstead. I gradually became familiar with the girls during the many visits throughout the past decade when I waited with my camera in the Dahl field along the road during planting, straw baling, and harvest season. Oftentimes, they would stop for a break and a bit of conversation.

On occasion when I stopped by to visit Kathy, we would stand on the front steps of the house for a quick chat. Other times, she invited me into her living room. Sometimes, one or two of the girls would join our conversations. However, even if they didn't join us, it was fun to simply observe their interactions. From where I sat on the couch in the living room, I could peer across the room through the swinging kitchen door of the Dahls' large, wooden oval table and see the many loaves of whole-grain bread left sitting to cool. Or I heard the girls talk about the daily story hour when Kathy reads to the whole family, including the older daughters, when they come home for visits.

I have run into Gary and Kathy in Ames, the home of Iowa State University, from time to time. The town is about 100 miles from Rolfe but only four miles from where I live in Gilbert. There was a time when various daughters had regular orthodontist appointments there. On those trips, the family became enamored with the Ames Public Library. Soon, they made a habit of trekking to Ames every time that library items were due, and that meant returning home with another couple of grocery bags full of books. Then they would run other errands, including visits to Big Table Books, a community-owned bookstore. One evening, we saw each other there and caught up on what was happening in our lives.

Gary and Kathy also come to Ames for some of the annual meetings of the Practical Farmers of Iowa held at the Gateway Center. The organization's mission is "to research, develop, and promote profitable, ecologically sound, and community-enhancing approaches to agriculture." When I first saw Gary and Kathy at one of the meetings, it was serendipitous to realize that they were long-time friends of some of the people I was just getting to know through PFI. It was also refreshing to know that there was at least one farm family from my hometown area who belongs to the organization.

This is an era when huge, commercial hog confinement facilities dot the Iowa map. The stench they produce is much worse than the barnyard smells that are nostalgically associated with the family farm of previous decades. Instead, with manure from hundreds, if not thousands, of hogs concentrated at one site, the accumulation of hydrogen sulfide and ammonia can ruin the air of an entire rural neighborhood. Indeed, it can cause a burning



Gary Dahl and his daughter, Heidi, stack bales of hay on a rack while one of Heidi's sisters, Mercy, drives the tractor. South side of Section 7, Garfield Township. 1994.

sensation in a person's nostrils even if he or she is merely driving along a highway through that part of the country. Even more problematic is the fact that these gases can precipitate respiratory problems for people living in the surrounding neighborhood. Additionally, the large quantities of manure stored in lagoons can spill directly into a river or creek or seep into the groundwater. Then there is the risk that an operator, in his or her haste to spread too much manure too fast, might create runoff. These scenarios are only a few of the ways in which the corporate hoglots menace the environment, the economy, and human health—not to mention the unethical and unhealthy living conditions for the hogs themselves. In contrast, the open-air hoop houses on the Dahl farm are an example of what many PFI members are doing to make a difference in the face of status-quo corporate agriculture.

I feel a deep sense of the sacred when I am with the Dahls, and that surprises me. Kathy and I knew each other in the Rolfe schools and Presbyterian Church, where both of our families had been members since the 1880s. We lost touch after graduation, and I was not aware of her adult journey and developing interests. In our younger years, I had never thought of her or her family as being conservative; however, times have changed, and like many of her siblings, Kathy and Gary consider themselves conservative Christians. In an election year, there are usually signs on their property for Republican presidential and legislative candidates whose political views are an anathema to me. Also, Kathy and Gary have moved away from the Rolfe Presbyterian Church, seeking more conservative religious communities. In contrast, I am a liberal and have become a Democrat even though I was raised in a Republican family. I, too, have moved away from the Presbyterian denomination, even after receiving a master of divinity at a Presbyterian seminary. Currently, I am a member of the Unitarian-Universalist Fellowship in Ames. It has seemed that the Dahls and I are at opposite ends of the conservative-liberal spectrum, and before I became reacquainted with Kathy and met Gary, I anticipated we would have little in common. My preconceptions were wrong.

Gary and Kathy's second daughter Heidi is married to James Roland. He grew up in the southwest Iowa town of Atlantic, where his parents owned Roland's Funeral Service. When I first met James in the summer of 2001 at the Dahl farm, he was a theology student enrolled at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School. However, he was taking time away from the Deerfield, Illinois, campus to work on his master's thesis. His topic was the purpose and meaning of life with a focus on what Jonathan Edwards, a mid-eighteenth century pastor and theologian, meant on the many occasions when he used the phrase "the glory of God." He and Heidi lived for a while with her parents; then in 2003, they moved into a farm home two miles from the Dahl home. Their four young children, Sophia, Maria, Peter, and William, are the sixth generation of Leon and Louisa Ives and Diedrick and Anna Brinkman to live in the Rolfe area. James has done a variety of interim and part-time work, including a tour of duty as a police officer in Rolfe. He plans to teach classes at a community college. There is the possibility that the couple and their children will travel to different parts of the world as part of their ministry, but there is also the possibility that the family will continue to live in the Rolfe area. Heidi loves to garden, bake bread, and prepare other culinary items such as jams and apple butter. She was one of the founders of the farmers' market in West Bend, where she enjoyed selling her produce.

One afternoon when Heidi and James were still living with the Dahls, I stopped at the farm to chat. Only Heidi, James, and their children were at home. They invited me to have tea, and we sat in the living room, watching the darkening sky through their picture window. We freely discussed rural issues, life in general, theology, and the importance of art. I felt comfortable with Heidi and James and shared some of my restlessness, if not cynicism, with the conservative wing of Christianity and my frustrations with my rural heritage. I was amazed at how well they understood and accepted my candor, almost as if what I was saying

was refreshing for them to hear. When the rest of the family returned home that evening, I was invited to join them for a soup supper. It was the first of a few fine yet simple meals around their large kitchen table. I continue to enjoy the family's enthusiasm for life, the meaningful conversations, the opportunity to be in a real farm home with traditional rural cuisine, and their genuine hospitality. I am also impressed with the close bonds between the family members: the cooperation of the sisters doing their farm chores, the playfulness of the siblings, their coziness in the evening around the wood-burning stove while they knit and converse, or young Uncle Luke, a teenager, holding and nurturing Heidi and James' two-year-old son Peter.

I was not impressed with home-schooling in the 1970s when I first became aware of the movement. I thought that children should be enrolled in a public school system where they could meet other students and learn to socialize in the classroom as well as through extracurricular activities. Neither was I impressed with Gary and Kathy having eight children. It seemed foolish for a woman of my own generation to have such a huge family and follow in the footsteps of mothers such as Velma, my mom, and many other women of the 1940s and 1950s who had little choice in terms of contraceptives. Again, my preconceptions were proven wrong. The Dahls appear to have a great deal of curiosity, cooperation, and self-initiative as well as viewing life holistically with no rigid divide between learning and life in general. They also have a way of discerning who they essentially are rather than getting caught up in popular fads and trends. I also realize that people have different vocations and that there are people such as Gary and Kathy who are extremely gifted at parenting. What counts is not the number of children but the children themselves. The qualities I see in Gary and Kathy's children and the relationships they have within and outside of their family are what really matter.

In the 1970s, Gary and Kathy learned about the L'Abri Fellowship International. L'abri means shelter in French. It is an organization that was founded in Switzerland in 1955 by the Christian theologian Francis Schaeffer and his wife, Edith Schaefer. One of the fellowship's guiding principles is giving honest answers to people who ask honest questions about God and the significance of human life. Gary says that one of the most important lessons that L'Abri teaches is that all of life is valuable.

The genuine hospitality that I feel when I talk with the girls on their breaks from fieldwork, telephone the Dahl home with a question, receive a thank-you note or Christmas letter from the family, visit with Gary and Kathy in Ames, talk with them over a ham salad sandwich at a funeral luncheon, or join the whole family around their kitchen table for an August meal of corn fritters and apple fritters is an extension of the powerful connecting spirit of L'Abri embodied in this family. The more I learn about the L'Abri attitude toward honesty as part of the quest to understand God, the more I understand why I was so comfortable with Heidi and James the afternoon when we sipped tea and talked candidly about so many issues that were beneath the surface of ordinary polite conversation.

Heidi, James, and the rest of the Dahl family also value creativity and art. Examples would be Dawn, who plays the piano and recorder; Anna, who plays the flute and decorates cakes; Heidi, who plays the violin and weaves; James, who creates oil paintings, writes essays and stories, and enjoys desktop publishing; Mercy, who sketches and paints pictures; Betsy, who is the family member most dedicated to journal writing; Carolyn, who plays classical piano music wonderfully; Luke, who is a woodworker; and John, who plays with Legos and engages in other building projects.

The Dahls also have a deep regard for my documentary project and photography. The first words that caught my attention when I checked out the L'Abri web site were ones by Francis Schaeffer, "Art is a reflection of God's creativity, and evidence that we are made in the image of God." Although I am hesitant to use God language, those words resonate in my soul.

Heidi, James, and the Dahl family sponsored a L'Abri conference in West Bend, a town 15 miles northeast of Rolfe, on a winter weekend in 2003. I was surprised and hesitant when they first invited me to mount an exhibit of my work. However, I knew that my best friend Joy Leister, who is a conservative living in Gilbert, had known Gary and Kathy in the 1970s when they were part of the ISU Bible Study in Ames. I decided that if Joy could get away for the weekend, the conference would be a fine vacation for us.

I intended to exhibit photographs of rural scenes, especially some large panels that show changes in agriculture and others that show the demolition of the Rolfe Presbyterian Church in 1996. However, while I was packing for the trip to West Bend, I began to think outside the box and decided to take along a still-life photograph of a teapot, cups, oranges, and apples. I did not yet know about the L'Abri emphasis on hospitality, and I felt a surge of serendipity: the refreshment table the Dahls had arranged in the lobby of the motel where the conference was held was amazingly akin to the photograph, with the exception that the table held more pots and baskets of oranges and apples. When the event was over, it seemed a perfectly fitting, if not a sacramental act, to give Heidi and James the photo. It is now in the farm home where they have temporary quarters.

The L'Abri event was a marvelous web of connections. My friend Joy met other people she had known as part of religious communities in Ames during the past three decades. I visited with people I had known while growing up in the Presbyterian Church, including my brother Charles and his wife Gloria. They and many of the other former Presbyterians who were at the conference have sought more conservative congregations and are no longer part of the shared ministry that formed when the Rolfe Methodists and Presbyterians merged into one organization.



"Tea Time Hospitality," a still life photo. 2000.

Kathy and Gary's oldest daughter Dawn is one of the main staff members at the L'Abri center in the village of Greatham in England. She focuses her efforts on hospitality and tutoring. Before she married James, Heidi, the second daughter, worked at home on the farm, and in the winter she was a companion to Edith Schaeffer, a widow who made her home in Rochester, Minnesota, where there also is a L'Abri center. Heidi prepared meals, did laundry, read to Edith, and helped the octogenarian entertain guests. Anna, the third daughter, commuted from the Dahl farm to Fort Dodge, where she earned a degree in nursing from the University of Iowa. She is currently a nurse in the vascular ward of St. Mary's Hospital, part of the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minnesota. The rest of Gary and Kathy's children still live at home. Mercy, Betsy, Caroline, and Luke are the main ones who help with the fieldwork now that their older sisters have moved away. However, the three young women enrolled in the nursing program at the Iowa Lakes Community College campus in Emmetsburg in January 2004.

I have to admit that what really caught my eye about the Dahl family was that the girls had horses. According to Gary, the girls, especially Mercy and Betsy, always wanted horses, and instead of owning Barbie dolls, they had Pretty Ponies. In fact, they still have them. One year when Gary purchased a milk cow, he also got baby calves for the girls. When the calves grew strong enough, the girls were unsuccessful in their attempts to ride them. The biggest problem was that the calves were so round that the girls couldn't get their legs around them. Finally, Gary acquiesced and got two colts, a Morgan-Percheron mare and a gelding. The girls gentled and tamed them for a year before attempting to do any riding, and in the process, they learned about the care and training of horses. Then the family bought a purebred Morgan stallion. They now have seven horses.



Three of the Dahl sisters and their horses. Left to right: Betsy, Alister, Messena, Carolyn, Ameris, and Mercy. 2003.

As a young child, I wanted a horse, but I never thought I would be able to have one. When I was nine, following our custom on Christmas day, we got out of bed and scrambled to the living room to open our stocking gifts. Next, our family had its holiday breakfast. The most memorable menu item was served in a split serving bowl and consisted of store-bought pear halves that Mother had dyed green and red, one color for each side of the bowl. Later in the day, we went to Grandpa and Grandma's farm three miles away. After dinner, we gathered in the parlor to open gifts from under the Christmas tree. As I sat in one of Grandpa and Grandma's overstuffed chairs, I felt forlorn with that vague blueness that can creep into the holiday season, but I also felt that I wasn't getting my share of gifts. Then my older sister Clara suggested I look past the Christmas tree and out the big picture window. Surprise of surprises! Grandpa was standing there with a bay and a black-and-white-spotted horse. One was for me; the other was for my brother and sisters. I went outside to help Grandpa lead the horses back to the barn. Then we rejoined the family as they finished opening gifts. Let me add a side note for the record: my grandfather from Utah gave me a brand new saddle for my upcoming birthday in April.

For a long time, I assumed that Grandpa, because of his love for horses, was the one who had bought the horses for us. I found out later that it was Dad who had made the arrangements. He had gone to a man by the name of LeRoy Nelson. LeRoy was associated with saddle clubs for many years and served as a judge at horse shows and as a ringmaster at events such as the county fair. He knew just where to get two horses that would be gentle enough for children to ride and paid \$50 apiece for them. The bay was named Pet. The spotted one was Beauty. They were probably 20 years old when we got them. Most of the time, it was Charles and I who rode Pet and Beauty. They were gentle, but then again, they had some spunk. Occasionally when I went to the horse pen to catch and saddle Beauty, she would come directly toward me, nodding her head as though she was going to butt me, and then she would spin around and kick her hind heels at me. However, once the horses were saddled and bridled, sometimes with Dad's help, Charles and I had some good rides in the fields and on the country roads.

I enjoyed riding Pet or Beauty east to the first farm along the road, up the long driveway lined with trees, through the grove, then across the field to a wooded area along Crooked Creek. Other times, I liked to go south to a wooded area at a sandpit along the road to the homeplace. Although it was a site where many people dumped trash and items such as old tires and washing machines, it was still a fun place to explore. On one outing, I brought along an aluminum foil meal. That meant putting a helping of hamburger, onion, potatoes, and carrots on a piece of aluminum foil, adding salt and pepper, then sealing the raw food in the foil so the juices would not leak. I had often made similar meals at camp, for 4-H or Presbyterian youth fellowship meetings. I mounted Beauty and managed to take the food pack with me. When I got to the sandpit, I made a small fire and cooked the meal in the embers. It was a fun outing, and I was proud of my adventuresome spirit. However, even though I enjoyed the companionship of my horse, the site was not a full-fledged wooded area and in that respect, the adventure was somewhat disappointing. It was also a lonely outing. It would have been fun to have some peers come with me. I recall that in the Rolfe High School yearbook, when I was a senior, the caption under my name said, "The more I know of men, the better I like my horse." It was a complete surprise when I thumbed through the book. I suspect some of my friends on the yearbook committee chose the phrase. I've chuckled about it, realizing they had a feel for who I was and conveyed my spirit as a tomboy who was not caught up in popular notions of how a girl should behave or what she should worship.

I always liked LeRoy Nelson and his wife, Mary. They were some ten years older than my parents and long-time members of the Rolfe Presbyterian Church. In the years following high school when I was home for vacation and attended worship there, they would always ask how I was doing in a way that told me that they truly cared about me. Leroy was the kind of person

I could go up to at a Greater Rolfe Days parade after not having seen him for years, give him a kiss on the cheek, and tell him that he was one of my favorite men. Whenever I reminded him of the horses he had helped Dad find for my siblings and me, LeRoy would remember. He could be funny, and people who knew him can easily recall the way he chortled and slapped his thigh in delight at a bit of humor.

Gary Dahl talks about how supportive LeRoy had been in 1992 when Gary's father-in-law Norton Ives was ill with cancer. Norton had been at the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minnesota, and then came home for the last week of his life. LeRoy stopped by the Ives farm for long visits with Norton. They talked about the old times, and the 74-year-old PhD farmer told LeRoy things that he had never confided, even to his own family.

I, too, could talk to LeRoy about serious matters. In 1994, there was to be a funeral in Rolfe that was projected to have a large turnout of people. I had always wanted to videotape a funeral processional with the hearse leading the line of cars, so I decided to place myself among the trees in the cemetery across the road, which overlooked the lot in the new cemetery where the committal service was to be. After the brief service ended and the cars drove back to town, I noticed that LeRoy stayed at the gravesite and was talking with the cemetery custodian. I ambled down the hill and across the road and spoke with them. LeRoy was there in his role as a member of the cemetery board. The previous year, 1993, was one of considerable rain and flooding in Iowa. People had told LeRoy about water seeping between the cemetery plots, and he was inspecting the grave. I ventured to ask him some questions. I wanted to know what my grandfather would be like in his burial lot only 40 yards away. If exhumed, would he have been completely decomposed or would I recognize him? It wasn't what LeRoy said as much as the fact that he listened to me, understood my questions, and was able to converse about things such as death, dead bodies, and perspectives in an in-depth but fun way. He told me that if my grandfather's body were exhumed, there might be a resemblance between it and my grandfather who had meant so much to me.

In 1995, LeRoy and Mary came to a supper and folk dance that I held for my 50th birthday at the Rolfe High School home economics room and the adjacent gymnasium. Several people, including Kathy Dahl, agreed to bring a crock-pot of maid-rite filling for sandwiches. We plugged the crock-pots into the several outlets along the wall. Kenny Allen, who had been one of the youngsters on my school bus route and later as an adult owned the Ideal Café in Pocahontas, catered the buns and coleslaw. I also arranged for Lavonne Howland, a cakemaker from Rolfe who was several years older than me but who had grown up along the road, to make a chocolate and a white sheet cake for the occasion. Each square was decorated with the number 50 and a small flower. The invitations had asked the guests to bring their favorite version of Jell-O salad. Several of the women took charge of organizing the serving table. Their good planning allowed people to fill their plates with food and find a table alongside the gym floor where they chatted with other guests while enjoying the meal.

A friend at the Unitarian Fellowship told me about a folk group from Ames called the Pretty Good Band that plays for barn dances. I arranged for the band to play at my party. I didn't know the musicians prior to the dance. However, it turns out that one of the guitar players, Rick Exner, is the research director for the Practical Farmers of Iowa, and the mandolin player, Mike Bell, would eventually write a book about PFI and use several of my photographs for the publication. The squeezebox player, Joe Lynch, and his partner Lonna Nachtigal, who plays the hammered dulcimer and was the caller, own Onion Creek Farm. I often buy basil, garlic, onions, collards, tomatoes, and other produce from them at the farmers' market. I've also built a good friendship with the fiddle player, Mary Sand, who has joined my friend Joy and me for trips to my mother's cottage at Lake Okoboji or for sewing and cooking retreats at my home.

During the dance, many people, including Mary Nelson and my parents, sat and talked with others on the sidelines. LeRoy joined in the dancing. I particularly remember being across from him when we did the patty-cake polka, a mixer. First, it was heel, toe and a slide, slide, slide. Then the participants each clapped their hands, patted their thighs, and gave a high five to their partner's right and then left hand. Next, a right elbow turn and on to a new partner. There was LeRoy in his subdued western attire with brown cowboy boots, well into his 80s: a fun dance partner.

He was on the program for at least two of Rolfe's all-class reunions and told great stories of small-town and rural life in the 1920s. In 2000, I asked him if he would write a piece for a book of Rolfe High School memories that I was editing. He put me off for a long time, not because he didn't want to contribute to the project, but because his ability to do so was diminishing. Fortunately, his daughter Mary Le Clark came to his aid and he finished an essay that is part of the book. He begins with the statement, "The Roaring Twenties. These were good years—prosperous years—the period between two wars." Later he tells how the tables turned:

Unfortunately economic conditions were not what they seemed. It was a lucky Rolfe High School graduate of the late twenties who would finish four years of college. Herbert Hoover became President in 1929. The Rolfe State Savings Bank closed in 1931. Our carefree life vanished before our very eyes. Farmers were burning corn rather than selling it for ten cents a bushel or on occasion nine cents. We watched as grain was scooped into the furnace to heat the courthouse in Pocahontas. People had their telephones taken out because they couldn't afford to pay the monthly bills. Land was lost. People went broke. Unlike many in the cities, we in the rural areas had food. The younger generation would recover. Many of the older generation would not. (*Excerpt used courtesy of LeRoy's family*)

LeRoy is gone. He died in March of 2003 at the age of 94. Mary has been in failing health for several years and is now in the Rolfe Care Center. LeRoy had been the healthier of the two and cared for Mary at home for some five years. Then in 2000, he had a stroke and in October 2002, he broke a hip. According to LeRoy and Mary's son Mac's wife, Mary Nelson, LeRoy went through some very difficult times before his death. However, LeRoy and his wife Mary, continued to live in their home with the family arranging for nurses and other help to be with them. Betsy, Mercy, and Carolyn Dahl each went to the Nelson home one day a week during January and February to care for the beloved couple. In March, the time came when Mary and LeRoy needed to move to the care center. Mac's wife, Mary, said that there was a warm week sandwiched between two terribly cold weeks when her son John and his wife, Amy, made a spur-of-the-moment decision to travel to Rolfe from the suburbs of Austin, Texas, with their only child, a month-old daughter. When they visited LeRoy, he managed to sit up and hold Madeline Grace Nelson, the youngest of his great-grandchildren, and gave her a kiss. An hour later, he passed away.

I went to LeRoy's funeral at the Methodist church building that is now the meeting place of the Shared Ministry of Rolfe. I got there ten minutes after the service began. I slid onto a folding chair next to the ushers who were sitting in an open social area at the back of the sanctuary. There was only a small turnout of people. LeRoy had outlived most of his contemporaries, and many younger friends and associates were too old or ill to attend. Mary was seated in a wheelchair in the aisle between the front row pews. Her daughter, Jeanie Stowell, who was a year ahead of me in school, was also in a wheelchair. She had been ill with



LeRoy Nelson. Circa 1988.

Equestrienne

By Jessie Edgerton Yeazel

I cannot think that there would be no horse
For you in heaven. Surely there must be
The best celestial steed reserved and waiting
For you to ride through all eternity.

I see you racing gladly down the years,
Wind in your hair and laughter in your eyes
As once you were, vital and young and free,
Pounding the endless trails of paradise.

For when I picture you as charging gaily
Down some far roadway, singing as you go,
Pain left behind you, then I can deny
The futile grief the human heart must know.

You are released, and time can have no fences
For such as you who in ethereal pride
Down the enchanting bridle paths of heaven,
Lost to the world, will now forever ride.

polio as a child and walked with a leg brace when I knew her. At the time of the funeral, she was suffering from multiple sclerosis. When the funeral service ended and the family moved to the back of the sanctuary, they wheeled Mary and Jeanie in front of them.

I felt as though I was in a time warp when I watched Mary. I had not seen her in many years. Her hair was white, there were dark circles under her eyes, and her face and body were that of a very old woman as she sat strapped into her wheelchair. Perhaps what impressed me most was her faraway gaze, as if she didn't fully understand what was happening. In my mind, I tried to reconcile the image of Mary in the wheelchair with the Mary I remembered and with what she would have looked like when she was a beauty queen at Iowa State University where both she and LeRoy had been students. The lesson that was percolating in my soul was not that of dust to dust in regard to LeRoy but a reflection on the long journey that a popular young woman, who was healthy and robust with a full life ahead of her, had made in some 75 years to a stage of life where she had lost so much and yet still exuded a kindness and dignity.

Her daughter, Mary Le, said that Mary had osteoporosis and dementia but was aware that LeRoy had died. However, Mary Le also said that several times during the funeral activities her mother had asked, "Is this somebody we know?" Another time, Mary confided in Mary Le, "I really did like him," as though LeRoy had only been a good friend. And at other times, Mary asked various people, "Well, didn't I take good enough care of him?"

Jeanie wheeled herself directly over to me. She told me how thankful she was that I was there. She expressed how much her dad liked me and how proud he was of my efforts to document my rural heritage.

After the committal service in the old cemetery, there was a luncheon in the basement of the church. The menu included ham salad sandwiches, Jell-O salad, potato chips, and an assortment of cakes. I sat at a table with Kathy and Gary Dahl. When LeRoy's daughter, Mary Le, joined us, she told Kathy and Gary how wonderful it was that their daughters had been able to care for her parents. Gary humbly responded that it had been a meaningful experience for his daughters and that they were glad they could assist Mary and LeRoy. He also said that caring for people was something he and Kathy had tried to foster in their children. He then mentioned his mother-in-law Velma, who was currently healthy and active and lived just a short quarter mile away from their farm. He said that when the day would come when Velma needed care, his daughters—Betsy, Mercy, and Carolyn—would be there to serve their grandmother as graciously as they had served Mary and LeRoy.

In the summer of 2003, Heidi and James Roland and their children moved to the farm where Mary and LeRoy had lived for many decades. LeRoy raised purebred Aberdeen Angus cattle as well as Arabian saddle horses. The place is called Meadow Run and is just east of the cemetery. A hitching post still stands in front of the house, even though there are no longer any horses on the farm. Point of interest: LeRoy's obituary says that he enjoyed riding horses until he was 90 years old.

I am reminded that there is a lone Wealthy apple tree on the abandoned Gunderson homeplace farm. The house is gone, the barn is being torn down, and the only buildings that remain are the steel grain bins and a machine shed. The tree was planted in 1925 when Dad was seven; it is worn from age and the elements of hard weather. The apples don't look so good, but they taste great and in my opinion are the best apples for pies. When I moved back to Iowa in 1993 and visited the farm, I was surprised to see the tree there and still producing apples. In August 2002, I was at that farm the day after a windstorm of near tornado intensity. I wanted to see if the barn was still standing. Luckily, it was in fine shape. As I was about to drive out the lane and on my way, I noticed the tree. As I got out of my car and walked over to it, I could see plenty of healthy apples lying on the ground. A windfall! Most years, I am not at the homeplace when the fruit is ripe. Other times, the apples are nearly ready for harvest,

but the branches are too high to reach the fruit, even when I stand on the top of my car. And sometimes, the fruit has been on the ground for a number of days or weeks and has rotted. That year I knew that the apples were for me. I gathered them into a plastic tub from the trunk of my car and brought them back to my apartment at Gilbert.

I knew that James Roland had used his computer to develop a sharp-looking list of food products and other homemade items that Heidi wanted to sell at the farmers' market and to other clients. Apple butter was on the list, and I realized that she probably was pretty adept at making it. I called to see if I could bring her the apples I had not cut up and hire her to make apple butter. She was eager to do so. I also visited with Marjorie Harrold at her farm just a mile from my parents and gathered more apples that had freshly fallen to the ground. After that, I stopped at the farm across the road from her place where Velma and Verle Howard used to live. Brian Slama, who lives there now, gave me permission to pick apples from their tree. Later I found a farm near Laurens in the northern part of the county where I could buy some honey. Surprisingly, the woman there is a cousin of Norine Reigelsberger, who lived a quarter mile to the east of my parents before she and her husband Joe retired to town. I took the extra apples and honey to Heidi.

In the next few weeks, between her responsibilities of parenting young children and having produce ready for the West Bend farmers' market, Heidi made several small jars of apple butter and a few large jars of applesauce. I've eaten some of the apple butter, and it is awesome. Each jar is a real treasure in light of the fact that the apples are from my grandparents' farm and the farms of neighbors along my road. It is traditional Iowa cuisine, made by a fine young woman whose heritage is linked to mine in many ways. Heidi even had a surprise to report. She said that when she finished making the apple butter, she scraped the last dregs from the bottom of the pan, put them in a jar, and entered it in the Clay County Fair, one of the most prestigious county fairs in the state, if not in the nation. The end result is that her (or should I say our) apple butter got a blue ribbon. Well, here is to blue ribbon relationships and memories!



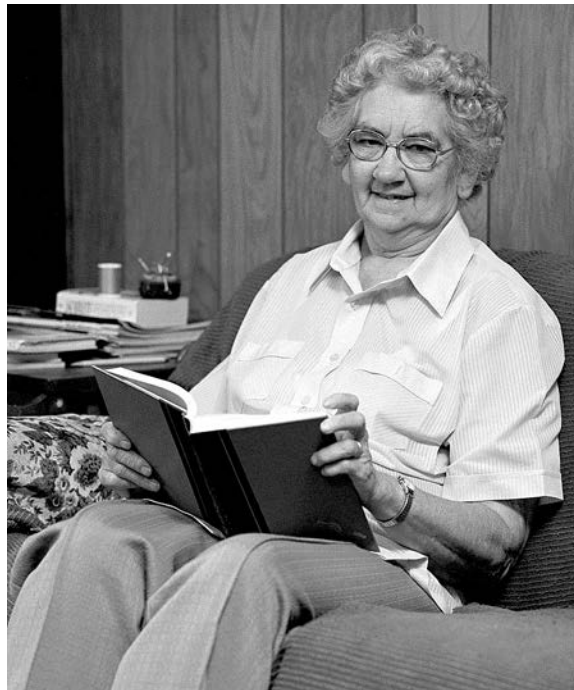
The Brinkman farm, north side of Section 18, Garfield Township. 1989.

THE NEXT FARMS ALONG THE ROAD

The Brinkman Farm

Albert and Hattie Peers and three daughters moved to Iowa from Kentucky in 1925. Albert was a hired hand first for Gus Brinkman then moved to Henry Brinkman's north farm in 1929 where a fourth daughter was born. In 1932, the Peers moved to town.

Wanda Peers Hodgell was one of Albert and Hattie's four daughters. As a young bride in the early 1940s, Wanda lived on my grandparents' farm where her husband Merle was a hired hand. Wanda says, "I have been in the position of being the hired man's daughter. I've been a tenant farmer's wife, and then we own a little land at this point, and [each role] has good points and disadvantages."



Wanda Peers Hodgell. Circa 1993.

Wanda's parents were poor. She dropped out of school after eighth grade because she was embarrassed about her clothing. However, she is the one who introduced me to the poetry of James Hearst. She says, "I have been called a snob and arrogant, but I don't think I am. Really, I have been more shy . . . but I simply have no time for idle chitchat." She talks about her connection to the land and the religious perspectives she has learned from it:

I see spring as the Easter, the new life. Summer is the growing period.
Fall is preparation for death. And then it comes around again. We revive
in the spring. There is something stable about seeing a tree and seeing
grass and knowing it will go dormant, but that it will come again.

She tells about losing a 19-year-old son in a car accident:

He left one night and never came back. And through the next spring and into the summer, there were times when I decided there was no God. But I have often thought about our burial plots in Gilmore, and had the thought that the three of us will be there, and ultimately, if we are nothing but this good black soil, that's not so bad.

I ask what season rural America is in. She responds, "I hate to believe that it is the fall, but I have an uneasy feeling it may very well be. Things have always changed, and people have always survived." She adds that some people are rigid like oak trees and others are flexible like willows and that they will adapt to change in differing ways.

I ask what her grandchildren will remember from her. She says, "It's hard to say because something you say that you think is really deep passes right over their heads. And something else you say as a side remark really impresses them. I don't know if it is so much what I say as what I do." Wanda loves Robert Frost's "Swinger of Birches" and says, "I never read that poem but that I see myself climbing up on the rocks and swinging out" over the cattle lot on the Brinkman farm.

Floyd and Naomi Page and their children moved to Rolfe in 1947 when he became a hired hand for Henry Brinkman. The Page family first lived on the Brinkman south farm, then moved to the Brinkman farm along my road until they moved away in the 1950s.

LaVonne Page Howland was the oldest of 10 children:

Father was only paid once every two weeks. So groceries were bought for two weeks at a time. I can remember my mother sitting down—she would spend the afternoon, making out the grocery list—knowing the amount of money and writing it down, so much went for this and so much for that. She knew the price of everything, figuring it out, "Oh, I can't spend that much. What do I have on here that we don't have to have?"

LaVonne didn't go to Webb's Drug Store very much:

Because if you spent a nickel there, you only got one thing, but if you went to McAnnich's, you got several things for the nickel. And they have all this penny candy. You could get five things, and you didn't eat them all at once. You would eat one now, and then you would have one for Sunday, Monday, Tuesday.

She said her father was a stubborn, independent man:

Anybody who hired him got their full money's worth. Whatever they paid him, he more than gave back to them. He was a very hard worker, and he didn't say, "Well, I hired only to work from 9 to 5" or whatever. He put in far more time and was conscientious about how he did his work.

She tells about a time when Henry Brinkman stopped at their place when her dad was taking a coffee break. Henry said, "We don't do this. You don't stop until it's time for lunch." But Floyd said he did and invited Henry to have a cup. And that's when the routine of Henry stopping for coffee began. LaVonne's mom would often have a cake.

One time, Henry had a team of horses the men couldn't handle, but that LaVonne could, and he told her the horses would be hers for doing chores. She also remembers helping animals when they delivered offspring when she was in sixth or seventh grade:



LaVonne Page Howland. 2003.

Sometimes when they're going to deliver, they get into complications, so you got to reach in and pull the pigs out. We had a calf born that I helped. It took two of us to pull. And when we got him here, he was blind, so I took him to the house and took care of him. And Henry said he was mine. I babied the calf and took the best care of him, but he couldn't make it.

I loved farming, I enjoyed being out there, even when it was cold. To this day, I love the horses. I will take the horses over a tractor any day. I would fit well with the Amish people. I hated chickens—the worst animal God ever created was a chicken on a farm.

LaVonne had to feed the chickens, gather the eggs, and hope they didn't peck her. The chickens belonged to her family, and if there were extra eggs, they would sell them:

Henry gave us a cow, and the milk was ours. And we got a hog and half a beef a year. And we always had a big garden. Our life was not perfect by any means. It was hard, very hard at times.

As brothers and sisters, they had to work together as a family. She says there was no choice. They still have deep-seated connections. She also says that because of some circumstances in her family, she was never allowed to show any feelings:

I never could give a viewpoint if I didn't agree or didn't whatever. That was just out. The farm was my outlet. The out and wide open. Nothing could find me. I wasn't penned in. If I could get off by myself, I could say what I felt, I could do what I wanted, I could let it go because the birds weren't going to say anything. If it was garden time, I would go work in the garden. I knew I couldn't undo or change anything, but it was a way of feeling better. Or maybe the barn would need cleaning or I would just go out with the livestock.

LaVonne says her attachment to farm life "is not so much to the building or the place but to the farming experience. The relationship between a human being and the farm. The raising of livestock, the raising of crops. You found your contentment in getting an apple off the tree. The meadowlarks singing. Watching the clouds and seeing things in them."

The first paid work LaVonne did was detassling. Next she worked for Merrit Bailey at the Cozy Corner Cafe, located in Rolfe on the corner where the Pronto Store now stands. She had to walk two and a half miles to work:

I loved it then. It was so busy. We would be open every night until ten, and Wednesday, Friday, and Saturday nights were just terrific. On Friday nights, there were all the hamburgers and the malts after basketball and football games. And I liked it, and that helped me overcome some of my bashfulness because you got to talk to people if you're going to wait on them. And it was the beginning of my finding out I enjoyed people.

Rolfe had several restaurants. There were four grocery stores. We had Firkin's, which was kind of a hardware-type of store, and the dime store. There was the bakery, Whitmore's. There were four or five barbers. The jewelry store. Several service stations, and the theater. Saturday nights were lots of fun. People parked all up and down the streets, and when it was warm weather, the streets were full. You could hardly get by, there was all the talking, and you could smell popcorn a-poppin'. And all the stores would be full of people. Maybe some were sitting in the car, others were out in the street, and you would hear the laughing and the calling out to one another, greeting one another. It was a fun experience.

I was fortunate in meeting Roger when I did and getting into this family because this family had love. They had their priorities straight. Love came first with material things second. They care for one another in a genuine way. When I came into the family, they accepted me for me, not what they could get out of me. But for me as a person.

Roger and LaVonne are married and live in Rolfe. He is an electrician, and she does freelance sewing and bakes cakes. In fact, she made the cakes for my 50th birthday party that

I held at the Rolfe school home economics room and gym. LaVonne loves making cakes. “A wedding cake especially. I can put so much into it. Be creative. Feel good. And it’s quiet time. There is nothing in the world but me and the cake. Sewing. I enjoy sewing. I can’t do it for as long a period of time now as I used to.”

She has served as an elder of the Shared Ministry of Rolfe, a combination of the former Methodist and Presbyterian congregations. LaVonne describes the contrast between when our grandfathers were on the farms and the way things are now:

When they were on the farm, the church was first. When you went to town, you went to the church. The church was the hub. Today, the church is last. Socially—because of modern things and transportation, and the new lifestyles—the church has become last in our calendar of importance.

Asked if she misses the farm, LaVonne quickly responds:

Oh yes, I would have been happy on the farm. I love the outdoors. I love being in God’s world. You can find a quietness. The planting of a little seed that grows into such an enormous thing and the livestock. Animals can be great friends. They rely on you but they’re good friends. Looking back for me, sure it wasn’t easy, the type of farming then, but I liked it. I enjoyed it, except I wouldn’t have chickens again.



The barn that was between the windmill and granary was cleared, and a few years later the rest of the structures were razed so the site could be tilled for a two-year rotation of corn and soybeans. Fortunately, Robert Brinkman, the farmer-owner, gave Helen a portion of the windmill ladder to use in exhibits. Circa 1990s.

The Reigelsberger Farm

Joe and Norine Reigelsberger lived on this farm until 1992, when they moved to a new house in town. Their son Mick and his wife, Sue, then moved to the farm with their four-year-old twins, Kaitlin and Joseph. Prior to the twins' arrival on the road, there had been no children or school bus on it for over ten years.

Joe's parents, Eva and Lee, bought the place in 1929. Their parents had owned land in Indiana and Missouri, but this was the first property the young couple owned. They moved here in 1930, when Joe was five. His two sisters were born on the farm that originally belonged to David and Rosa Dady, who used it as pasture. There were no row crops until after 1916. The house had been a harness shop in Rolfe and pulled out to the farm. Joe said:

During the Depression of the 1930s, we almost lost this place. We made no interest payment, paid no taxes or principal on it for about 2½ years. We didn't have the money. One of my worst fears was that the sheriff would set us out on the road—and I would hear my folks talk about the possibility—and for a little kid to think about losing his home, it's kind of traumatic.

Lenders did not take back the Reigelsberger farm because they could not turn around and sell it for as much as Joe's parents owed. Land was priced at \$65 per acre, but Eva and Lee had borrowed \$95 per acre. Joe has never forgotten his early fear of losing his home. He says, "Since then, there have been ups and downs, of course, but they haven't been nearly as traumatic as that."

Joe's family had been Republicans until they switched to the Democratic party in 1932 when Roosevelt promised a farm program. Corn had been selling at 8 to 12 cents a bushel, but the first time they sealed their corn (i.e., obtained a government loan against the corn while storing it on the farm) under the new program, the price per bushel went up to 33 cents.

As a youngster, I used to walk a quarter mile to visit the Reigelsberger family, especially Joe's sisters, Helen and Mary Therese, who let me ride their horse. Later, Dad informed us that Joe, a bachelor living with his folks, was going to get married and admonished us that we shouldn't tease him. Joe had been a Marine, serving in China during World War II. When he came back, he went to G.I. farm classes at Havelock where he met Wayne Arnold from Plover who introduced Joe to his sister, Norine, at a dance at the Ridotto Ballroom just east of Havelock.



The Reigelsberger farm, south side, Section 12, Roosevelt Township. The corncrib in the center has been razed, and a new pole building for machine storage has been built at the right behind the small tree. 1990.

After Joe and Norine married, they moved to the farm. I recall visiting them at their old two-story white house and Norine confiding in me that they were going to build a ranch-style house on the farm. Joe had given her the parameters of what they could have, then she drew up the plans and had blueprints made. She showed them to me, but said not to tell anyone. Norine was also the assistant 4-H leader and helped me clean chickens, even though she had never done it before. We learned by reading a book and asking advice from John Tiernan, a handyman from town, who was painting the corncrib at my folks' farm. He loaned us his hatchet, but Norine and I were not adept at using it and ended up with a mess.



Left photo: Norine and Joe Reigelsberger. 1953. Right photo: Norine and Joe Reigelsberger. 1996. *The Norine and Joe Reigelsberger collection.*

I also remember living at home for several months during the early 1970s and playing touch football, golfing, and fishing for bullheads with Mick and his brother, Greg.

Joe's parents subscribed to *Wallaces' Farmer* and *Iowa Homestead* magazines during the Depression. He had long been impressed with the Wallace people and the history of the Pioneer Seed Company. "Everything they said or did was to aid the farmer." Joe used their seed and figured if an opening ever came up to have a dealership, he "would leave no clod unturned" to get it. The opportunity presented itself in the early 1980s, and since then, the Reigelsbergers have had a Pioneer seed business in addition to their farming operation. Norine learned to use a computer to run the Pioneer software and to do the bookkeeping. She also does the cleaning and plans their annual Pioneer pig roast.

I asked Norine if she considered herself a farmer. She said, "No, not really." She added that she does make farm decisions now, managing land she inherited near Plover. Joe added that there was one time when Norine nearly fired him as her tenant and hired Mick. Norine teasingly responded, "I threaten a lot."

After high school, Mick took a winter farm operations course at Iowa State, then he went to Iowa Lakes College where he took electrical courses and met Sue. Mick has taken over the farming operation that includes land in Roosevelt Township and Norine's property near Plover. Sue is a clerk in the county assessor's office at the courthouse in Pocahontas but arranges her schedule so she can help Mick with farming during the busy planting and harvest seasons.

Joe and my dad have been known to collaborate on many ventures. There was the time that Joe and Norine and Dad and Mother rented a plane and flew to the World Series in Saint Louis. During one era, Joe was the Roosevelt Township Democratic committee man, Norine was the township Democratic committee woman, Dad was the township Republican committee man, and Mother was the township Republican committee woman. Before Dad retired at the age of 57 in 1976, he and Joe worked together to plant their crops. In 1990, Joe wanted to plant his Pioneer demonstration plot on land directly across the road from his building site, on land that was part of Mother's and Dad's farm. Dad and Joe made the deal, and my parents' renters, Dan and Roger Allen from town, did the work. All parties involved seemed to be proud of the plot and thought it nearly a work of art. Currently, the Reigelbergers have their demonstration plot on their own land.



Reigelsberger test plot. 2001.

In September 1992, two months before they moved to town, I interviewed Joe and Norine at their farm. We talked briefly about the church. I asked Joe about the connections he saw between the Sacrament of Mass and his everyday work. I also asked what kinds of things he thought about when he was planting and harvesting, whether he reflected on spiritual issues or had common, ordinary thoughts. He sidestepped the question about the relationship of church and work but talked about what went on in his mind when he drove the combine:

Oh, just common, ordinary thinking. There's enough noise and rattles. It's about like driving in the city on a thoroughfare that's got about five lanes of traffic, and you have never been on that stretch of road before, and you're looking for road signs. You're pretty fully occupied. So you really don't get much of a chance to lay back and relax and just drift in thought. You've got to stay on the ball the whole time and think about what you're doing, or the first thing you're going to do is pick up a small rock, or be off the row, or something of the like.

I also asked Joe and Norine about their decision to move to town. Norine said:

I guess we felt that Mick and Sue needed to be out here since he is doing the farming, and as we get older, I don't really care to be stuck out here in the country. We felt we needed a house that was all on one floor in case one of us became disabled or something—and we would still be

able to live in the house—maybe keep us from the nursing home a year or two longer. (Chuckle) Not a very pleasant thought, but those are all things you have to think of when you get to be our age. Mainly, we felt that Mick and Sue needed to be out here—and that they wanted to be out here—and they should be. Just like when Joe and I got married, his folks left the farm, and we moved out here. It's kind of a cycle that you go through, and this is the time for us to move on.

The best news about the Reigelsbergers, as far as I am concerned, is twofold. One is a profound sense of observing cycles and watching Mick, the lithe kid I played football with, now in his late 30s, meeting the challenges of farming and being a parent. The other is that Kaitlin and Joseph are new faces on the road, and it is fun to watch them grow and get to know them. Norine says, "If now is any indication, little 'Joe' is going to be a farmer because he is out with Mick working all the time."



Above: Mick Reigelsberger on left and Greg Reigelsberger on right playing football at Helen's parents' farm. Early 1970s. Below: Joseph (left) and Kaitlin (right) Reigelsberger in the Reigelsberger warehouse. 1994.





Photos, opposite, top left: Sign for Reigelsberger seed business. Circa 2000. Opposite, top right: Joseph and Kaitlin wait for school bus. 1994. Opposite, middle, left: Joseph and Kaitlin dressed for snow. 1996. Opposite, middle right: Kaitlin and Joseph on the combine. 1998. Opposite, bottom: The school bus arrives. 1994. This page top left: A rural street sign with fallow Reigelsberger field in the background. This page, top right: Norine and Joe's mailbox when they lived on the farm. 1992. This page, bottom: The mailbox that Dan Allen made for Mick and Sue. 1994.



Corncribs at the farm where Helen grew up. North side of Section 13, Roosevelt Township. 2001.

THE FARM WHERE HELEN GREW UP

The farm where I grew up is not the Gunderson homeplace. Instead our homeplace, where Great-Grandpa and Great-Grandma settled in 1881 and Grandpa and Grandma lived until the 1950s, is three miles south. Mother and Dad, my older sister, my brother, and I moved here in 1945. I was five months old.

The farm had been the home of David and Rosa Dady who bought it in the 1880s. My grandfather bought it in 1939. The oldest building on the place is a small wooden one that was the Dady carriage shed. Dad used it as a shop until he built a Quonset building for his welding and other mechanical work. The next oldest building is the round, brick corncrib that was built in 1922. I have become accustomed to it standing unused and obsolete—a monument, but it has been harder to adjust to the status of the barn and wooden corncrib I “helped build” when I was a youngster.

A wind of tornado intensity tore into the roof of the barn in the 1980s. Dad dismantled the top section, then had the whole building torn down, making way to put a large, green government Quonset building from town on the concrete foundation for equipment storage. The tall, red, wooden crib built when I was five still stands but is not used except to store old cars in the alleyway. There have been no cows, pigs, or sheep on the farm for 25 years, and now there are no cats and dogs except for stray cats.

We used to have several tractors, new and old, mainly John Deere, but also Grandpa’s Model M Farmall. Dad eventually sold all his farm implements. For awhile, he regretted selling his red GMC truck, but it had reached a point where he couldn’t justify the costs of keeping it repaired. He did purchase a tractor, a Model C Farmall for mowing the yard, but it became cantankerous, and in 2002, he deeded it over to his tenants.



Helen’s Dad’s GMC truck and a flatbed trailer loaded with tile for a field drainage project. Circa 1979.

I remember that Dad was almost always working on a project in his shop, running errands in his truck, or working in the fields on a tractor or combine. Those activities were a big part of Dad's identity, but the man and the farm have changed. He has slowed down but still does projects and runs errands, such as surveying a field to find a broken tile line.

Dad has been an ardent fan of Iowa State University athletics and in the 1970s built a statue of the university mascot—a cardinal bird named Cy—that he designed and welded in his shop using scrap metals. He had the statue painted in brilliant red and gold colors and delivered it to Iowa State where it stood in the stadium for several years. Eventually, the university no longer had a use for the statue, and Dad's rendition of Cy is now stored in one of his machine sheds. It is rusted with dull red and gold colors and a bit of pigeon dung.

My parents' farmyard is quiet and empty except when Mother and Dad's renters, Dan and Roger Allen, are operating machinery. I've known Dan and Roger since childhood. Even though they grew up a few miles away on another road, their farm was in the same section as

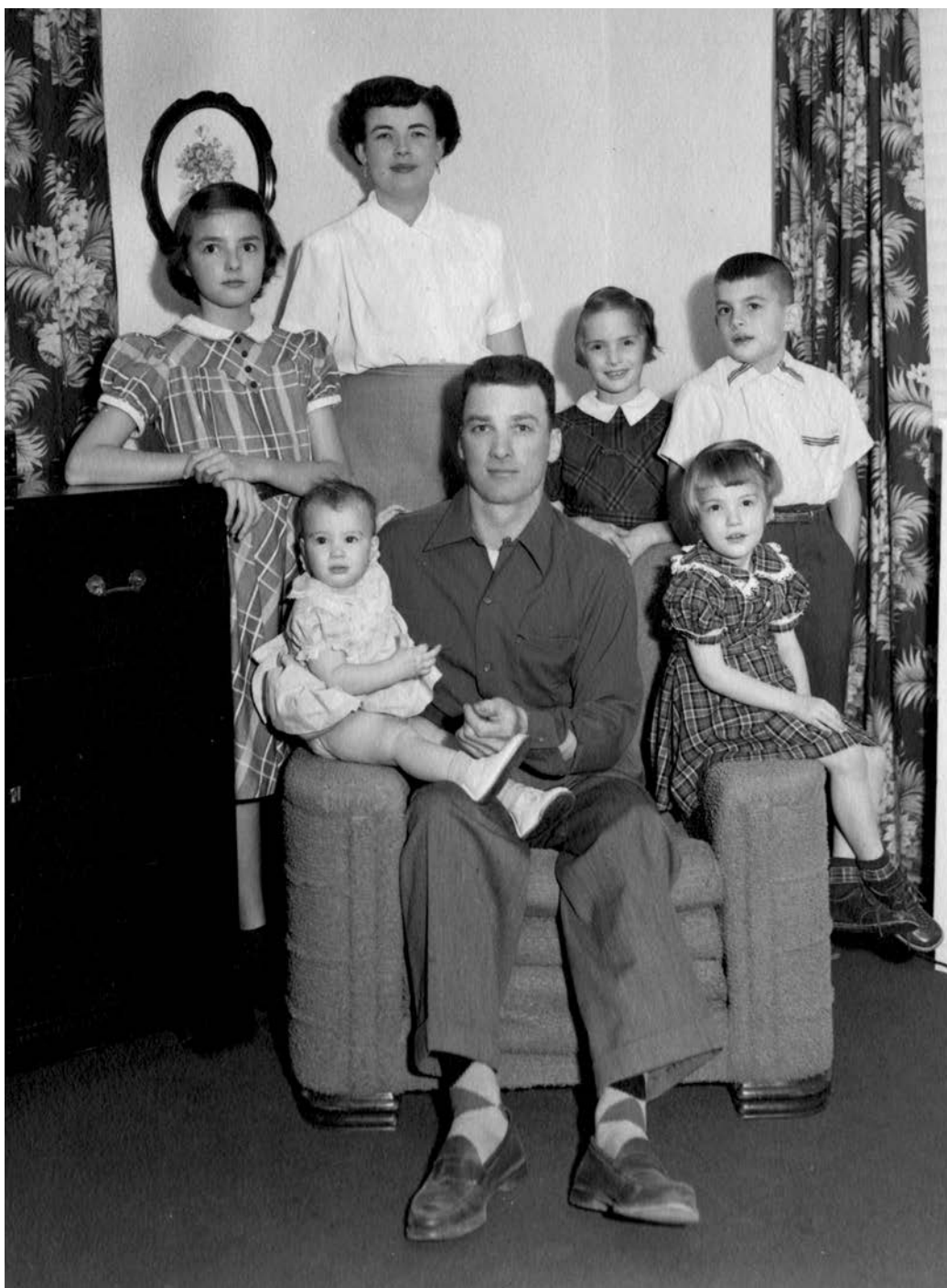


ours, and we were part of the same rural neighborhood and school bus route. In fact, the place where they grew up has been cleared and is now part of the fields of corn and beans that the Allen boys (as my parents call Dan and Roger) farm for Mother and Dad.

After all is said and done, and in spite of the fine, efficient, and responsible farm work that Dan and Roger provide, not to mention the mutual respect they and my parents have for each other, I still find it disconcerting to see the end of an era of farming for our family.



Photo at left: Deane Gunderson near his shop with his rendition of the bird named Cy that is the Iowa State University mascot. Circa 1975. Photo above: The barn that was built when Helen was a young child is on the left side of the photo. It had been heavily damaged by wind in the 1980s. Deane thought he could preserve the bottom half of the barn and make it useful. However, it was eventually razed and replaced by a large, green Quonset building that he purchased from the co-op, which had purchased it from the federal government. The United States Department of Agriculture had used it a few decades ago for storing surplus corn. The Quonset building was moved from town to the farm where Deane had retrofitted the concrete foundation of the barn to accommodate the new addition. 1989.



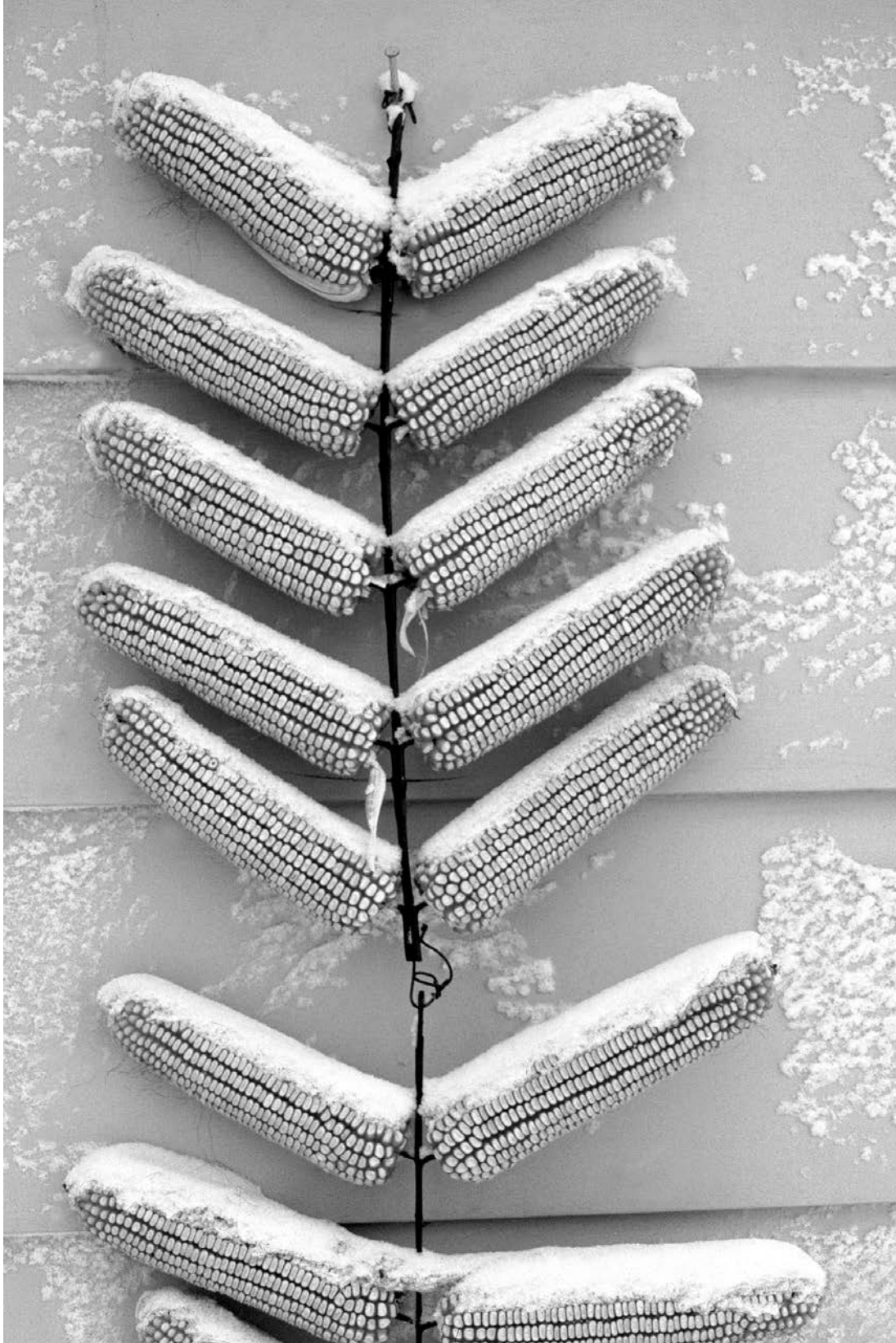
Helen says, "This is my favorite portrait of my family. Perhaps it is because of Dad's argyle socks or that I had a simple haircut and a genuine smile." Back row left to right: Clara, Mother, Helen, Charles. Front row left to right: Peggy, Dad, Martha. The youngest Gunderson sibling, Louise, was born in 1955. Circa 1952. *The Deane and Marion Gunderson collection.*



The Gunderson family gathered at the Rolfe Public Library for an open house honoring Marion Gunderson for more than 30 years of service to the library. Left to right: Marti Carlson (Largo, Florida), Louise Shimon (Perry, Iowa), Helen Gunderson (Gilbert, Iowa), Marion & Deane Gunderson, Clara Hoover (Millard, Nebraska), Charles Gunderson (Rolfe), and Peggy Moore (Canton, Michigan). 1998.



Top photo: The yard light is a sentinel between the garage of the Gunderson home and the buildings on the right that have served as Deane's machine shops. Circa 1994. Bottom photo: Gunderson farm buildings. Left to right: round brick corncrib, gasoline tank on posts, small building where Deane raised hogs, tall wooden corncrib, and metal grain bins. 2003.



Snowflakes and ears of corn on an antique corn dryer that Marion used for decoration near the main entrance to her home. 1989.



Tulips. 1968.



Bunny rabbit. Circa 1949.



Horses. 1956.



Gunderson farm. 1948.



Marion Abbott Gunderson. 1941.



Raggedy Ann doll. 1961.

Marion Gunderson's Art¹

My mother, Marion Abbott Gunderson, has lived on the farm where I grew up ever since she and Dad moved there in 1945. Mother was raised in Ogden, Utah; however, her family's history in Iowa predates the Gunderson lineage in the state. Her mother, Helen Loomis, was the daughter of a Sioux City railroad dispatcher, valedictorian of her high school class, and attended Iowa State College, where she met Jim Abbott from Utah. Helen and Jim married then lived in Utah, where he was a chemist at a cement company before working in the family wholesale hardware business. One set of Jim's grandparents had lived in Iowa as early as the late 1850s.

As a teenager, Mother dreamed of going to an art school such as the Chicago Institute of Art; however, her parents talked her into enrolling someplace more "practical." That was Iowa State where Helen and Jim had met and Mother would major in applied art and meet Dad. Mother spoke of her early interest in art:

I became interested in art when I was a young child. It was during the Depression years, and I was thrilled to get a new box of crayons. One day the babysitter and I searched the house for enough money to buy a new box. Another vivid memory is of the time when my mother and I rode the train from Ogden to Sioux City, probably a two- or three-day trip. I had a new box of crayons and a new coloring book. Nothing could have pleased me more.

1. Marion Gunderson entered the Rolfe Care Center shortly after this biography was written in August 2003.



The Reigelsberger farm, watercolor painting by Marion Gunderson. 1957.

During junior and senior high, Mother was always able to schedule art classes. She said that she learned most of the basics from her high school teacher, LeConte Stewart, a renowned artist from Utah. When she enrolled at Iowa State, Mother was already in tune with much of what was being taught in the art classes. In those days, the art program was part of the College of Home Economics, and the art majors took all the courses—chemistry, nutrition, home management, etc.—that were required of other home economics students. While at Iowa State, Mother had the fortune to study under the university’s beloved sculptor, Christian Petersen. She remembers, “I was not very successful but got an A in the class because he expected all of us to do our best work, and we did the best we could do.” Regarding her vision for life after graduation, Mother said:

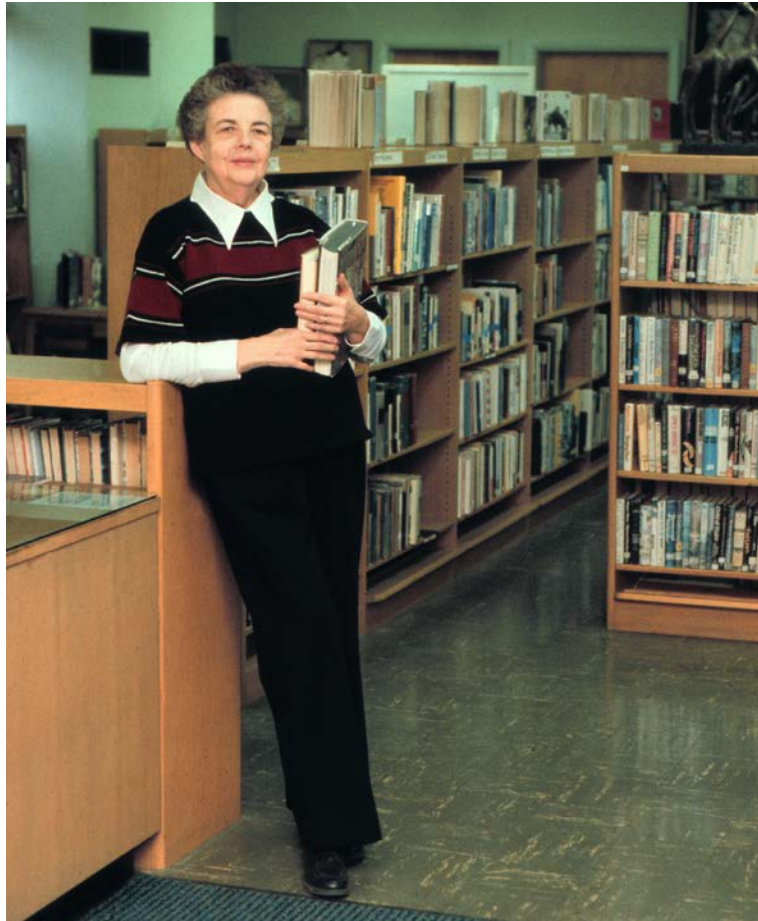
I don’t know what I thought I would or could do with an applied art degree when I was out of college. Fortunately I didn’t have to make that decision. For the most part, my painting and art pursuits have been purely for my own entertainment.

Mother also had the opportunity to study art during her early years in the Rolfe area. She acknowledged that the person who influenced her the most as a watercolorist was Cathrine Barr, a professional artist and watercolorist from Connecticut who spent summers visiting relatives and giving watercolor lessons in Rolfe. Mother claimed:

I learned almost everything I know about watercolors from Cathrine. Her classes were about six weeks long and often on location. At one time, she had 50 or more students from Rolfe and surrounding areas. During those years, I was a mother of six children but found time to paint and did most of my solo painting at night. I especially loved to paint floral scenes but found still life items as well as buildings and landscapes that interested me. Cathrine’s classes evolved into the Barr Art Association. The students I remember most from those days are Darlene Brinkman and Lena Vaughn from Rolfe and Percy VanAlstine from Gilmore City.

Mother exhibited her paintings with the Fort Dodge Art Guild, at the Iowa State University Memorial Union and other galleries, and with Darlene Brinkman at the Mason City Public Library. Mother has also enjoyed other media such as batik, acrylic painting, and crewel stitchery. She continues to paint occasionally with my sister, Martha, during her visits at the farm.

When the popular movie *The Music Man* was released in 1962, Mother saw it and was impressed with the spunky love song that the smooth-talking traveling salesman, Professor Harold Hill, sang to the River City librarian, Marian Paroo. She thought to herself, “Mmm, Marion the Librarian—why not.” A vacancy opened at the Rolfe Public Library in 1963, and she began working as an assistant to the head librarian, Flossie DeVaul. Mother earned \$10 a month during her first year at the library and within a couple of years was making \$25 a month. Her motivation was the work itself and serving the community. She continued at the library and was the director until she retired in 1998. She claims that she loved every minute that she devoted to the library. She also has personalized license plates on her car that say “LIBRARY.”



Marion Gunderson at Rolfe Public Library. Circa 1979.

In 1947, Mother and Dad were charter members of a group that played bridge in the various members' homes on a monthly basis. It was simply known as Couples' Club. After 42 years, many members had either died or moved away from the Rolfe area, and the club disbanded in 1989. Mother was also a member of various women's groups, including the P.E.O. Sisterhood and Sorosis. In 1970, she cochaired a flea market sponsored by Rolfe women's groups to raise money to build the town's first and only public swimming pool. Three decades later, Mother provided the impetus, through a financial gift and vision for a new library, to the fund-raising efforts for a new community center. Construction began in January 2003. The building is designed to house a library, city offices, and a large meeting room. Mother has also been an ardent genealogist and developed a substantial archive of local history materials at the library.

When her children were growing up, Mother taught the junior high arts and crafts class for the Presbyterian vacation bible school and served as a Cub Scout and girls' 4-H leader. There are also numerous other ways she has served the community and the state, including membership on some Iowa State University alumni boards.

Certainly Mother's home is no stereotypical farm home. Its aesthetic appearance and fine interior design and furnishings are testaments to her background as an artist and librarian. She had learned to use a computer through her work as a librarian, and in about 1985 bought an Apple IIe long before many of her children had computers. As an octogenarian, she uses it both for genealogical projects and correspondence with family and friends.

Her travels away from her home are becoming less frequent. She and Dad play duplicate bridge on Wednesday afternoons in Fort Dodge, occasionally go out for dinner to Garland's broasted chicken restaurant in Rolfe, and are often on the road to medical appointments in Ames and other Iowa towns. She seldom goes to her Lake Okoboji cottage, some 70 miles northwest of Rolfe, but coordinates a schedule for her children, grandchildren, and friends to enjoy to the place during the summer.

As Mother has grown older, there have been times when she expressed a desire to move from the farm, perhaps to Ames. In fact, she and Dad lived there for two winters during the 1970s, house sitting for a couple who had gone to Arizona. However, Mother continues to live on the farm, partially because she is accustomed to the place and has superb support from the small-town community that she might not have in Ames. Also, she has apparently reconciled herself to the fact that Dad is reluctant to live any place other than on the farm.



Bushel basket and clay pots. Date unknown.



Gunderson farm. 1975.



The Gunderson farm. 1952.

POCAHONTAS COUNTY

Farmer of the Week

8-Row Planter Used on Roosevelt Township Farm¹

One of the things which has made America what it is, and what has made this country's standard of living continue to climb year after year is the continuous search for and discovery of better and more economical methods and equipment. That is particularly true in the field of agriculture.

Rising costs of production and smaller gross incomes have made it even more essential that agriculture look for cheaper means of production.

One such method was developed on the Deane Gunderson farm in Roosevelt township. Deane developed an eight-row cornplanter which he used in planting some 525 acres of corn this spring.

The planter represents some 200 hours of work by the 35-year-old "Farmer of the Week." He started working on the project shortly after the first of the year and, incidentally, did all of the work on his own place with the exception of \$1.25 worth of machine work done elsewhere.

Two four-row planters were attached. The check-rod between them was connected with a universal mechanism from another type machine. The check-wire for a regular four-row is strong enough, incidentally, to trip the eight-row.

One of the problems Deane had to overcome was the hitch for the planter. It was necessary to make it light, strong and yet portable. The hitch also is equipped with two wheels and serves as a trailer for the hitch rods and markers when the machine is being transported.

Another problem was getting the markers long enough and strong enough without making them bear too heavily on the planter's lifting mechanism.

The eight-row is assembled and disassembled in a hurry—about fifteen minutes' time, and the two four-row machines are disengaged, attached one behind the other with the hitch assembly on the rear of the second four-row and it's ready for the road.

The eight-row planter, by the way, isn't the only time-saver Gunderson has developed since he started farming in 1946. He has a tractor-mounted oats seeder which he made himself with which it's a relatively simple matter to seed 85 acres of oats in an afternoon. The seeder consists of a regular endgate seeder, fed by two large hoppers which hold about 60 bushels of seed.



Deane Gunderson. 1954.

Another time-saver is a large wire-frame built on top of a manure spreader which eliminates double handling of corn cobs when shelling. The cobs are loaded directly into the spreader from the sheller and hauled out at once.

1. This article is from the *Pocahontas Record Democrat* on May 27, 1954, and is used with verbal permission from editor Brooks Taylor. Dad's portrait was taken circa 1954 when he was campaign chairman for Republican Leo Hoegh, who was running for second term as governor of Iowa.

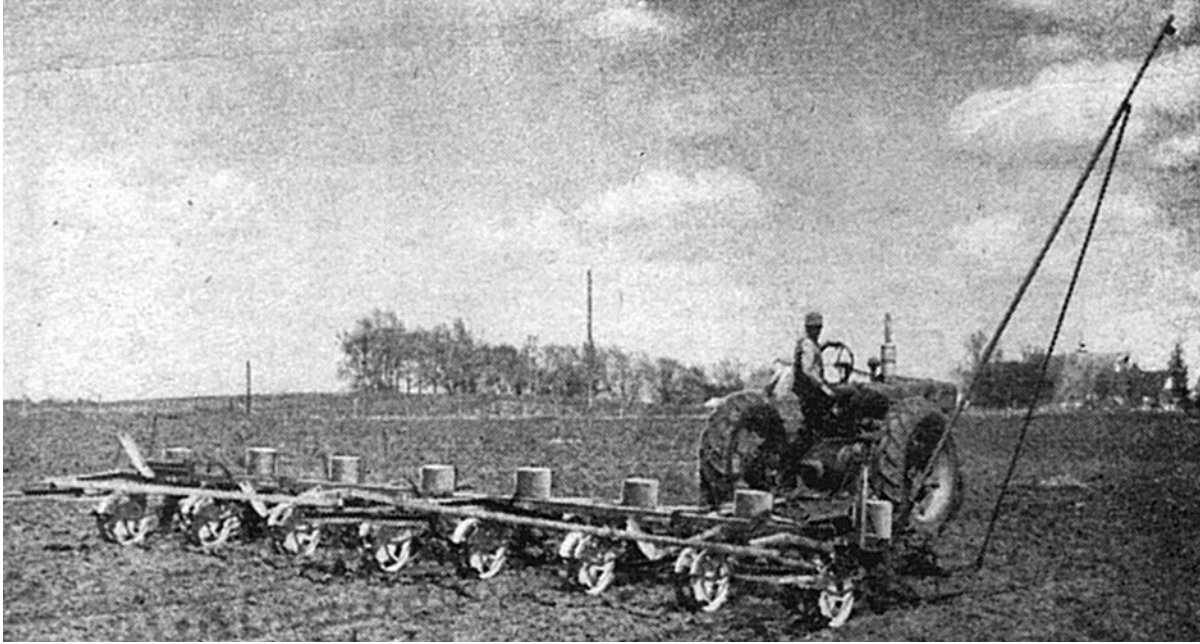


Photo of Deane Gunderson on his Model M Farmall with his 8-row cornplanter. 1956. *The Iowa Farm and Home Register*.

Deane's next project will be a practical corn dryer which will make it possible to pick some of the corn earlier before it has a chance to drop from the stalk. Perhaps after that a picker sheller, possibly a four-row outfit.

Gunderson operates about 800 acres of land. He actually owns 200 acres and rents the remainder from his father, John C. Gunderson. He has one full-time hired man and occasionally hires some part time help. Of course, he has the equipment necessary for that size farming operation—two MD Farmall tractors, a cornpicker, combine, four-row cultivators, etc.

On the land he operates, he will have 425 acres of corn, 225 acres of oats and the remainder in hay and pasture this year. All the oats are seeded with Mammoth Red Clover as green manure crops and the ground to be fall-plowed is covered with bulk-spread commercial fertilizer. All second-year corn ground is side-dressed with nitrogen at the second or third cultivation.

Deane has 61 head of feeder cattle at the present time. He likes to buy calves every other fall, have them on grass through the summer, in the cornfields in the fall, then on full feed and sold in the spring. His present cattle were bought in Oct., 1952, at about 350 pounds

and now weigh about 1150 and are ready for market. The last 100 days they are fed shelled corn, protein and prairie hay in dry lot. Pasture is kept down two years, being plowed down the second year.

Gunderson is a strong advocate of fall pigs farrowed on pasture with a minimum of investment in equipment. He expects to have about 65 sows farrowing the last of this September. He does have a few spring litters—and has Farmers Hybrid stock.

Deane was born on a farm two miles south of the one where he now lives. He's lived in the same community all his life with the exception of the time spent at Iowa State College earning a pair of engineering degrees and the five years spent with the engineering staff of John Deere at Waterloo.

He's township chairman of the Roosevelt Community Chest, Republican precinct chairman and a trustee of the Rolfe Presbyterian church. He's also president of the alumni corporation of Pi Kappa Alpha fraternity chapter at Ames, which consists of some 400 members.

Deane and Mrs. Gunderson have five children: Clara, 11; Charles, 10; Helen, 9; Martha, 5; and Margaret, 2.



The Cornwell home is loaded on a rig of steel beams and wheels for its move from the farm to the town of Rolfe. 1989.

THE MIDDLE FARMS

The Cornwell Farm

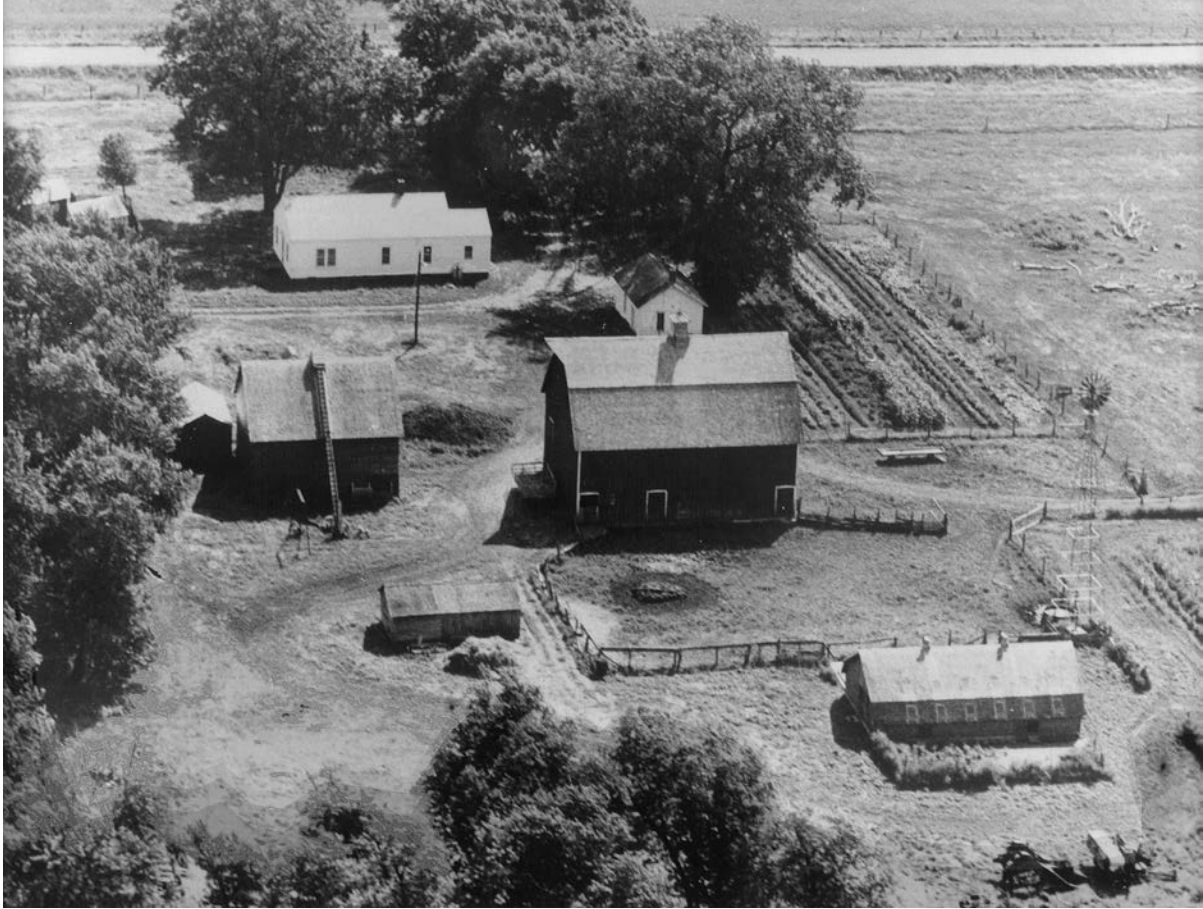
Irving and Velma Cornwell lived with their daughter, Joy, on the farm that Irving's grandfather, Melvin Cornwell, bought in 1895. It is the third Century Farm along the road, and there won't be another until 2020. Irving and Velma now are deceased. Their house was moved to town in 1989, and their farm fields are alternatively planted to corn and beans.

Joy was the valedictorian of the Rolfe High School class of 1964. She did her undergraduate work at Upper Iowa University in Fayette and completed a master's degree at the University of Missouri in Columbia. She married Doug Palmer. The couple lives on a farm near Forest City and raised two daughters. For several years, Joy drove 200 miles round trip each week to Rochester, Minnesota, where she lived and worked for two and a half days, cataloging medical journals at the Mayo Medical Library. She continues to own the farm where she grew up and rents the land to a neighborhood farmer.

Irving's father's mother was Dorothy Wiegman. In 1888, Dorothy's parents, Herman and Elizabeth, moved to the farm at the far west end of our road. They sold it in 1913. Herman had a sister, Anna Marie Margaret Wiegman, who married Diederick Brinkman, a pioneer patriarch in the area. That means Joy is connected to the large clan of Brinkman cousins, including Kathy Dahl and Robert Brinkman who live on the highway not far from the east end of the road.



Left to right: Irving, Joy, and Velma Cornwell at a farm auction. Irving and Velma are deceased, and Joy Cornwell Palmer lives in the Forest City area with her husband and two daughters. Circa 1977.



Top photo: The Cornwell Farm, northeast corner, Section 14, Roosevelt Township. The camera faces east, southeast. Circa 1955. *The Joy Cornwell Palmer collection*. Bottom photo: This photo was taken from about the same place and angle as the photo above. The Cornwell land is in the lower right quadrant from the intersection but all the buildings and other signs of the Cornwell farmstead have been cleared. The Reigelsberger farm is on the left in the distant part of the photo, and the farm where Helen grew up is on the right. Circa 1996.



Hayrake seat and tines at Cornwell farm auction. Circa 1977.

The Harrold Farm

Marjorie and Paul Harrold, mother and son, have had the most diversified farm operation along the road. Paul was six years behind me in school and has one sister, Paulelda, who is married and is a food and nutrition specialist with the Iowa State University Extension Service in Fort Dodge.

Marjorie Davis and two of her three brothers, Milton and Melvin, moved to the place with her parents in 1942, shortly after buying the farm. It was the first land they owned. That summer, Milton cultivated the crops with horses while Melvin cultivated with a tractor. In October, Milton went into the military, and in November, Melvin married and moved to a farm two miles away but farmed in partnership with his dad. With her brothers gone, Marjorie learned to be a chore person. Later she met Faber Harrold at a dance. The two married and moved into a small house her father had moved onto the farm, across the lane from the big house. Faber and Mr. Davis farmed in partnership until the older couple moved to Fort Dodge in 1952. Then Faber and Marjorie moved into the big house, rented the farm, and supported their family on their 50 percent share of her parents' 240 acres.

After Paul graduated from Rolfe, he took an 11-month farm power course at Iowa Central Community College in Fort Dodge then worked for Robinson's John Deere dealership in Rolfe. He set up new planters and combines and helped farmers who bought them adjust and start using the machinery. In 1976, he began farming with his dad on land they owned and rented. Faber died in November 1989, leaving Paul and Marjorie the challenge of keeping up the farm work. Paul does the bulk of the farming while Marjorie gardens, mows the large lawn, and manages the household. Occasionally, she works for Paul, for instance, driving their Model M Farmall tractor and pulling a rack of hay bales home from the field.



Davis family. Front, left to right: Gladys, Marjorie, Elmer. Back: Milton, Melvin, and Marion Edgar. 1937. *The Marjorie Harrold collection.*



Above: The Harrold home, south side, Section 11, Roosevelt Township. 1989. Below: The Harrold family. Faber in back, then left to right: Paul, Marjorie, and Paulelda. 1958. *The Harrold collection*.

Paul farms approximately 800 acres, including Velma and Verle Howard's farm across the road and land at the west end of the road that he bought from the Mildred and Arlo Ives family. At times, Paul teams with area farmers, hires a retired farmer, or arranges for young men to work with him.

Paul used to have 250–300 hogs and 80–100 head of cattle. He would buy young feeder pigs from local farmers and yearling heifers at sale barns, then finish the pigs and cattle out, and sell them when grown. When corn prices got high, and it became too costly to feed pigs and cattle, he decreased the number of livestock he had on the farm. Often he has no pigs because hog factories have emerged in the county and forced independent farmers out of the business of breeding and selling young feeder pigs. He could buy young pigs from the hog factories, but their price is too high. Occasionally, though, he will custom-grow 350 feeder pigs for Chamness Swine of north central Iowa.

Paul no longer has any cattle; however, he practically lived with his livestock during





Paul Harrold standing by his Model 4020 Diesel John Deere tractor. 2003.

the 100-year heat wave in 1995. He watered the hogs and let them wallow in mud for protection from the heat. But the cattle got stressed, and their tongues hung out from the heat. Paul had two buildings on the farm that he seldom used except when he lined up cattle to implant them. So during the heat wave, he opened the buildings to give the cattle shade. Then his neighbor, Verle Howard, brought two fans from his farm. One was from the alleyway of his crib that he used during corn shelling to create a breeze for the workers. Paul put the fans in his sheds and set up a sprinkler system so the cattle could get shade, breeze, and a spray of water. Paul was also cultivating crops and would ride his three-wheeler back to check on the cattle every two hours. Fortunately, none died.

It wasn't the first year that severe weather hit their farm. One instance was in 1980 when a wind blew their barn away, scattering debris south across the Howard farm. Another crisis came on Labor Day of 1983 when a hailstorm wiped out their corn and soy beans. Before the storm, it had looked like there would be a bumper crop. After the storm, there was nothing in the fields but stubble.

When Paul and Paulelda were young, the supper hour was a time for the family to discuss what was happening at school. They have continued to make a point of talking things over. The day after the hailstorm, the family sat around the round oak table in their kitchen and talked things out. They are quiet, unassuming, private people with a subtle sense of humor, basic wisdom, commitment to hard work, and close ties built on a tradition of solving problems together.

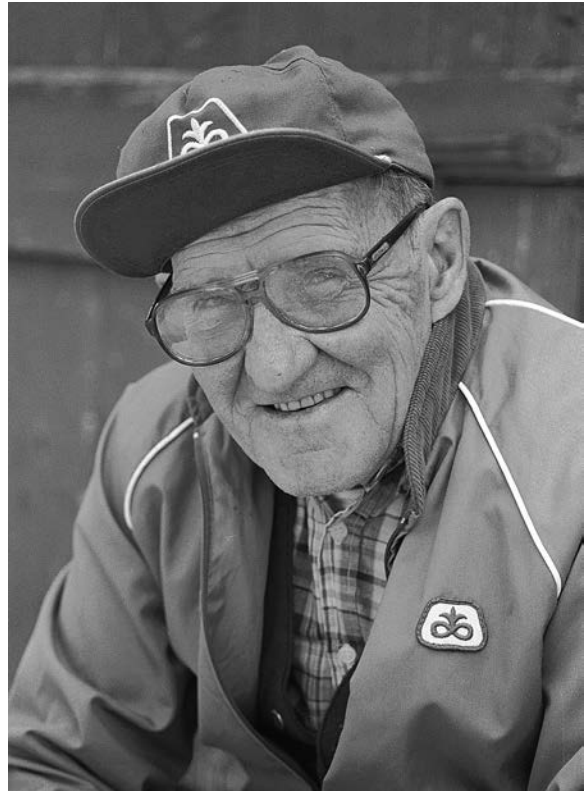
With no livestock and no livestock chores to do, Paul has more leisure time. In 2001, he used it to paint the Model M Farmall he bought in the 1970s from his neighbor Irving Cornwell and to restore a 1952 Chevrolet pickup truck. Marjorie has always been a seamstress, sewing most of Paul and Paulelda's clothes when they were young. However, now with her hands becoming arthritic, her sewing projects are mainly machine-pieced quilts. Marjorie does a significant amount of gardening. Paul says she has always had potatoes and that in recent years, she has begun growing cauliflower and broccoli. Marjorie added, "I grew all the vegetables, peas, and beans. Most of the time we had a strawberry bed and strawberries to can." When I asked if she had any favorite poetry, scripture, or activity to turn to when she wanted solace she said, "I go to the garden and hoe. Lots of times you can think over things and by the time you get through, you have it figured out."



Top photo: Marjorie and tomatoes from her garden. 1994. Bottom: Cattle at the Harrold farm. 1989.

The Howard Farm

Before moving to town in 1998, Velma and Verle Howard lived across the road from the Harrolds on a 160-acre farm. It was one that Verle and his two sisters inherited from his folks who had moved to the farm in 1940 after purchasing it in 1939. At one time, Verle rented an additional 160 acres west of his place but never got into big-time farming. He says that he was able to survive in farming because he “never bought a lot of expensive machinery but kept wiring the old equipment together with baling wire.” Finally, in 1992, he retired from farming and rented the land to Paul Harrold.



Left: Velma Howard. 1990. Right: Verle Howard. 1993.

Velma and Verle were married in 1947. He worked for rural power companies while she did bookkeeping and stenography work. In 1953, they moved to the Philippines where Verle took a job as a power plant supervisor with the Voice of America. In 1962, they moved back to the States, making their home on the farm and raising six children who have all left the area.

Even though they no longer own the building site, Velma and Verle’s farm is the homeplace to their children. When their family held reunions at the farm, Velma says, “it was sheer bedlam.” They set up two campers and a tent. The adults sat around and ate and talked. The grandchildren played with toys, got out the badminton and horseshoe sets, and built forts in the haymow.

I began to get to know Velma and Verle in the fall of 1989 when I asked if I could photograph their farm. Since then, I have photographed their last season of picking corn and shelling it the following summer. I have had several cups of coffee at their round oak kitchen table and picked apples from their two apple trees. Velma has given me advice on things such as planting asparagus, and Verle has helped me do things such as measure their barn and make

a platform for my camera so I could photograph the haymow. Theirs is the last barn along the road. Almost every time I leave their place, Velma says, "Hurry back."

Velma has a garden and used to raise chickens. She tells about how in 1990, while she was still a cook at the nursing home in Pocahontas, she decided not to dress chickens anymore:

That winter, I made the decision, after we had talked about it, and Verle agreed and went along with me. So that spring, he said, "How many chickens should we order?" I said, "Don't order any. I'm not dressing chickens this year." Not too long after that at work one day, a co-worker, Marian Kuchenreuther said, "You tell Verle to order some extra chickens, because Al wants some."

I said, "What are you talking about, we're not having chickens." "Oh yes," she said. "Verle told Al he ordered the chickens." Needless to say, there was a little blue smoke around when I got home from work. But I refused to dress chickens, so Verle had to find someone to dress chickens that fall. [In the years before that] I picked the chickens out of the shed, hung them on the line, and cut their heads off. Did the whole thing until he took over. Then we got the people from West Bend.

Verle has often played tricks on some of the neighboring farmers like Mick Reigelsberger and Dan and Roger Allen, and they have played jokes on him. One day Verle came home from town and was looking for his riding mower. He looked everywhere but couldn't find it. Later, he discovered Mick and Roger had hung it from the ceiling of his shop.



The Howard family homeplace farm, north side, Section 14, Roosevelt Township. 1996.

When I asked about the spirit of cooperation in the neighborhood, Velma said, "In this community, you never have to ask." Verle added, "If somebody is in trouble and needs help, you don't have to ask. They're here." Then Velma told about their third child, Monte, president of the high school student council, who fell from an elevator silo at Bradgate where he was part of a construction crew in 1970. "When Monte was killed, we didn't have all of our beans walked. His friends went and walked our beans and didn't even tell us that they did it. Others told us then that the kids had been out and walked our beans. Now that's called help without asking."

Velma and Verle's other son, Randy, died of cancer at his home in Chicago in 2001. Their oldest daughter Joy died following a short illness at her home in 'Aiea, Hawaii, in 2003.

The Howards sold their acreage, which includes 3.5 acres of land and the buildings, to Brenda and Brian Slama in 1998. Brenda and Brian have remodeled the house. She is a mechanical engineer and works for a company in Laurens, Iowa. He is a construction worker. On November 24, 2002, they had a baby girl named Josee.

Brian occasionally helps Paul Harrold with harvest and other projects. Sometimes Paul comes with his tractor and shovels the snow for Brenda and Brian. Paul also uses the barn and a machine shed on the place.



Above photo: The Howard home. 1989. Photos on opposite page are of the Howard kitchen. In this road project, it has been interesting to discover so many residents and former residents who have round oak tables in their homes. 1998.





Details from the Howard kitchen a few weeks before Velma and Verle moved to town. 1998.







POCAHONTAS COUNTY

Farmer of the Week

Some of Best Corn in County on Howard Farm¹

Year after year, some of the best corn produced in Pocahontas County is raised on the Harry Howard farm in Roosevelt township. The Howard farm, located four miles east and four miles north of Pocahontas, is 160 acres in size and has been owned by the Howards since 1940.

Credit for the above-normal corn yields on the place is due to several things. First off, Harry follows a practical field-rotation plan which gives his ground an opportunity to recover the elements and tilth it necessarily loses when planted to corn. Second, Howard makes good use of livestock manure and commercial fertilizers. Third, he plants heavier than normal plantings.

This year, Harry had 55 acres of corn, 55 acres of oats, 25 acres of beans and the remainder in pasture and hayland. He uses a red clover alfalfa mixture for his pasture that has proved particularly good for ranging hogs. He rotates his fields each year.

Harry raises about 250 hogs each year and feeds about 40 head of cattle annually. As a result, he's sold corn off the farm only twice since operating it. In 1939, he sold the crop off and last year he sold about 1,100 bushels. Because of his livestock feeding program, he's probably purchased a good many times that amount of corn in addition to his homegrown grain for feed.

Commercial fertilizers play an important role in Howard's high-yielding corn crops. Harry generally uses about 100 pounds to the acre of starter fertilizer when he plants the crop. Then he applies ammonium nitrate when he lays the corn by at the rate of 70 pounds to the acre.

Although he check-plants his corn, Harry takes advantage of closer plantings to boost the number of hills per acre on his ground. When planting, he plants two 40-inch rows alternated with two 36-inch rows. Cross-rows of course, are 38-inches (the spacing on his planter-wire). Mathematically, it figures about 10 percent more hills per acre, Harry says. In other words, in a 50-acre field of corn, he would have a crop equivalent to 55 acres of 40-inch rows and 40-inch cross-rows.

About half of Howard's corn is Farmer's Hybrid this year. Because his corn had such a good stand and showed every indication that it was going to be a high yield, Harry wanted to enter their yield contest. He couldn't, however, because of his heavier plantings.

Harry is a Spotted Poland China hog enthusiast. He raises mostly Spots and believes they grow faster than other breeds. Particularly, he's found, they aren't as active as others and as a result don't "run-off" their weight. He usually raises about 140 spring pigs and between 100 and 125 fall pigs. His farm, incidentally, is completely hog-tight.

Usually, he feeds about 40 head of cattle each year. He now has that number of 400-pound calves which he will feed out on grass next summer. With younger cattle, Harry says, you can just let them grow. The cheaper feeds they require and the resulting cheaper gains make it a less risky and more profitable program than feeding heavier stock. The Howards keep a few chickens on their place, although it's not one of their major projects.

Speaking of major projects, they've undertaken one in the form of a home-remodeling job. In addition to modernizing their home, Mr. and Mrs. Howard are now in the process of almost a complete renovation of their place. They have three children: Mrs. George Wilson of Kelly and twins, Mrs. Curt Hepperly of Burbank, Calif., and Duane of Humboldt.

Harry was born near Jolley. He has lived in the Havelock and Pocahontas vicinities for the past 20 years.



Marian and Harry Howard, who lived on the Howard farm from 1940-1941, with their granddaughter, Joy, who lived in Hawaii until her death following a short illness in 2003, and her younger brother, Monte, who was killed in a construction accident the summer after he graduated from high school. Circa 1940s. *The Velma and Verle Howard collection.*

1. The "Farmer of the Week" article on the left was published in 1952 in the *Pocahontas Record Democrat* newspaper with verbal permission from the editor Brooks Taylor to use it in this project. Note: Harry and Marian Howard' son, Verle Duane Howard, was known both as Verle and Duane, depending on who was speaking about him.

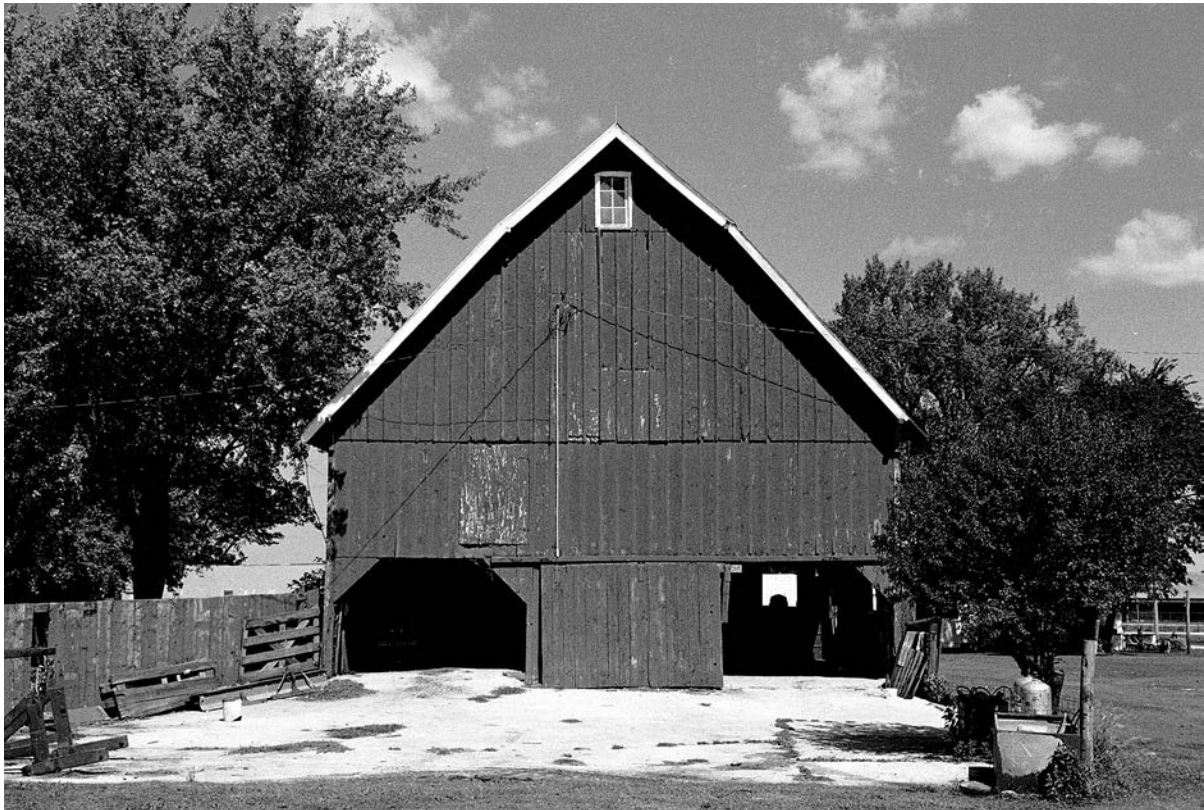


Barn at Velma and Verle Howard farm, north side, Section 14, Roosevelt Township, Pocahontas County, Iowa. 1989.

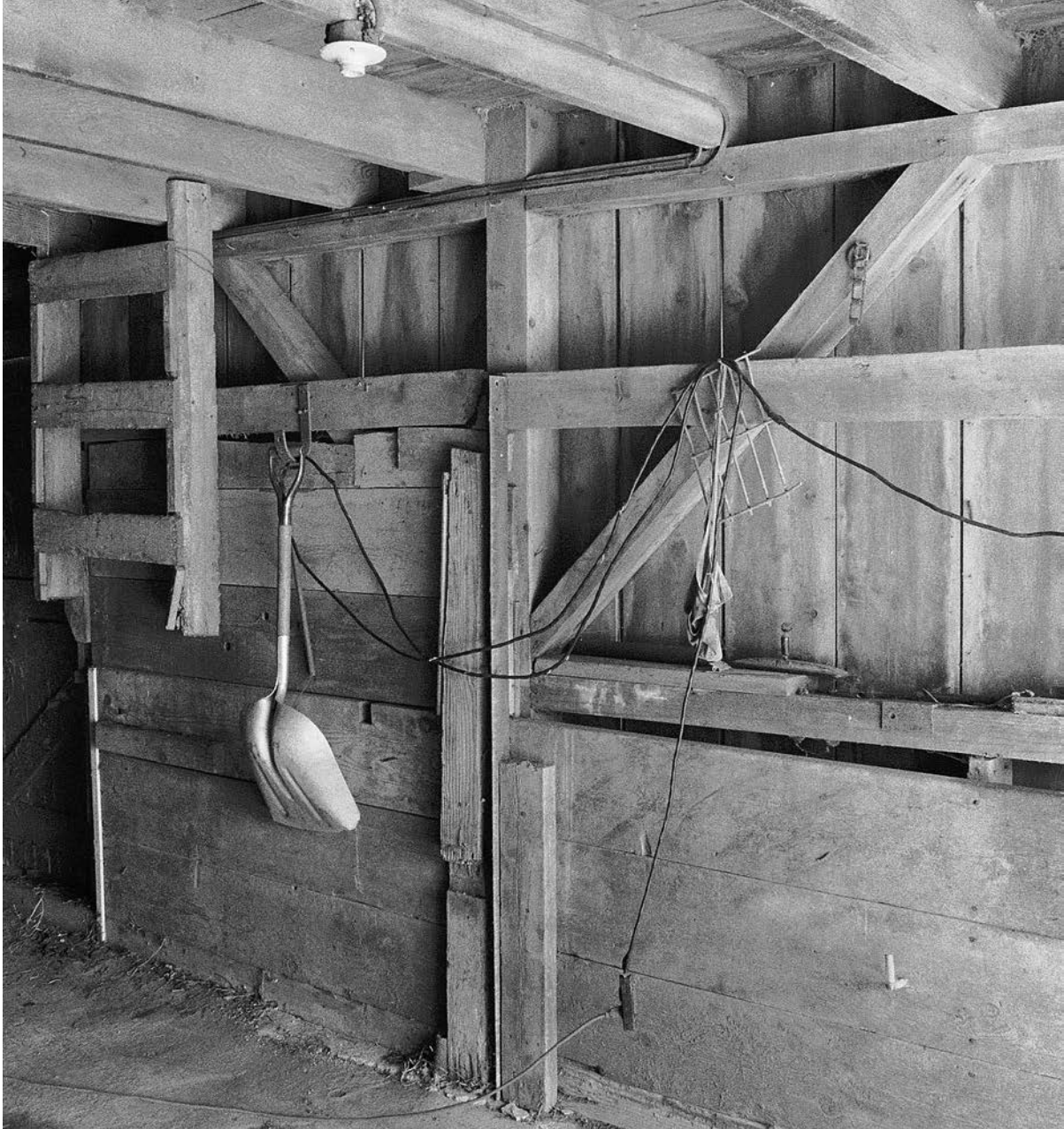
THE LAST BARN ALONG THE ROAD

The barn at the Howard farm is the last barn along the road. It is red with white trim, has a hip roof, and measures 34 by 42 feet. It was built in 1914. My parents lost their barn in the 1980s when a wind tore off the roof. Their barn was also red but with a rounded roof, standing 36 by 54 feet. I “helped build” the barn in 1948 when I was three years old.

The Harrold barn, a white one constructed with concrete block walls and a hip roof, blew away in 1980 in a wind that scattered debris across the Howard yard. The Harrold barn was built in 1946 and measured some 40 by 60 feet.



The Howard barn is the last barn left along the road. Upper photo: Barn cats that watched Helen photograph the barn and stayed with the farm after Velma and Verle moved to town. 1998. Bottom photo: The camera was positioned south of the barn. 1994.



Ground level of the Howard barn with a scoop shovel and extension cords on the wall. 1994.

The Reigelsberger barn was also white with a hip roof, measured some 32 by 48 feet, and was built in about 1918 and burned in about 1977. Rumor has it that the Reigelsberger fire was the result of two boys playing with matches.

The Cornwell barn was red with white trim and a hip roof. It was built in 1911 by Melvin Cornwell, the great-grandfather of Joy Cornwell Palmer who currently owns the farm. Joy says that a 90-mile-per-hour, straight-line wind picked up the barn and moved it six inches off its foundation. In the early 1980s, Dan and Roger Allen salvaged some of the lumber from the Cornwell barn and used the weathered siding (gray with a hint of its original red color) for paneling the interior walls of a barn that they had renovated at Dan's home in Rolfe. The fire department burned the remainder of the barn. Dan also remembers taking apart the barn



Haymow of the Howard barn with piles of bales and two ropes for swinging. 1994.

on the first farm along the road when he lived there from 1971 to 1976. He stored the good lumber at his father's place. Later he was able to use it, too, for his renovation project.

In 1989, I photographed the barn at the Brinkman farm when I was on a photo excursion with the late Darlene Brinkman, the owner of the place at the time. The barn was falling apart, and the interior was musty and dusty. It was treacherous to walk inside, especially to climb into the haymow. There were remnants of horse collars, halters, and other harnesses, but they had deteriorated so much that when we touched them, they flaked apart. I also have a photograph that I took of the Brinkman farm around 1992. By that time, the barn no longer existed.

McCormick-Deering FARMALL

The Original All-Purpose Tractor

THE best reason for using a Farmall tractor is that it does cut the cost of producing crops. Yet, strangely enough, when you ask a Farmall owner why he likes the Farmall the first thing he is likely to tell you is that it makes farming so much easier. He likes the idea of being able, himself, to cultivate four to eight acres in the time it used to take him to cultivate one. He likes the idea of not having to curry, feed, and water a barn full of horses before breakfast. He likes the ready, steady, ample power the Farmall supplies for every kind of farm work.

The main reason why there are well over 100,000 Farmalls on farms is that men like to work with the Farmall.



Illust. 1. This is the two-plow FARMALL—the tractor that is putting agriculture on a new and far more profitable basis. The wheels may be the 12 x 42-inch with spade lugs as shown, or 6 x 40-inch with angle lugs. Wheel equipment must be specified.

2 Sizes Now—Two-Plow—Three-Plow

The International Harvester Company produced a long line of the McCormick-Deering Farmall tractor. The first Farmall was manufactured in 1924, and the most popular model, the M, was produced from 1939 to 1952. 1931. This Farmall advertisement was obtained and used by permission from the Wisconsin Historical Society, which houses the *McCormick-International Harvester Collection*, image number WHi-11755.

FARM EQUIPMENT

When one thinks of farm machinery, the images that come to mind depend a lot on how much one knows about farming as well as what era and level of agricultural sophistication one is envisioning. In Grant Wood's 1930 painting "American Gothic" the implement in the hand of the somber Iowa farmer is a pitchfork. Implements of a similar nature from that time period included the heavy steel scoop shovel, spade, scythe, hoe, rake, and bushel basket. There were also barn accessories such as ropes, pulleys, hay slings, horseshoes, horse collars, and harnesses.

Dad got his college degrees in agricultural and mechanical engineering and had little, if any, interest in the technology of barns, putting up hay, or draft horses. I used to enjoy hanging out in his shop, watching him invent such things as an eight-row corn planter in the early 1950s or a bicycle rack for my car in the 1970s. He had angle iron, flat iron, channel iron, galvanized pipe fittings, structural pipe, wheels and bearings from old machines, roller chains, ag link chains, cables, iron strapping, mesh wire, reinforcing bars, bolts and washers, electric motors, hydraulic hose, old tires, used vehicles, and other items stashed away in his shop, the grove, and other places around the farm. Although his various collections might have seemed like junk to an uninformed observer, he always knew where to find just the right item for an invention or a repair job. Dad says that he would not have been so successful in farming if he had not had the capability to repair his own equipment.

His shop was a large, gray Quonset shed. He had many traditional farm tools, but what I recall most were his grease gun, socket wrenches, vice grips, anvil, Skil saw, heavy-duty



Deane Gunderson's farm shop. 1994.

electric drill mounted on a 30-gallon barrel, air compressor, bench grinder, and arc welder. Indeed, it would be accurate to say that the arc welder was his favorite tool. When he lifted his black welding mask in front of his face, he made me turn the other way so that I would not be blinded by the shower of sparks that flew as he touched the welding rod to a piece of metal. It is not hard to conjure up the hum and crackle of his welder, the sparks, or the acrid smell of the small plume of smoke emanating from the electrical contact point.

When I think of farm equipment, I also remember simpler things. For instance, there was the five-gallon metal bucket I used for carrying water from the hydrant near the house across the farmyard to the hog house where I had the responsibility of nurturing a litter of baby pigs. I also think of the shiny pails my grandfather used for hand-milking his cows, the milk cans, and that amazing cream separator in his basement.

I vividly remember browsing in Grandpa's shop at the homeplace farm in the weeks following his death in 1956 when I was 11. It was a small, musty, red shed that stood in the shade of a grove of trees. The sturdy wooden workbench was mottled from wear and stained from the grease and oil that it had absorbed during its many years of use. I enjoyed playing with the darkened oilcan that Grandpa used for machine maintenance and the leather punch and riveter that he used for repairing horse harnesses.

On a much larger scale, there was the horse-drawn and tractor-driven equipment. In Grandpa's era and the first decades of Dad's farming career, that meant manure spreaders, grain wagons, hayracks, sickle mowers, binders, cultivators, discs, plows, harrows, oat seeders, corn planters, corn pickers, corn shellers, feed grinders, and single-rear-axle trucks.

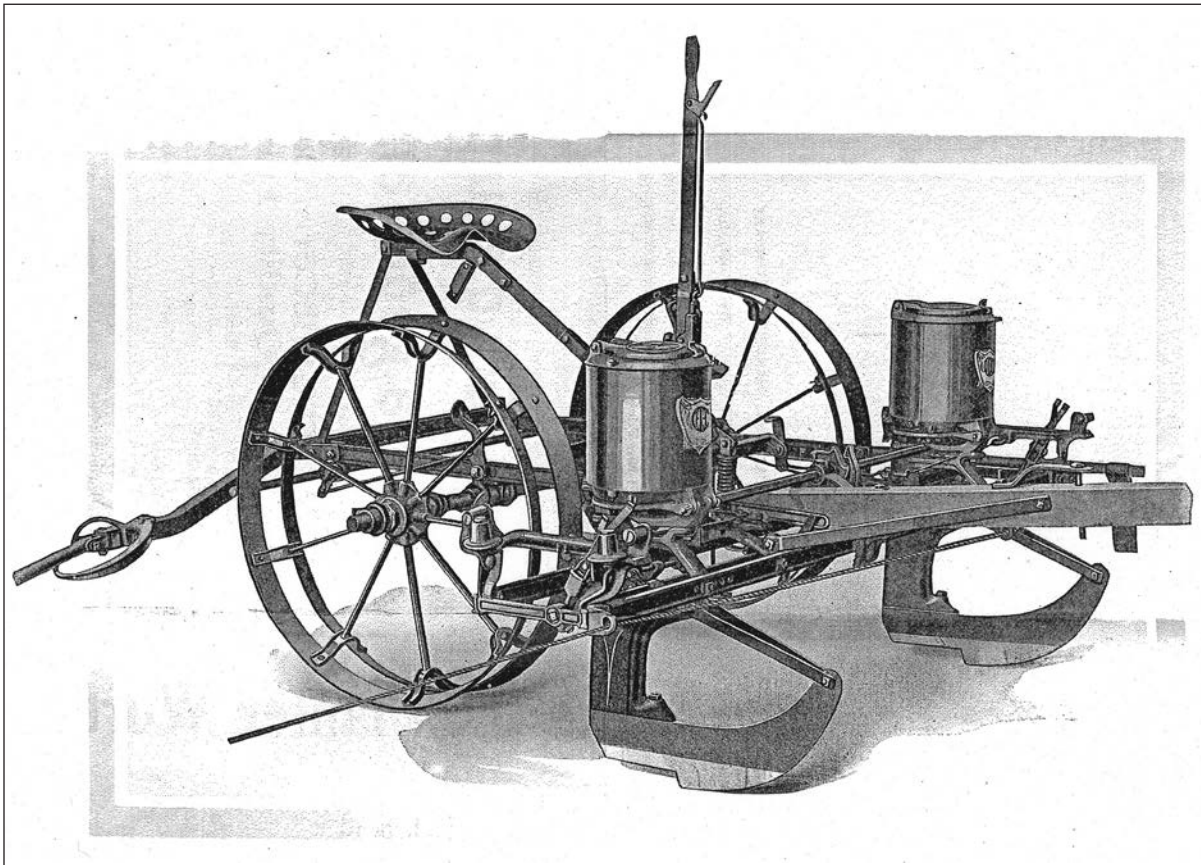
One pleasant memory is of a sunny day when I was about 10 years old and part of Dad's crew who was putting up haystacks. I drove our small Ford tractor, pulling the side rake to make windrows, while Grandpa was across the field with his team of Percheron draft horses and a sickle mower, cutting new swathes. Dad was driving a Model M Farmall tractor with a hay loader on the front end, and some of his hired help were atop the haystack, shaping it with their pitchforks. I also have memories of the many times that Grandpa used his team of horses and mower to cut grass along the road ditches. The work seemed almost like a hobby for him. In the years after his death, I would wander in the grove on his farm and sit on the rusted seat of a corn planter or mower, simply pondering the rudimentary nature of the equipment.

Merle and Wanda Hodgell were newlyweds in the early 1940s when he was one of Grandpa's hired hands. The young couple lived in the little house across the lane from Grandpa and Grandma's big house at the homeplace. I first met Merle in 1990 when I was photographing the crew that was dismantling my grandparents' house. He had heard that the place was being torn down and stopped by to wander through the rooms, reminisce, and watch the workers. At the time, he was a jovial septuagenarian and had a great deal of reverence for Grandpa, even though he admitted that Grandpa was sometimes hard on his horses and men. With a fond and gentle chuckle, Merle said that for some reason, perhaps because he was the youngest of the help, he was Grandpa's pet worker and the two of them got along well. Merle also claimed that Grandpa worked from dawn to dusk during the corn-planting season. In the dark of the early morning, Grandpa went to the field with his two-row planter and a team of horses. He wanted to take advantage of the first rays of sun that illuminated the field-length wire that was used to crosscheck the corn and the marker line in the ground that guided him as he drove the team of horses and planted straight rows. He worked in the field all day, attended by Merle and the other hired men, who provided a regular rotation of fresh horses. After the sun went down and Grandpa could no longer discern the wire and marker line, he quit planting and returned the horses to the barn.

Crosschecking was a way of planting corn so that there was an equal distance (38 inches) between the north and south rows and the east and west rows. A wire was threaded through a device in the planter and stretched across the length of the field. Each time a knot in the wire passed through the device, it triggered the planter to drop three kernels into a hill. In a field of crosschecked corn, a farmer could cultivate north and south to cut weeds and later take a swipe at them driving east and west. Later when chemicals became popular for controlling weeds, a field didn't need as much cultivation, and farmers started planting 30-inch rows in one direction.

To farm in those days meant being close to the earth. The farmer would be perched on the seat of a planter, riding just inches above the tilled ground, and was probably much more aware of nature and wildlife than today's farmers. Farming then was a quieter occupation than it is now. During planting, there were the simple sounds of the horses, perhaps a snort or whinny, the cadence of hooves striking the ground, the clinking of the metal parts of the harness, and the clitter-clatter of the gears of the planter box as they dropped the seed into the ground at regular intervals.

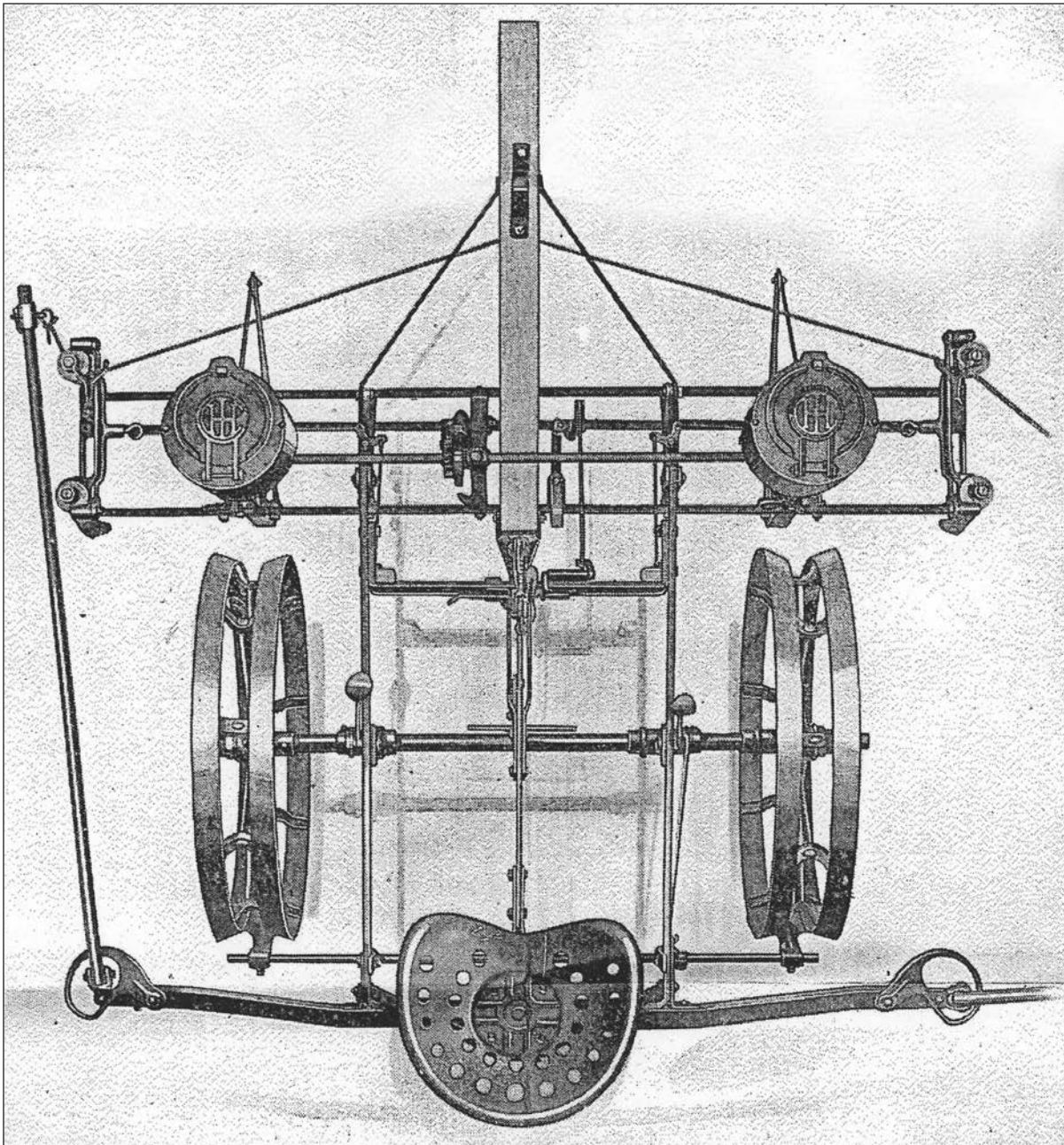
Additionally, there would have been the horse commands of "whoa," "gee," and "haw" meaning stop, turn right, and turn left. Perhaps, too, a farmer may have hollered out an expletive when the horses didn't perform as expected. It's fascinating that a farmer with



This McCormick-Deering No. 8 hill-drop corn planter is similar to the one that sat idle in Helen's grandfather's grove after his death. 1925. The drawing is from an advertising brochure and was obtained and used by permission from the Wisconsin Historical Society, which houses the *McCormick-International Harvester Collection*, image number WHi-11757.

horses could get off his machinery, such as a planter, open a gate to a field, and be able to give voice commands to the team to walk ahead and through the gate. Then the farmer closed the gate and got back on the seat of the planter.

For some farmers, the transition from horses to tractors was difficult. There are funny stories from that era, such as the one in which a farmer gets off a tractor to open a gate, stands there giving commands to his tractor, and then realizes the tractor is not going anywhere.



Plan view of the McCormick-Deering No. 8 hill-drop corn planter. 1925. The drawing is from an advertising brochure and was obtained and used by permission from the *Wisconsin Historical Society*, which houses the *McCormick-International Harvester Collection*, image number WHi-11758.

I always thought Grandpa was one of those farmers who was reluctant to switch from horses to tractors. However, Dad says that it was my great-grandfather who was against tractors. He remembers Great-Grandpa saying, "After all, with a tractor, you've got to go to town and get gasoline. That's terrible." Although Great-Grandpa was living in town at the time, he was loaning money to Grandpa and had a great deal of influence over how Grandpa farmed. The result, according to Dad, was that the Gunderson farm was one of the last ones of its size to make the transition to tractors.

Dad, on the other hand, was eager to use tractor power and be done with horses. After Grandpa died, Dad no longer raised livestock or had crops such as oats, alfalfa, and clover. Instead, he focused on row crops and that meant corn and soybeans. In the 1970s when he retired from farming, his inventory of field equipment consisted mainly of tractors, tillage equipment, his eight-row corn planter, a bean drill, barge wagons, a combine, and his single-rear-axle truck. It was hard to fathom how farming could get much more modern or how the equipment could get bigger. However, there have been tremendous changes in agriculture in terms of scale and the kinds technology since the 1970s. My father's eight-row planter was a newsworthy item in the 1950s. Now, 16-row corn planters are common, and there are several 24-row planters in the county, not to mention reports of farmers in the state who own custom-built 36-row planters.

Many farmers can plant 240–300 acres a day, depending on the length of their work day and the problems they encounter. A new 16-row planter costs about \$83,000 and requires a \$3,000 monitor that reports malfunctioning units, seeds per foot in each row, acres per hour, total acres, and tractor speed, which is about six miles per hour. A new 24-row planter costs about \$95,000. The monitor is included. One area farmer, Dennis Wagner, has a 24-row planter he bought in 1996. If he didn't move from one field to another, he could plant 400–500 acres a day, but the land he farms spans 25 miles and he consumes time transporting equipment. However, it takes him only three minutes to fold or unfold the 24-row planter.

Single-rear-axle, straight trucks with wooden grain boxes were common on area farms prior to the 1980s. The one Dad owned was a red GMC truck with a box that held about 350 bushels of corn. Then there was a phase when there weren't as many trucks. Farmers were using gravity wagons to do most of their grain hauling. However, in the mid-1990s, many Pocahontas County farmers began to use truck-tractors and semi-trailers to haul grain.

The Iowa Department of Transportation now offers farmers a special semi-truck license that they can purchase for a much lower rate than a commercial truck license, which is generally prohibitive in cost for farm use. However, this special farm license has restrictions. The truck must be used within a 150-mile radius of the farmer's home base; and the combined gross weight of a truck, trailer, and load is limited to 80,000 pounds. That's equivalent to about 830 bushels of corn. So although the semi rigs have the advantage of being faster and safer than conventional tractors and wagons and can carry a larger load, their useful capacity is not significantly greater than gravity wagons that hold 600–750 bushels of corn. The DOT has a length limit of 65 feet for a common farm tractor and the wagon or wagons it pulls but no weight limit. A hefty tractor can pull two wagons at a time, carrying many more bushels of corn than the law allows for semi-trailers.

Many of today's farmers own semi-tractors and trailers. They buy used ones from commercial, over-the-road trucking companies who need extremely reliable rigs. These companies maintain their vehicles well and sell them after only a few years of use. Mick and Sue Reigelsberger were the first farmers in the neighborhood to own a semi-truck. It was one that Mick bought used from the bottled water company in Humboldt. The truck was white, but Mick had it painted a handsome, fire engine red. The trailer held up to 900 bushels of grain. He has since sold the rig and bought another. Sometimes the Reigelsbergers park their

semi-trailer in the farmyard next to a grain bin and use it as a conduit — meaning that Mick or Sue drive their cart wagon alongside the truck, extend the cart arm over the box, dump the load from their wagon into the semi box, and then head back to the field. The grain flows down, out of the semi into the basket of an auger, then up the auger to the top of the grain bin, and finally into the bin for drying and/or storage.

A group of farmers, who were gathered for coffee and conversation at the co-op one day in the fall of 2003, said that the DOT increases the semi-trailer load limit to 90,000 pounds for a short period of time each year in order to give farmers more flexibility during harvest. However, they cynically labeled the DOT variance as “the 90–90 rule” because the limit is allegedly raised to 90,000 bushels only after 90 percent of the harvest is completed, and so it actually does very little to help farmers.

Some farmers haul more than 830 bushels of corn, perhaps up to 1100 bushels, in their semi-trailers on direct trips from the field to the grain storage on their farms even though it’s against the law. However, when hauling grain to town, they are more cautious because the DOT inspector’s blue midsize sedan with bubble light could be parked along their route to the co-op. They know that the inspector has the authority to stop a grain hauler and examine the load. If it looks suspicious, the inspector can get portable scales from the trunk of his or her car and weigh the semi-trailer on the spot. One of the farmers at the co-op said that he had been fined \$760 during the previous week for having a load that was over the legal limit.

Today, few farmers repair and maintain their own equipment, especially combines and tractors. These machines are extremely complex, and repairing them requires sophisticated analytical devices and mechanical tools as well as mechanics with specialized training. It was not many years ago that nearly every town in the area had an implement store and repair shop. However, the nearest dealer and repair places are now, for the most part, 20 miles away. In some cases, a farmer calls on these modern implement stores to send out a mobile crew to repair a broken piece of machinery, but the visit is a pricey one. There are also times when a farmer has to ship a malfunctioning electronic component to a faraway state for repair, resulting in a two- or three-day delay in the farming operation.

When I conjure up images of today’s farm machinery, I don’t think of hand items such as pitchforks, scoop shovels, two-row equipment, or the long list of machinery that was used in diversified farming. Instead, I envision planters, tractors, combines, auger and gravity wagons, water tanks for applying chemicals, sprayers, stalk choppers, V-rippers for deep-tilling the ground, field cultivators, and semi-trailer trucks. I also think of the white anhydrous ammonia tanks on wheels and huge Terragator tractors from the co-op in town that are used to spread fertilizer or spray herbicides on the fields. In many ways, I regret that I was not into photography when I was growing up. At that time, there were plenty of people working in the fields and farmyards on any given day.

Nowadays, there are many weeks, if not months, during a year when little is done in the field. Consequently, it is tempting to buy into the stereotype that all the modern farmer does is plant the crop in the spring, harvest it in the fall, till the land, and go on vacation. However, farming is not that simple. Many farmers have off-the-farm jobs, and farming itself has year-round responsibilities and challenges. However, much of the activity has to do with management and maintenance and is not visually intriguing. In contrast, the planting and harvest seasons provide extremely good photographic opportunities. That is partially why this chapter of farm machinery photography consists mainly of images of planters, combines, tractors, and wagons. The mix of photos in this chapter is also a result of watching Dad construct his eight-row corn planter. I was impressed by his achievement and proud of him. I wish I had more than a fuzzy newspaper photo of his eight-row rig, which he pulled with a Model M Farmall tractor. I don’t. But during this project of documenting life along my road,

I have often stood watching a planting or harvest scene, reliving childhood memories, and grieving a passing era in agriculture. Perhaps standing with my camera and waiting for a tractor or combine to come into my viewfinder has been akin to the times that I rummaged in my grandfather's shop after his death, trying to come to terms with the fact that he was gone. I must have intuited that a day was not far off when his style of farming would be history. Little did I realize that Dad's era of farming would also become history.

My quest to photograph the ordinary activities and machinery of farming all these years may seem like folly to some people. Admittedly, there have been times when I have questioned the value of this project. However, a few farm experts predict that in another decade or two, a half-dozen farmers will operate all the land in the Pocahontas County. That could be a valid prediction, and it is incentive to document what is happening in the neighborhood before this era of farming and its current models of farm equipment also become obsolete.

A Reuters News Service article about space-age tractors that was posted on the Internet on July 17, 2003, from Sydney, Australia. It said, "Heavy modern agricultural equipment is killing the soil through repeated compaction and tilling." The piece went on to say, "But a new world of automatically steered tractors, guided by satellites, will allow them to run on predetermined tracks and confine their impact on the soil to 15 percent of farmed soil." The article also suggested that there would be a 200 percent increase in yields. It added that the space-age tractors are part of a revolution to save the world's soil, the sickest soils being in the farmlands of North America, Europe, and Australia. The use of space age tractors sounds like science fiction and is difficult to envision. Yet, perhaps a time will come when a computer specialist will sit in an office far removed from the soil and operate robotic equipment on several farms. The picture would be like that of a security guard watching the monitors on a quiet day at a shopping mall or similar to a computerized farm simulation game. There might be maintenance crews who would occasionally go to the fields in their hovercraft to keep the equipment running smoothly. Hardly anyone would be in the role of farmer in the image of my grandfather, father, or the men and women who farm along the road today.

Some aspects of satellite technology are already creeping into agriculture in ways that would have boggled my grandfather's mind. For instance, global positioning system (GPS) technology is already being used to analyze the fertility of a grid of property and to guide an operator in applying the right amount of fertilizer to various portions of that grid. There is also satellite technology that will automatically guide a tractor and corn planter in a straight line. These are quantum leaps from the technology of the horse-drawn era. Unfortunately, these quantum leaps that are happening in farm technology are simultaneously resulting in a quantum loss in rural population.

I wonder: What kinds of images will a photographer be able to capture here in another 20 or 30 years? I suspect the scale and sophistication of the machinery would boggle my mind. Sad to say, the continued loss in population would be even more mind-boggling. The equipment by itself is not half as fascinating as the combination of people and equipment. It is indeed this combination that draws me to the road and calls me to document life here.



Photos at left and immediately below: Mick Reigelsberger plants soybeans in Sections 12 and 14, Roosevelt Township. 1997 and 1998. Mick and his family are my parents' closest neighbors, living a quarter mile away. They have a Pioneer Seed dealership on their farm. He is one of many farmers with a 16-row planter. Bottom photo: Robert Joens plants beans, Section 15, Roosevelt Township. 2001. Robert's dad, Herman, bought a new four-row planter in 1953 from Spike Robinson's John Deere dealership in Rolfe and told Robert it was his turn to plant the crop. Robert has been farming ever since, although he is cutting back on acres and phasing toward retirement. In Robert's first years of farming, it was common to crosscheck corn. Now he plants with a 12-row planter that he got in about 1987 from an equipment store in Laurens. He says the current seeding standard is that of planting one kernel of corn every seven inches in a row.





Photos above and on right: Betsy Dahl plants beans in the middle of Section 7, Garfield Township. 1998. The planter is one that her grandfather, Norton Ives, and his neighbor, LeRoy Rude, bought when it was top-of-the-line equipment in 1976, about the year my father retired from active farming at the age of 55. The planter plants eight 38-inch-wide rows and has a monitor that lets the driver know when a unit fails to plant seed. The Dahls also carry a spade. It is both functional for digging rocks and symbolic, carrying on the tradition of Norton, who first placed the spade on the back of the tractor. Bottom photo: Norton Ives, on his combine. Circa 1990. Norton died in 1992.





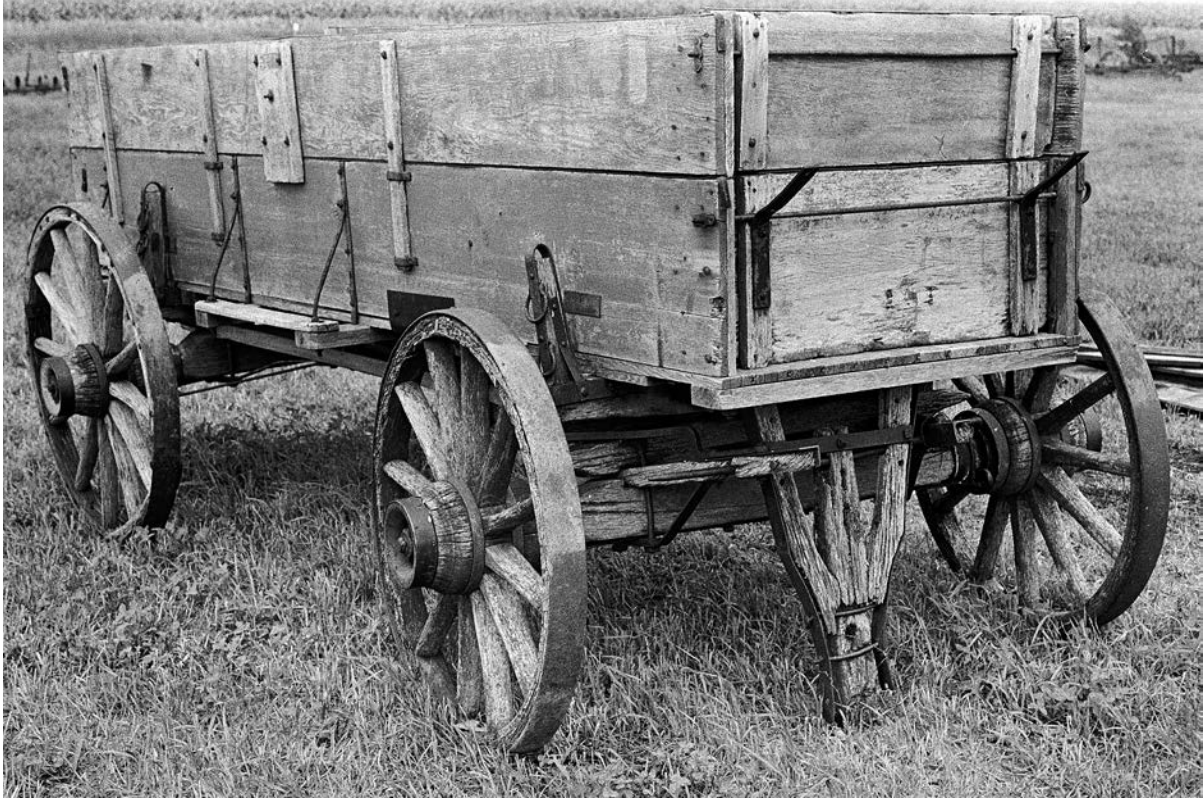
Top photo: Threshing oats at the Hattie and Morris Ives farm, north side of Section 19, Garfield Township. Kathy Ives Dahl's grandmother, Dora Brinkman Ives, is the tall woman standing in front of the steam engine. 1903. *The Gary and Kathy Dahl collection*. Bottom photo: Leon and Margaret Sinek and their son, Don, were among the 45 friends and relatives who went to the Will Beneke farm near Gilmore City to pick and crib 3,000 bushels of corn for the Benekes. Will had been ill for several months and died in 1946. His wife was Leon's sister. The Sineks resided in Section 7 of Garfield Township, not far from the road. Don went on to college and an architectural career while his brother, Paul, took over the farm from Leon and Margaret. A similar good neighbor deed occurred in 1964 when friends and family gathered at the Sinek farm to help with harvest after Paul was killed in an accident when a portable farm elevator fell on him. 1946. *The Betty Sinek Sandvig collection*.



Helen's grandfather, John Gunderson, and his two-row corn picker mounted on a Farmall tractor. Circa 1947. *The Deane and Marion Gunderson collection.*



Verle Howard picks corn. The next year he and his wife Velma retired from farming. His family's homplace with landmark barn and cottonwood tree are in upper right corner of the scene. Northwest quarter, Section 14, Roosevelt Township. 1992.



The basic wagon during the horse-drawn era and early days of tractor farming was the 36-inch wagon. Its exterior was commonly 38-inches wide and 126-inches long, but the interior was 36 inches by 10 feet. The standardized dimensions meant that a wagon had 4,536 cubic inches of cargo space and a capacity for one bushel of ear corn per inch of height. For grains such as oats, the wagon could hold two bushels per inch. The side boards came in three heights: 10, 12, and 14 inches, and the box could hold 36 bushels of ear corn. During corn harvest, a bangboard was added to the top of one side so that a farmer would break the ear of corn off the stalk by hand, throw it against the bangboard, and let it rebound into the wagon and not onto the ground. This wagon was part of Irving Cornwell's farm sale. Circa 1980.



John (Johnny) Zeman unloads grain from a barge wagon into an elevator that carries the grain to the top of a steel bin. A typical barge wagon could carry a load of 150 bushels of grain. Johnny worked for Deane Gunderson as a "hired hand" from 1957 until 1975. Deane retired the following year. Northwest quarter, Section 13, Roosevelt Township. 1975.



Jack McCartan, a retired area farmer who helped Paul Harrold during the harvest season for a few years, drives a John Deere tractor and hauls a gravity wagon full of grain from the field to the grain bins at the Harrold farm. The wagon has a capacity of 325 bushels of grain. 1996.



Top photo: Deane Gunderson combining beans. Section 13, Roosevelt Township. Circa 1973. Bottom photo: Dan Allen combining beans on land farmed from the 1950s to 1970s by Russel Jordan, who was featured in the documentary film *Troublesome Creek*. Southwest quarter, Section 10, Roosevelt Township. Dan and his brother, Roger, grew up in the same section where Helen's family lived and now farm all her parents' land and some owned by her sisters. 1996.



Top photo: Dan Allen combining beans and dumping them into a cart wagon pulled by a tractor driven by Dan's brother, Roger. Southwest quarter, Section 10, Roosevelt Township. The camera faces northeast. The white Pro Cooperative grain elevators at Rolfe are barely visible on the horizon left of the combine. 1996. Bottom photo: Roger Allen hauls grain from the field to on-the-farm bins. His cart wagon with auger holds 550 bushels and cost \$7,000 to 8,000 new. Between Sections 10 and 15, Roosevelt Township. 1995.



Mick and Sue Reigelsberger's grain-hauling tractor and semi-trailer. The tractor was white when Mick bought it used from the bottled water company in Humboldt. He then had it painted a fire engine red. The trailer has a capacity of 900 bushels of corn, but Iowa's Department of Transportation limits semi-trailer loads to about 830 bushels of corn. 1996.



A milkweed pod releases its seed. Circa 1970s.

A HARVEST WALK¹

Autumn is my favorite season of the year. There is a time during August when the scent from the maturity of plant life intertwines with the moisture in the air, and a cool shift in temperature says fall is coming. I like the feeling. In September, the leaves of the trees on the farms along the road are still green, as are the lawns, but the late-variety apples are finally maturing. They are firm and cold. While taking a walk at Velma and Verle Howard's farm, which is a mile from where my parents live, I reach for one and take a bite. It is crisp, tart, and juicy. I feel alive. The caw-caw-caw chorus of the crows resounds across the grove. The large birds sit high in the cottonwoods, ash trees, soft maples, lindens, and elms. The leaves on a few trees are turning color and beginning to fall. The wind blows them in gentle somersaults, whispering across the green grass and down the lane. How long before the entire countryside turns to the monochromatic color scheme of winter? We cannot predict the precise timing nor control the process, but the change happens as summer makes its metamorphosis into the landscape of winter.

In the midst of the transformation, this road is quiet. Farmers are in their machine sheds readying their combines to harvest the corn and beans while the crops continue to mature and shift color. The corn stalks are a weave of green and dirty beige; the silks at the end of the ears are burnt brown, coarse, curly, and tangled. The whitish husks are beginning to loosen, revealing full, yellow, dented kernels. The bean plants are turning rusty brown, their leaves drying, curling, and shrinking. The pods that have been hidden in the mass of green foliage during the summer are clearly visible. A farmer can measure the size and count the number of beans in a pod to predict the yield per acre. Even so, no one knows for sure when the first hard frost will come and the growing season will end.

As I walk down the road with my camera, the gravel crunches under my feet. The sky is a dense blue, and there are only a few wisps of clouds. The air is fresh and cool, making my cheeks red and causing my nose to drip; but there is also a glow from the sun, and I feel cozy in my wool sweater and Pheasants Forever jacket. There aren't as many pheasants in the county now as when I was a child, so I delight when I see a rooster dart out of the road ditch, flutter its wings as it takes off, and then glide across the field. Its body is crimson and gold; its neck is radiant green with a white ring around it. Its piercing warble-gobble is a gift to my ears as I reminisce.

In the ditch there are milkweeds whose pods have hardened and opened, releasing a spray of white angel hair with brown, almost heart-shaped seeds at the end of each strand. The wind blows the seeds apart, and the strands of silk shine in the sun like soap bubbles blown by a child. In some sections of the road ditch, there are native prairie species that have survived the march of modern agriculture. The big bluestem is the most noticeable, their purple-blue seedheads shaped like turkey feet swaying in the wind. The bronze plumes of the Indiangrass are smooth. The Canada wild rye plants are nearly white, as though they have been bleached by the sun. Their kernels are full, and their whiskers are brittle and long. I look low and see the wild roses. Their thorny stems and small leaves are dull in color and almost hidden, camouflaged against the ground; but the red, round rose hips are distinct. When winter settles in, they will shrink and some will turn dark.

1. A 1995 perspective from Gilbert, Iowa.

Iowa is the only state that once was covered predominantly by tallgrass prairie. In fact, 85 percent of the state was made up of prairie. Today, less than one tenth of 1 percent (.001) of that prairie, with its rich biodiversity, continues to exist. It has been tilled to create a monoculture of row crops, mostly corn and soybeans.

Soon the combines, tractors, and wagons will come to the fields, and there will be weeks of work. In a normal year, the soybeans are harvested first, then the corn. There will be fluctuations between mild and harsh weather. There can be delays if there is very much rain and the fields become too muddy for the big machines.

The Machinery of Harvest

I like harvest and the activity of combines. I like seeing the tractors headed for the fields, returning with wagons of corn and beans behind them. The pattern of farmers and their harvest machines is much like the activity of ants in their colonies. There are many varieties of tractors on the farm-to-market roads. The huge, new green ones with their double sets of rear tires are taller than I am. They are monstrous machines and able to pull two monstrous wagons at a time. There are also older tractors and wagons. Often the farmers get out their utility tractors, the ones that are not modern but can help with the harvest. These old tractors have trouble pulling the big new wagons, but they can pull the older *barge wagons* with rectangular wooden sides. These are the kind of wagons Dad had from the 1950s through the mid-1970s when he retired from active farming.

The Model M Farmall

My favorite tractor is the International Harvester Model M tractor. Several of the farmers in the area own one. The M is the most endearing model of the Farmalls and was made from 1939 to 1952. The name Farmall meant that the line of tractors, with the appropriate implements, could do anything a farmer needed: plant corn, cultivate, pick corn, mow and stack hay, pull a three-bottom moldboard plow, and shovel manure or snow. The Farmall does not have a good name in all circles of historians. Some say that the Farmalls caused the Dust Bowl because farmers were able to use the tractors to plow up marginal land — land that never should have been tilled — on a large scale.

The wheels on an M are in a tricycle configuration with two 11-inch-wide and 38-inch-tall treaded-rubber wheels in the back and two knee-high wheels side by side in the front. It is open-aired with no glassed-in cab, leaving the driver exposed to the elements of the weather. The seat is shaped like that of a horse-drawn implement and rests on a coiled spring to cushion any jarring motion of the tractor. The steering wheel is a black circle connected by three steel rods, like three-way spokes, to the long steering column that is partially visible along the top of the body of the tractor. Farther toward the front of the tractor, there is a silver-colored exhaust pipe that stands straight up from the top of the body.

The Ms that farmers have now are faded and rusty unless they have been restored to their original color, a cross between deep cherry and fire-engine red. They are a common and popular attraction at parades and antique farm implement shows. An M cost \$1,000 when it was new and sells for that much at auctions today. The M is designed with 25 horsepower, but it may have a capacity of up to 30 horsepower. That is small compared to the John Deere Model 8200 tractors that I see along the road today. These new green machines have 185 horsepower.

Essentially, the Model M Farmall is a grand, beautiful, red machine with simple lines. It has accomplished many functions of farming very well. I love an M about as much as I love

the draft horses that it replaced. The M isn't used much today. Harvest is its biggest season. It might be used to haul wagons of grain, but these days it is more likely that a farmer will park an M at a corncrib or grain bin and use its power takeoff mechanism to drive the auger systems. An *auger* is essentially a long, metal cylinder for conveying grain from one place to another. Inside the tube is a rotating helical shaft. As the shaft turns, the grain is spirally pushed to the end and falls into its next destination such as a larger wagon or a bin for storing the grain.



Helen on Paul Harrold's Model M Farmall he bought from Irving Cornwell in the 1970s. Self portrait with help from Dennis Goodrich. 1995.

Grain Wagons

Often I would help with harvest, driving the M that we inherited from Grandpa and pulling a barge wagon full of harvested grain from the fields to the farm. One of those wagons carried up to 150 bushels of grain. To unload it, a person had to drive the tractor across a mechanical elevator system and stop with the front tires of the wagon on the lift or use a hydraulic elevating device built into the wagon. This device lifted the front end of the wagon high so the grain could pour out the back through a tailgate that the operator slid open to regulate the flow of grain. The grain would rush down and out from the wagon into an elevator or auger system that would carry it to the top of the appropriate storage units. There are still some of these wagons around, but there have been radical changes in wagons as well as tractors.

The top of a barge wagon comes up to my eye level. It is fairly easy to climb into one and stand on the flat bottom of the box. In contrast, the *gravity wagon*, which has replaced the barge wagon, is ten feet tall. The most popular size carries 600 bushels. These wagons also have four wheels, but the wagons don't need to be elevated to unload the grain. They are rectangular at the top, but at the bottom center, between the front and back wheels, they are shaped like an upside-down pyramid or large, angular udder. To unload the grain, the farmer steps to the side of the wagon and turns a thin, metallic wheel the size of a captain's steering wheel, which opens a sliding metal panel. The grain comes rushing down a chute into the conveyor device that carries the grain away to be stored.

Another popular development is the large grain cart that holds up to 1,000 bushels. It has a built-in auger system but only one set of wheels, tall ones standing five feet high. The wagon is rugged, and the person hauling grain can drive the tractor and cart alongside the combine, allowing the combine driver to unload grain into the cart while on the move. Later, the cart can be pulled up alongside another wagon or truck or at a storage site where the auger can be swung out to unload the grain. In comparing costs, a set of wheel rims and tires for today's cart wagons costs \$2,500 compared to the \$250 that a farmer used to pay for the running gear and box of a barge wagon in the 1960s and 1970s.



Gary Dahl in the cab of his combine, unloading corn into a grain wagon. 2003.

Combines

The first combine was built in the 1830s. It got its name because it was a combination of a horse-drawn reaper and thresher. It was primitive compared to today's combines, which are rolling factories that move through the fields at five miles per hour. These huge self-propelled machines are like army tanks, but they are shaped much differently and ride on large wheels with rubber tires. The driver sits in a glass-enclosed cab with cushioned seat, fingertip controls, air-conditioning, heater, and radio and looks forward and down at the cutting mechanism. If it is harvesting beans, a bean platform or head will be mounted on the front of the combine. If it is time to pick corn, the farmer has to spend one to two hours replacing the bean platform with a cornhead.

When I was a child, the corn was harvested with a corn picker, either mounted directly on a tractor or pulled by a tractor. The corn was harvested by the ear, meaning the picker tossed the whole ear into a wagon that hauled the load to a corncrib where the corn was stored for drying during the winter. In the summer, farmers would gather at a farm, unload the cribs, and put the corn through a big, stationary machine called a *sheller* that took the ears apart, sending the yellow grain via an auger to a wagon or truck, and making a pile of red cobs and one of yellow-white husks.

In the first half of the twentieth century, combines were limited to harvesting small grains such as wheat and oats. They were also used to harvest soybeans, which were first grown along my road in the 1930s. However, in 1955 John Deere introduced the first *cornhead* for combines. The cornheads on today's combines have a set of shields resembling giant metal fingers that extend low and to the front of the machine as they glide through the rows. These shields cover the complex rollers and chains that gather the corn stalks in, bend them down, snap the ears off, and guide them into the belly of the combine. There the husk and kernels are stripped from the cob. The kernels drop into a pan, are cleaned, and then are elevated to a 200-bushel tank that sits above and behind the driver. The whole process, from when the ear is ripped off the stalk until the grain lands in the tank, takes a mere twenty seconds. The tank can fill up in eight to ten minutes, and the combine can harvest 2,500 bushels an hour. Eventually the corn moves through an auger, which extends to the side of the tank. The long cylinder is about one foot in diameter and some 12 to 18 feet long. When the grain reaches the end of the auger, it drops like a golden waterfall into wagons or trucks. The vehicles will then carry the treasure from the field to metal storage bins on a farm or to the farmer's cooperative elevator in town. The rest of the plant that was drawn into the combine is chopped into pieces and propelled out the back of the combine by the rear beater and fanned across the ground.

After a combine moves through a field of soybeans, it leaves behind stubble shorter than three inches high and rows that are relatively clean and easy to walk through. A cornfield is different. The cornhead on the combine leaves taller and thicker stalks that are bent over and easy to trip on. I prefer walking in the cornfields. I carry my camera and look for the right spot for a photo. I lift my feet high so I don't trip. The stalks crackle and rustle with each step. As I establish my position at a safe distance from the path of the combine and wait for it to come into my viewfinder, I feel the ground solid under my hiking boots. There is a smell of ripeness that I find hard to describe. My agronomist friend at Iowa State University, Stan Henning, tells me that it comes from the actinomycetes, a kind of organism in the corn stalk and the earth.²

V-rippers

When harvest is over, there is still work to be done. The corn stalks need to be chopped and the ground plowed with a *V-ripper*, an implement consisting of large tillage knives mounted behind a tractor. Unlike the days when Dad and Grandpa farmed, few farmers today use the old moldboard plows that turned the stubble and earth over so that the field was completely black. Farmers took pride in how black their fields were after they finished plowing. In fact, it was a sign of a less than competent farmer if any stubble or other plant debris was visible when the plowing was done. That style of plowing exacerbated the erosion of Iowa's topsoil; it opened the ground up too much, exposing it to high levels of oxygen that depleted the organic nutrients of the soil. Disking the fields was another common tillage practice that has been significantly reduced in recent years. The problem with disking was that it compacted the ground, and subsequently reduced crop yields.

2. Some of my understanding of the technology of a combine is based on a newspaper article by David Hendee, "Corn off the Cob, 20-Second Process," *Omaha World-Herald*, 4 October 1995, page 11, Focus Section.

Wildlife

If I am lucky, I may see a jackrabbit bounding across the field. The wildlife is never close enough to photograph, so I don't try. I simply say, "Hi, Mr. Jackrabbit," and watch him dart across the field in a jerky, zigzag pattern like a cartoon character. Then again, I might hear honking and look up to see a squadron of geese migrating south. Other times, a dark cloud will rise out of a field. It is a fluttering flock of blackbirds that have been startled and are moving to another part of the field in search of grain.

As I look across the cornfield, I see a family of three deer. They have regular routes between the water at Crooked Creek to the north and Lizard Creek to the south where bits of grain have fallen to the ground in the open fields. If I hadn't come along, the deer would gradually have moved to the road and crossed it. Now they stand frozen, eyeing my car. As I drive slowly west, they begin to run ahead of me and parallel to the road. They then take off across the field away from me, running, springing, and leaping with their white tails bobbing. They are graceful and majestic like stars of a ballet. I watch them until they are out of sight behind a rise in the field and the lone building, a corncrib, on one of the seven abandoned farmsteads along my road. I get out and stand by my car, enjoying the quietness of the countryside.

Over nine-tenths of the tillable farmland in Pocahontas County is used to grow corn and soybeans. They are the cash crops, the underpinning of the economy, but there is no adequate protection for wildlife during the winter in the farm fields. When farmers burn the road ditches after harvest for weed control and to reduce the possibility of large snowdrifts on the road, there is even less habitat for the pheasants, rabbits, and deer.

Growing Wheat by Hand

In the spring of 1994, I planted 400 square feet of wheat by hand on an abandoned farmstead I own six miles from the road where I grew up. The place was part of the land that I inherited from my grandfather's estate after he died in 1956 when I was in sixth grade. The project was an experiment with poetic motivations. I hoped to at least be able to bake a loaf of bread from wheat I had grown. I used a hand sickle to harvest the wheat, cutting the stems at the base of the plants. I laid the plants to dry in a pile in a cardboard box in my father's machine shed. Later I took them to my apartment. I made a flail from two pieces of wood tied together with some clothesline and beat the wheat to loosen the seed. I put a pile of seed, hull, and bits of stalk into a five-gallon plastic bucket, stood outside on my deck in a strong wind, and poured the mixture into another bucket. The idea was to let the wind blow the debris away while allowing the wheat berries to fall into the second bucket. I repeated this winnowing process several times, but I still had refuse left in my bucket. I sat down at a table and picked the kernels out by hand. It was tedious. The result was three 10-ounce jelly jars of wheat. I decided to quit and give the rest of the plants to friends to use for decorative purposes. I packed one-ounce samplings of the grain in small plastic bags and gave them as party favors at a dinner for my 50th birthday. I have yet to grind the bit that I have left and make a loaf of bread.

Appreciating the Fields

Today, there are many variations of no-till and other conservation tillage systems, all largely dependent on heavy uses of chemicals. The chemicals can be applied either in the fall or spring. Many farmers take advantage of special price offers in the fall and have the fertilizer application out of the way so that the job doesn't encroach on planting time in the spring. After combining and doing whatever tillage is necessary, a local farmer arranges with the co-op to have fertilizer and ag-lime applied to the fields. The lime improves the soil's alkaline-acid balance that is thrown off by the heavy use of nitrogen fertilizers.

At the tail end of the season, as I drive along my road, I see tractors in the fields pulling white anhydrous ammonia tanks or the tall, funny-looking, three-wheeled, monster-shaped trucks on large balloon tires. The total width of the track made by these flotation tires is 11½ feet. With that much solid rubber meeting the ground, there is little pressure per square inch and less risk of compacting the earth. When these vehicles with brand names like Terragators finish their work, the land lies fallow for the winter, but much is happening in the soil during that time.

A well-managed field is like bread dough that contains yeast and is kneaded and left to rise before being shaped into the loaves. The soil and dough are both aerated and alive. The difference is that the fallow ground rests in a suspended state of activity during the winter with conditions more like a refrigerator or freezer than the warm spot in the kitchen where the bowl of bread dough sits.

There are billions of minute creatures in a couple of scoops of soil, and there is a cycle of consumption. The molds and fungi begin to eat the crop residue, but the debris has little nitrogen in it. So the bacteria begin to digest the inorganic nitrite of the anhydrous ammonia that the farmer has applied and convert it to organic nitrates. After devouring all the nitrogen sources that are available, the first round of organisms dies and is consumed by larger



Plowed field, snow, and Caterpillar tractor tracks near the road. 1996

creatures. This cycle of devouring and being devoured builds the level of organic nitrogen in the earth so that the new spring plants can assimilate them with average yields of 51 bushels of beans or 163 bushels of corn per acre for Pocahontas County.³ Creatures that are large enough to move between the layers of the soil, such as insects, earthworms, centipedes, and millipedes, aerate the soil. They move to the surface to obtain organic material, and then take it down deep, leaving vertical holes that allow air and moisture to sink into the earth.

When the temperatures drop below freezing, the frost creates a beautiful, crystalline look, a white dream dust that sparkles on the landscape. The sky to the south is dapple gray with a thin, hazy blanket of clouds merged together with silver dimples. The light is diffused, and the sun is an eerie, pale yellow sphere with soft edges in the dull sky. To the north, the sky is dark and steel colored. The fields have been sheared of the crops that they bore during the summer. At the farms down the road and those across the section, all the trees except the evergreens have lost their leaves. The landscape is a simple monochromatic juxtaposition: fallow fields, brown trunks and branches, and a somber sky. As the wind picks up, the clouds begin to separate and move. The sky becomes stratified, a mixture of light and dark clouds interspersed with bands of blue. The temperature drops again, and the first winter storm starts moving in from the west.

I love fall. I love the harvest. Since I own land inherited from my grandparents and given me by my parents, I profit from it financially. But I also wonder about the cost. What is the long-term effect of having a system that jeopardizes the natural ecosystem of the rural landscape to such an extreme degree? I also wonder about the effect of modern agriculture on rural neighborhoods. For instance, it is hard to ignore the inverse correlation between the trend toward even larger farms and the population of Pocahontas County. I have no easy answers; instead, I have mixed feelings of nostalgia and disenchantment, love and disdain as I walk along the road where I grew up. The feelings are strong, and the inner wrestling match seems overwhelming at times. Being in the country is part of my salvation, but it also disturbs me. I like being there with my camera and observing the combines moving through the fields and the tractors and wagons carting the grain down the road. I enjoy breathing the cool air and stopping at my parents' retired neighbors. Often they serve me a cup of coffee and a dish of apple crisp at their round oak table. However, part of me wonders how much I should accept the status quo agribusiness and how much I should try to change it. Then the big question hits me — the one I would just as soon avoid — and it stares me in the face: "Is it possible to alter the system of Iowa row crop agriculture and its lack of ecological diversity, or must it roll on, even if it has reckless consequences for the natural community and the people community, before future generations of farmers and the public at large come to their senses and insist on change?" That is the kind of winter that scares me.

3. Pocahontas County farmers averaged yields of 50.6 bushels of soybeans and 162.7 bushels of corn in 1994. From the Iowa Agricultural Statistics. State Statistician: Jim Sands, 210 Walnut Street, Suite 833, Des Moines, Iowa 50309-2195. <http://www.nass.usda.gov/ia>



Drifted snow in a road ditch, fence, and plowed field. Circa 1995.



Outdated barge wagon once used for hauling grain sits idle at the Deane and Marion Gunderson farm. 2004.

WRESTLING WITH A HERITAGE¹

October Trauma

October is a big month for me. The 25th is my next younger sister's birthday. The anniversary of Martha's entry into the world is the anniversary of my first experience of feeling displaced. As a three-year-old and the third child, I would no longer be the youngest or treated as the darling of our family. The 17th is the anniversary of my grandfather's death in 1956. He had suffered a stroke at his farm the previous day and was taken by ambulance to the hospital in Fort Dodge, 40 miles away. I knew nothing about what had happened until the next morning at school when my siblings and I were called to the principal's office and Mother told us that Grandpa had died.

Often I head into October anticipating a difficult time because of the repressed trauma of those early events, trauma I wasn't aware of until dealing with adult issues in seminary in my late 30s or therapy in my 40s. A traumatic event took place during November after my grandfather's death. It was a dry year with a lot of damage to the corn crop by corn borers that ate away at the stalks so they fell to the ground. Then there was an early snow. A big percentage of the corn crop had fallen to the ground and escaped the head of the corn picker. It was my brother's and my job to pick up the fallen corn. Dad took us to one of my grandfather's fields five miles southwest of our farm. The field was on Highway 3 and three miles east of Pocahontas. Dad left Charles and me there with our aluminum bushel baskets with rope handles. There was a solitary barge wagon with added-on sideboards standing in the center of the field a quarter mile from the highway. Charles and I were to fan out, walking the rows of stubble, picking up ears of corn from the snow and frozen ground. We began our work, walking, gathering the corn, carrying it back, lifting it over the edge of the wagon, and dumping it. I got cold and lost ambition. I told Charles that I was going to crawl under the wagon to keep warm until Dad came back. I figured that he would be back soon. Charles said I should keep moving so that the work would keep me warm. I didn't believe him, and besides, I wanted to curl up and hug the frozen ground. I did get cold, and Dad didn't come back. Finally, there was a spark of hope. I could see his red truck at a distance to the east on the highway, and I thought he was coming to the rescue. Surely he would stop, but he didn't even slow down. I waved, but he kept speeding toward Pocahontas, going about his errands. Eventually, after my hands felt frozen and after I had given up hope of surviving, Dad drove into the cornfield where Charles worked and I waited in agony. Dad was deeply apologetic. He had no idea that the time had gone by so fast or that I was so miserably cold. He quickly got Charles and me into the cab of his truck and took us to the homeplace where Grandma now lived alone and gave me hot water to drink. He then drove us three miles to our home. I could tell that Dad felt bad and that he knew he had been negligent, even though by accident. I know now that had I kept moving and working, I would have stayed warm and probably would have been exhilarated by the work. I also know that Dad was relieved that Grandpa had not been around to observe what had transpired that day.

Now at the age of 50, I look back at that scene and realize that Dad was only 38. He was a young father and farmer. He was also a young man dealing with his father's sudden death from a stroke, dealing with the demands of getting all of the family's 2,000 acres harvested,

1. A 1996 perspective from Gilbert, Iowa.

dealing with the fact that my grandfather left no will, working with the lawyer and the probate courts, and managing to hang onto the land yet pay \$85,000 in estate taxes. Was he also dealing with the kind of complex issues that come up between fathers and sons, especially farmers and sons who farm together? Was he grieving too?



Charles and Helen Gunderson. Circa 1952.

Brotherly Privilege

Several times in recent years, I thought I was healed of the wounds of feeling abandoned. Then I discover myself feeling blue and alone. That was the case in 1994. I was on the go: off to lead a mini-workshop called Doing Local History with Video in the western part of the state and then down to Des Moines to attend a grant-writing workshop at the Iowa Arts Council. When I was home later that week, I would spend long obsessive hours at my computer, learning the features of my new software. I was also trying to print some tables of farm data that I had set up on the computer the year before. It had been a laborious task but it seemed worthwhile. I realized that I resented that Charles was the only sibling who had been groomed to make farm decisions and that he was the farm manager for my land and that of my sisters. After years of neglecting or merely glancing at farm reports that he sent me, I had finally organized the data in a fashion that made sense to me. It was a strategy that I had learned in seminary when studying Greek and Hebrew. I took the material from the textbook or from

the instructor's writing on the blackboard and created my own notebook with charts done in a way that I could make sense of them and learn more efficiently from them. I worked off and on over several years with the sheaf of data that Charles had provided. Finally, one winter day seemed to be the pinnacle of achievement. Well, let's say one phase of achievement. I sat at the computer, opened the data tables, and added the latest pieces of information. But when I clicked the print menu of the new version of WordPerfect to make a set of copies, the system malfunctioned. I often felt that there were gremlins in the computer. There were gremlins the previous December when I was nearly done with the charts. There were gremlins this particular day. On one hand, I knew that having perfect tables of my farm data for the last 15 years would not give me the confidence or skills to be my own farm manager. Yet it was the step that I was trying to take toward learning more about my land. And I felt just as frozen in taking that step, and just as lost and abandoned as I felt on that frozen day in the cornfield with Charles.

There was two years' difference in age between Charles and me, but he was only a year ahead of me in school since he was held back from kindergarten a year. In some ways we were best friends; at least, we did things together that my older sister Clara or that my younger sister Martha were not interested in. Charles and I played "fort" together in the grove. Once I got mad when he used the term "ammunition." I had never heard of it before and said that the word didn't exist. Charles said it did. Another time, we worked on cleaning up the scrap shingles around the corncrib after it was built in 1952. Dad gave us a football for our pay, and Charles and I spent many hours playing catch and running pass patterns. Often we would get identical Christmas gifts: two Erector sets or two Hopalong Cassidy cowboy outfits. In some ways, we were treated too much alike. Our identities merged. When Charles got to be in Cub Scouts and Mother was a den mother, I couldn't understand why I couldn't go, too. Fortunately, Mother did give me a set of the Cub Scout handbooks.

Also, in 4-H and FFA, Charles got to have a grain project, managing a 55-acre parcel of land. Girls in our school in that era didn't get to be in FFA, and although some girls in the county joined boys' 4-H clubs so they could have cattle projects, that was not the case in my family. However, as part of girls' 4-H, I could have a chicken project. I enjoyed the project, but I received little support. It was seen as a lark, and the bookkeeping dimension was not taken seriously. That was in contrast to Charles' field project. His project was grooming him for the role that he has today of managing the land.

As I tried to print out my farm data and came to the grim realization that all my work of preparing the tables had been in vain and were frozen in the computer in a contaminated file, it hit me how abandoned I felt. Under the busy veneer of meetings and obsessive computer work, driven by a vein of perfectionism deep in my being, there was that familiar blue feeling, as though life had lost its meaning. However, the blanket of those subtle but hard to swallow feelings didn't weigh on me as much as they had in previous years. Even in the midst of the feelings, I felt fortunate for the insights that I had gained in seminary and therapy. I was also happy that I had begun studying yoga again and was practicing regularly as well as eating better.

I was also glad that soon I would head up to my home county. I had trees to plant and prepare for winter on my farm northeast of town in Des Moines Township, six miles from where I grew up. It was geographically distant from the other family holdings in Roosevelt Township, even though it was enmeshed in the family system of things and managed by — you guessed it — my brother.

Football and Farming — A Man's World

Once in seventh grade when our class went out to the playground for the noon hour, my best friend Dallas Ives informed me that junior high girls weren't supposed to play football with the boys anymore. I never had been a star player, but I was good. I even recall my mother relaying something a friend of hers had said at the Couples Club bridge game the night before. The woman said that her son Doug, who was a year younger than me, had said, "Wow, I can't believe that Helen Gunderson can play football so well. She can really kick the ball."

Football used to be one of the reasons that I loved the onset of fall. I loved to play the sport. I loved to go to the games. To me there was nothing more wholesome or American than fall weather and football, especially if the teams wore old gold and cardinal red uniforms. Both the Rolfe High School and the Iowa State collegiate teams sported those colors. Dad regularly took me and Charles, and sometimes other family members, to the Iowa State games. I continued to be a proud fan well after I had graduated from there and even into the late seventies when I worked in Sports Information at North Dakota State University. Gradually, as I saw that my life issues were connected with those of other women and I began to view myself as a feminist, I realized that football is one of the demons of society. Oh, I'll still go to a game, maybe once every other year if Dad keeps prompting me to use one of his tickets. I go mainly to hear the band, which is something I have always loved about football. I enjoy marching bands and good brass music, and I like some of the color and camaraderie of the game. But there is no place in football for women, and I am beginning to realize the connection between the kinds of sports that are valued in our society and issues of domestic violence.

All in all, the farm scene along the road I grew up on is for men, just as football is for men. In football, there may be women who are trainers or secretaries along the sidelines of a game, but there is no way for women to play or be part of the decision-making.

In the fall of 1973, I wanted to help on the farm like I had before graduating from high school, but Dad and his hired hands had the work under control. Fortunately, there was a bit of work that they let me do. It was another element that helped me endure that phase of sorting out my life. I was able to start up the Farmall, hitch it to one of our wooden barge wagons, drive it out the lane, down the road to the east, and to the fields that the Dahls now own, the farm where the lone crib stands in the middle of their hayfield.

My role in farming during the fall of 1973 was not a major one, but it was a way to feel involved with the harvest, to be out in the fresh harvest air close to the action of combines and tractors, hauling the grain back to our farm and unloading it. That was the last time there was a space for me to be engaged in active farming. Dad retired that fall at the age of 57. Since then, the land owned by our family has been rented out to long-term tenants.

There may be a lie at work in agriculture similar to a lie at work in collegiate sports. Many university administrators claim that the huge costs of football and men's basketball are justified because those programs are revenue-producing sports. In turn, they will try to cut back other sports, the nonrevenue ones, like women's sports and men's swimming or gymnastics. I have often heard that research shows there are only a few universities where the football and men's basketball programs enjoy that kind of success and that more often than not, they lose money or barely break even. This kind of lie presents itself in the agricultural world when the ultimate value is placed not only on men's work but also on large-scale corn and soybean programs that jeopardize the ecosystem. Men are viewed as the real farmers, while the women at best, in that system, are viewed as farm helpers. Men raise the cash crops, but those crops have a high cost. In terms of bookkeeping alone, one has to ask how

much financial return a farmer earns for all the expenses that have gone into growing the crop. In terms of ecology and ethics, one has to ask whether or not the mile-long rows of corn and beans, dependent on the heavy use of chemicals and sophisticated machinery, are a sustainable form of agriculture. These are big and complex questions.

Nearby Neighbors

Mick and Greg

I recall years ago when Mick and his older brother Greg came to the road. Both had been adopted as infants, and I remember my older sister Clara being excited each time that Norine announced that she and Joe were going to have a new addition to the family. I guess I was too much of a tomboy to pay attention to details about births, babies, and adoptions.

I got to know them better years later when I returned home to live with my folks in 1973. Part of that time, I was a lifeguard at the Rolfe swimming pool. Most of the time, I was sorting out what to do with my life. I had taught junior high physical education four years in Duluth and was working on a master's degree in instructional media technology at the University of Wisconsin-Stout in Menomonie.

During the course of the summer and fall, Greg, Mick, and I went fishing for bullheads at the Des Moines River, had a morning fish fry in their yard, golfed at the local course, and took pictures of the gray tiger cat named Hooch that I had brought home for my parents to have on the farm. We also played touch football in the afternoons when they got home from school. They weren't into organized sports yet nor programmed to think that girls shouldn't play football. Having them as neighbors and being able to do so many activities together helped me keep sane during a time when I felt lost and was trying to decide what to do next with my life.

Holiday Ping-Pong Tournament

During the Christmas holiday season in 1973, I organized a Ping-Pong tournament. Several neighbors gathered at my parents' house for instructions. The people who considered themselves better than average at Ping-Pong put their names on slips of paper in one hat. Those who felt their skill was less than average put their names in another hat. Then we drew names to determine partnerships for a doubles tourney. Half the teams walked or drove the quarter mile to the Reigelsbergers' farm to play their round-robin pool in the basement and to enjoy Norine's snacks. She was a great cook, known at holiday times for her candies, cookies, and caramel rolls. The other half stayed at Mother and Dad's place, playing their round-robin in our basement. Then everyone got together at our place again for more food and for the winners of the two pools to face each other in a playoff.

I had even arranged for trophies. Mother and Dad had a large cardboard box in the basement that was filled with outdated duplicate bridge trophies that they had won during their many years of playing the game. I rummaged through the box and found two with wooden bases and loving cups, took them to Fort Dodge, and had new plates engraved for our holiday tournament.

I recall the walk back from the Reigelsbergers to our place. The sky was black as a bottle of India ink, with the constellations of stars shining vividly through the night made fresh and clear by the cold temperatures and dry air. The gravel road was solid underfoot, my stride was strong, and my confidence was more buoyed than it had been for a long time.

Kaitlin and Joseph

On Sunday, October 29, 1993, a mild autumn afternoon, I got to the county and drove the length of the road, checking the status of harvest. I also took a quick trip to my farm to develop a strategy for planting my trees during the upcoming week. When I came back along the road heading for Pocahontas to stay with friends, I stopped in the yard at the Reigelsbergers' place. Mick and Sue were both there standing near his white pickup truck. Mick and his colleagues, Dan and Roger Allen, had just finished with harvest, the end of long days of labor. Typically, it is a time of relief for farm men and women. I recall the many times during Dad's farming career that he was proud to have the crop safely in storage, and Mother was overjoyed, not only with the success of the harvest, but with the fact that he would have more time to be with her and the family.

I stopped to say hello and to congratulate Mick, Sue, Dan, and Roger on being done. I wanted to be part of the excitement, but I also didn't want to stay long because I sensed that they would be getting ready to go to dinner in town. Their twin children, Kaitlin and Joseph, five years of age, came over to where we stood and talked but stayed a polite distance as if the circle of conversation was for the adults and not for kids. I could hear them saying my name in the background, and as I left to get in my car, Kaitlin and Joseph greeted me and called me by name. I was tickled.

The first time I met Kaitlin and Joseph was in the fall of 1991 when they were two years old. It was at a Pioneer Seed appreciation barbecue for clients, neighbors, and other friends of the family. The twins and their parents were still living in town, but their grandparents, Joe and Norine, lived on the farm and operated their Pioneer dealership in addition to farming. Mick was also part of the seed business and farming operation.

Kaitlin and Joseph were bashful at the barbecue, especially around strangers. They clung to their parents, particularly Sue. She held Kaitlin in her arms while Joseph clung to Sue's leg. I shot a little video, but not much. The lighting wasn't bright enough inside the machine shed where the dinner was held. I also felt uncomfortable about being intrusive with my camera. After all, it was not a public event, and although the Reigelsbergers knew a little about my project, they didn't know much about what I was up to. It seemed important to be tactful and build a long-term sense of trust.

The next time I saw Joseph and Kaitlin was in the fall of 1992 when they were three. I had been in Iowa from August through November and was preparing to drive back to California after Thanksgiving. Joe and Norine were planning to move to a new house they had designed in town, and Kaitlin and Joseph were to move to the country with their parents. I dearly hoped the moves would be completed and the twins settled on the farm in time for me to photograph them there before I had to head west. "Wouldn't it be great," I thought to myself, "to get photos and video footage of the twins during their first weeks of living on the farm?"

The move to the country seemed a natural thing to do. Norine and Joe, who were in their late sixties, could retire and be in town in a neighborhood near their friends. The house on the farm would not be vacant. The younger family could live there and have the open space of rural life. Mick would be living at the heart of the farming operation, and the tradition of having a Reigelsberger family live on that farm would continue.

As ideal as the move seemed, there were complications. Norine and Joe's house in Rolfe wasn't completed on schedule, but Mick and Sue were ready to move to the farm. They had been living in an apartment for several months after they sold their house in town as part of their master plan to move to the country. There was tension, like when Mick and Sue moved their clothes washer and dryer to the house on the farm before Norine was ready to be out. Although Mick and Sue were eager to get out of their apartment and to have more space,

was it originally their idea to move to the farm? Hadn't they become comfortable with the advantages of town life? Mick was even on the town council.

It was wonderful to anticipate children living along the road after a decade of no children residing in the neighborhood, but I wondered if Kaitlin and Joseph would feel isolated from friends. Fortunately, they had peers, Thomas and Jacob Brinkman, who lived with their parents, Robert and Joanne, 1½ miles away. The Brinkman homeplace farm is on the highway near the east end of the gravel road that goes past the Reigelsbergers' and my parents' farms.



Joseph and Kaitlin Reigelsberger. 1992.

In any case, the move was completed. I talked to Sue at the courthouse, where she is a clerk in the county assessor's office. We agreed on a time that would be good for me to take photos and video of the twins. When I arrived at their farm, the weather was cold with a threat of winter storms. Kaitlin and Joseph wore their parkas and were willing to go outside for a photo session. However, they were not familiar with the farm, and the only outside activity they were comfortable with was that of riding their tricycles. Unfortunately, the gravel in the farmyard was too rough and wet for riding their tricycles, and the air was too cold on their faces. So we found a compromise. They rode their tricycles in the old machine shed around and around. I shot video, but it was tricky. I stood inside the large door with the dimness of

the machine shed light in front of me and the dullness of the November daylight behind me. Then we tried another setting — going to the big machine shed/seed warehouse that was essentially empty. Kaitlin and Joseph again rode in circles. The light of the new building was only slightly better. Then I tried to interview them, offering to let them hold the microphone. Kaitlin had little interest in the interview until Joseph grabbed the microphone and wouldn't give it up. Even so, neither of them said much, but I still thought it was worth the effort to record some of their words during their first weeks on the farm. Occasionally, Joseph would chirp "hi" or "hello" into the microphone. I wondered if someday he would become a sports announcer. I also set up my 35mm still camera on a tripod to take photos with available light. Kaitlin and Joseph cooperated and sat astride their tricycles, posing for photos in front of a large sign sitting against the far wall that said "Pioneer, See the Leaders."

The year I moved back to Iowa was the flood year of 1993. I had my hands full settling into my apartment in Gilbert and working on a part-time project at Iowa State. It was not a good year to take photos or ask questions. The fields looked lousy due to weeks of heavy rain, and the crops were bad with a statewide corn yield of only 80 bushels per acre. However, because I was living in Iowa, could use my own car, and had few time restraints, it became more convenient to stop by the Reigelsberger farm to see how things were going. And yet, visiting Sue at the courthouse was the best way to know what was happening. She was reserved but willing to answer my questions. Even though I've known Mick since he was an infant, he appeared to be indifferent to my project. He didn't seem to mind my photographing him in action, loading seed into the corn planter or out in his combine, but for some reason, I was hesitant to hang around too much or too close with my camera or ask many questions. Also, I didn't want to jump out of my car every time I drove past their place in order to see Kaitlin and Joseph. I knew how kids could shift from a phase of being fairly natural and innocent before a camera to a phase of being silly and hot-dogging for the photographer. Also, I wanted to respect the family's privacy and did not want people to think I was exploiting the fact that the twins were novel on the road or that they were such refreshing children to be around.

Early in the fall of 1994 when I stopped at the Reigelsbergers, Kaitlin and Joseph were playing on their swingset. It was a wooden structure featuring two regular swings with canvas seats, a teeter-totter swing, a trapeze, and a slide. The two were active, one on each end of the teeter-totter swing, pumping it back and forth. They sailed high into the fresh autumn sky full of life, full of smiles and showing off for my camera. I tried taking video and photos but it was nearly impossible to focus since they were moving so fast.

I came back several weeks later to photograph the twins. The day was chilly and approaching sunset. The field behind Kaitlin and Joseph was harvested, and I could easily see the grain elevators of Rolfe on the horizon behind them, three miles to the northeast. A glint of sun made the concrete silos shine a pure white. The two had on new hooded sweatshirts that looked warm and snug around their faces, hiding most of their blonde hair. Kaitlin's sweatshirt was royal red, while Joseph's was royal blue. I knew from the last time that I tried to photograph them how hard it was to catch them in action, so I asked them to pose. First, I had them stand together and composed the photo with the harvested field and grain elevators in the distance. But the twins were squirmy and looked unnatural. Then I had them sit together on the trapeze. As I shot the photos, they seemed picture perfect, and the moment seemed special as I looked through the viewfinder. Soon the photo session was over, and Kaitlin began doing gymnastics tricks for me. Even though I had started doing yoga again, I knew I never had been and never would be as limber as she was that day. Unfortunately, when I got the photos from that day processed, I realized the color tone was off; that is, as I had suspected, it had been too close to dusk, the sun had gotten too low, and the scene was too yellow and orange from the golden rays of the sun.

Family Farms

Deborah Fink's book *Agrarian Women* has provided me with a new understanding of the term *family farm*. The phrase became part of our country's vernacular in the early 1900s and was used to differentiate an essential style of farming from a new system based on the model of Henry Ford's production lines in the automobile industry. The conflict between the two styles of farming still faces us today, and a person can see the issues surfacing in the controversy between small, independent hog farmers and corporate hog growers. It is a hot dilemma.

Was the only choice in agriculture between that of a family farm and a huge production line farm? Why weren't other models of farming pursued? One option could have been a communal approach; however, I can see people laughing at the suggestion and shaking their heads at my naivete. They would claim a communal model had been tried in Russia and that everyone in the world knows how that system failed. The Iowa agricultural landscape is so very different than, say, that of Israel with the communal kibbutz. For instance, the landscape of Pocahontas County is laid out in square sections, and many of the farmsteads where people lived were built as far as possible from other farms. Indeed, the way the landscape was laid out was conducive to "rugged individualism" and a lifestyle where, for the most part, the father was in charge and the people, land, animals, and equipment were his property.



T-intersection sign. Cornfield on left, soybean field on right. Circa 1994.

Remaking History

I like the *Dr. Who* science fiction television programs on PBS stations and Madeleine L'Engle's fantasy books such as *A Wrinkle in Time*. What I like best about these works is the time travel where a person can (or must) go back to a critical turning point in history and act in a significantly different manner in order to change society. However, if one connects the male bias that exists in agriculture with today's hard economic times, the fact that row crops and chemical-based farming are prevalent, and growing corporate control of agriculture, the result is an extremely difficult pilgrimage toward a new but better mode of rural culture.

Looking at the question of revenue, I am not sure how many farms could survive, either in the past or present, if the families depended solely on the work of men and the production

of cash crops. It has often been said that it was the income from the woman's sale of cream, butter, and eggs that sustained a family during the Depression years of the late 1920s and the 1930s. A look now at my road, or the nearby area, shows that many of the women have jobs in town. Joanne Brinkman works at the Rolfe State Bank. She lives on the highway near the east end of the road with her husband Robert and children Jacob and Tom, who are in elementary school. Sue Reigelsberger works as a clerk at the county assessor's office at the courthouse in Pocahontas.

Empty Neighborhoods

To the eye of a visitor with romanticized views of agriculture, rural life along the road may appear to be as neighborly as it used to be. There are still four farms. People still live on them, even if they only number eight adults and two children, and they are indeed neighborly. But the old structures of rural areas are disintegrating, the ones where there were a variety of overlapping neighborhoods along the road and plenty of people were at home on the farms during the day with chores to do and other activities to engage in. But now, at any given time during a day, it is possible that there could be no one at home or even in the vicinity of a farm. It could even be that there would be no one at home on the whole length of the road. The children may be in school, the young women employed in town, the men at work in the fields of another farm several miles away, or at lunch at the local lounge. There may also be trips to the livestock market to sell hogs or to Humboldt to pick up a tractor part. People who are retired but continue to reside in the neighborhood may also be gone. Mother could be working at the public library; Dad could be probing to find a drainage tile line in a field six miles away; the two of them could be at their cabin at Lake Okoboji, at a meeting at Iowa State University in Ames, or off to Perry to see my nieces play softball or perform in a play. Velma and Verle Howard might be shopping for quilting material and lawnmower parts in Fort Dodge, visiting a friend at the nursing home, or on a vacation to see their daughter in Hawaii.

Agrarianism — The Great Socializer

While videotaping the 1992 harvest, I realized how much I loved being on the scene again, being around combines and tractors. Although Velma Howard helped her husband Verle and Marjorie Harrold helped her son Paul with the farming, hauling in the crop and unloading it, I was immersed in anger as I watched the harvest activity of the big boys. There were clusters of them along the road and throughout the area, teams who worked for our family, groups who cooperated to harvest the crops grown on other land.

One harvest night, I turned south from my road. I was on my way to supper in Pocahontas but planned to drive by the farm where Grandpa and Grandma had lived. It was dusk. It was chilly, but it was beautiful. At least on the surface, the experience of being there was beautiful. I drove in the lane of the homeplace and parked. There was a lot of harvest activity in the field east of the barn. I sat and watched the dark sky and slow-moving combines, monster machines with high-level headlights. Suddenly it dawned on me with full force that the scene was one of all men and no women. I was appalled and felt frozen in my tracks.

Maybe I would never have been a good farmer. I am rather fickle and can become interested in projects, then drop them when they become too complex or too much work. But as a young person, I had high admiration for my grandfather and father. I looked up to them as people, but especially as farmers, and there was a part of me that wanted to grow up to be a farmer. I recall seeing a video program about the farm crisis in the 1980s, produced by the Prairie Fire farm activism organization. There were interview segments in the show, mainly women's

voices. One woman said, "These men deserve to farm; it's all they have known their whole lives." I'm sorry, but I have no sympathy for such an argument. My response may have been different if the women had talked about a wide-ranging sense of why *they*, including the women themselves, their men, and their families should be able to farm. To make the men the focus of a rationale for family farming, I don't buy it.



Helen on model MT John Deere tractor. Circa 1958.

A Definition

My life has been a restless one pulled between two forces: a fondness for the farming way of life and a disenchantment with its system of male dominance. Perhaps what has been most disturbing was that I never felt I had models or allies in my home county with which to question or change the system. I was torn and thought my psychological alienation to be uniquely mine. After reading Deborah Fink's *Agrarian Women*, I realized that the roots of my anxiety run deep and wide and that they are not mine alone. In some ways, the system is based on principles of male bias that our ancestors brought from Europe and Scandinavia to America. Those principles became part of the fabric of our nation and have been reinforced throughout the decades by government policy. They were part of Thomas Jefferson's model for democracy that viewed farming as a superior way of life and men as the prime citizens of the new nation. Deborah, who is a friend of mine, says in her book:

Agrarianism, the belief in the moral and economic primacy of farming over other industry, rests firmly at the base of the collective U.S. ideological framework. Reaching from the pre-Revolutionary period to the present, agrarianism has been first a founding vision and then a sustaining ideal of the good life. Politicians have returned to it time and again as a way of explaining political programs and rallying citizen support. The authority of the European American pioneers' claims to land rested on their proclaimed superiority as farmers. Motherhood and apple pie, symbols for which wars are fought, spring from an American identity grounded in pure, honest, rural values. Agrarian ideology has appealed to urban as well as rural people, to wealthy as well as poor, to liberals as well as conservatives.

Jefferson's writings contained all of the essential ingredients of agrarianism: belief in the independence and virtue of the yeoman farmer; the concept of property as a natural right; a preference of land ownership without restrictions on its use or disposition; the use of land as a safety valve to ensure justice in the city; the conviction that any man could thrive on a farm through hard work; and the idea of farming as the primary source of wealth for society as a whole. Agrarian ideology was compelling and popular. However, its formulation and the specific political agendas emanating from it have varied greatly. National policy questions about westward expansion and the distribution of lands taken from indigenous inhabitants centered on the application of agrarian principles.



Pioneer family and corn harvest. *Photo from the State Historical Society of Iowa. Found under: Farms and Farming-Buildings and Barnyard-pre-1920.*

Jefferson's canonical citizen was a farmer, and his canonical family was a farm family. He saw the farm and the home as separate spheres, and his agrarian ideology rested on this separation. The citizen farmer would be supported and enabled through the services of a woman who tended to the home and did not venture into his domain.

These ideas were not limited to the era of our nation's forefathers. They were also reinforced by the United States Department of Agriculture and promoted by university agricultural extension programs. A woman was to be in the kitchen or at least near the house, perhaps venturing as far as the chicken coop or orchard, the edges of her domain. I once heard a speaker say that in the toughest of times, when people were settling the land, men and women were more equal in their roles because they both needed to perform difficult, daylong work. Supposedly the division of labor between men and women began later when a farm family had more of a cushion, when it could afford a house rather than a shanty or sod home, when it could produce more than it could consume, and when there were markets for cash crops. In the new era, women could continue their traditional roles of giving birth to, feeding, clothing, and educating the children. They could also have their gardens, raise the chickens, milk the cow, tend the orchard, and dry the apples. Men would do the real work of the farm, working the fields and financially supporting their families.

Lack of Kindred Spirits

When I read what Deborah wrote about the agrarian principles that Thomas Jefferson promoted and inserted into government policy, it was easy to see why I have had so much ambivalence and so much love-hate regarding my rural heritage. On the one hand, the agrarian ideology asserts that people who live on the land and farm are better and nobler than other people, especially urban people. I have unconsciously bought into that system and realize that the reason I loved — and continue to love — the land was not simply a result of pure, unadulterated, natural factors. I loved the land, in large part, because I was brought up in a culture permeated by agrarian principles. These ideals were part of why I thought my grandfather's and father's way of life was so superlative. I also respected my grandmother and the neighborhood women who were gardeners and let me tag along with them; however, I was naive about the issues of male favoritism that they more than likely encountered.

On the other hand, at an early age, I realized that boys were encouraged to grow up to be farmers and that girls were not supposed to become farmers but could become farmers' wives. I knew that I didn't fit that mold, and for a long time I felt alienated and lost. As I write these words, I start to choke up but clench the feelings back. I was sucked into loving the land but faced a no-win situation because there was no place for me to be a part of the agrarian scene. Somehow marriage to a farmer, or marriage of any kind, has not been part of the lifestyle that I have chosen. Now, as I begin to see the patriarchal emphasis in the agrarian movement, I understand why I felt so lonely.

When I was growing up, I had neither role models nor kindred souls who desired to be part of farm life but chafed against patriarchy. I heard neither women nor men who spoke out about the restricted roles for women, nor did I have peers who shared my feelings. I felt like a troublemaker, but to be sure, there was trouble with the system. Reading Deborah's book, I realize that the reason why I had no models or peers who commiserated with me or with whom I could collectively try to make a difference was because our culture is based on Jefferson's agrarian model, which emphasized women in the house and men as the ones who would pursue agriculture. It was not just my parents who modeled this gender-based division of labor. It was the system.

Living in the 1990s, we can see how television has shaped society. It is the great socializer. Whether the emphasis is on romantic love, slim bodies, and blonde hair; violence as a means of solving problems; big-time sports as the model of recreation; or political campaigns run on glitzy ads and sound bites, we understand that the influence of television cannot be escaped. It is a pervasive medium that molds us. We also know that money, big money, dictates television. Similarly, in an era before either radio or television, the male-centered agrarian movement was a pervasive philosophy with the force of government behind it. That force permeated the minds of the people and institutions that inhabited rural America.

Some people would claim that male-centered social structures weren't limited to rural America and that women in other spheres were also discriminated against. I agree, but cannot speak for them; however, I know my own experience. For a long time, I thought that the anguish of loving agriculture and the land and yet bristling against the subjugated role of women was a dilemma peculiar to my family or the Rolfe area. It had something to do with the inadequacies or short-mindedness of the people. Instead, I now realize the mindset resulted from a deliberate policy shaped and pushed by someone who has been held to be so noble: Thomas Jefferson.

The Men's Club

That cold harvest night in 1992 when I parked my car in the lane of my grandparents' farm and watched the harvest activity, it was neat to see the teamwork. In some ways, I was envious of all those men being able to farm together. It seemed like an autumn rite of bonding; they had agriculture by the tail and had their own exclusive club. Even though I owned land, and even if I wanted to farm, there was no place for me in that organization. It also seemed like there was a macho thing about driving a big combine or big tractor. Did you really have to be a man with extraordinary skill to drive those machines? Were there secrets to driving combines that a woman couldn't learn? The same questions could be asked about farm management. I wonder about my land and my brother's role as its manager. When I suggested to my dad a few years ago that I would like to learn to manage my own land, he winced, choked, and frowned. He suggested that things were getting so complex that even he wasn't confident in managing land anymore. Is farm management really all that complex? Does farm management really necessitate having a man to make the decisions? Are there secrets to farm management that a woman could not learn? I certainly had no opportunity to get in on the ground floor of the grooming process for farm management. No girls that I knew were in the vocational agriculture program when I was in high school. In fact, one time in high school, I jokingly said to a friend that maybe I would sign up for shop class. The reason I said it in a joking matter was because I knew that taking the class was an impossibility. I wanted to take it, but since I knew I couldn't, or that I would receive no support for taking it, I had to cover things over with a joke.

The fortunate thing about this project is that it brings me close to the issues: close to the scene of things but not immersed in them; close enough to feel the issues, yet detached enough in the early years of the project to go back to California and reflect on issues and analyze them; close enough to fume and rage for an entire season about the patriarchy of farming, the bigness of agriculture, and the fact that there is little place for me even though I own land; detached enough to distance myself from it, joking about it some, but not really finding things to be funny. This project engages me with the issues. I see, hear, feel, and reflect on them. I would like to think that my anger is softening, my grief is healing, and that I am getting a toehold toward making a difference. I wonder. I doubt but hope for change. If you ask what kind of change I would like to see, I would be hard pressed to say. And if you ask if the hurts are really healing, I would say both yes and no.



The only photo of Helen with a doll or playing dress-up. 1948.

It was too dark that harvest evening at the homeplace to do any photography and I needed to be on my way to dinner in Pocahontas. The next day, I would return to central Iowa where I had been directing a video for the Iowa Master Farm Homemakers Guild. So I left the men's club to do its harvesting

Gender Matters

There was an article in the *Des Moines Register* (November 2, 1993) about a popular University of Iowa professor of economics and history who announced that he was undergoing a sex change and would become Diedre instead of Don. Why did this article catch my eye? Why did I read all of it? Why did it keep prickling at me last night? And why, when I turned on "Talk of the Nation" today on NPR, did I catch the program right in the middle of a discussion of issues regarding transsexuals, bisexuals, and heterosexuals? It is not a show I listen to regularly.

The professor said he had an epiphany that being a woman is part of his identity. OK. OK. I don't understand all that is involved. But let it be. Let him have his life. But will he really be a woman? Will he have to fear the prospects of having breast cancer or osteoporosis? Will he face glass ceilings in the work force? Will he be more vulnerable to rape and domestic

violence? What kind of relationship will he be able to be in? What about loneliness? As he ages, will he have to worry about the kind of poverty that many older women face? Again I ask, will he really be a woman?

The article has lingered with me. What is my perspective as I work on my road project? Why do I hate patriarchy instead of accepting it as easily as some women do? Why do I hate the favoritism given to men? Is it because women seemed like second-class citizens and I hated to identify with them? Were women really second-class citizens if they were the ones who bore the children and fed, clothed, and educated them? As I mature, I realize the great importance of parenting and the role that women have had, and although there are a variety of valuable callings in life, none is greater than that of creating a home.

But is there a deeper reason I look at things the way I do? I recall the night of the holiday Ping-Pong tournament when a small group of us walked back from the Reigelsbergers' home to my folks' home after our round-robin competition. I had been working hard at keeping in shape, doing lots of jogging, getting my heart and lungs to be efficient, and improving my speed. Yet my brother, who was doing little to keep physically fit, could easily stride right past me. It never seemed fair that he could be the last person on the basketball or football bench, yet could outperform me in basketball, touch football, or running even though I was voted the most athletic girl in my class. However, even more than hating the physical differences between the sexes, I have a disdain for the prejudices — the gender role limitations and restrictive molds — of what it means to be male and female.

I often think about that professor in Iowa City and reflect on what it might be like for me to switch genders and go through life as a man. Such a switch could be a hazardous step. I would be even more vulnerable in that gender mode than I am now, appearing as a man, but inside possessing the level of esteem I have adapted to in these many years of being a woman in a patriarchal world. Besides, how would high levels of testosterone affect my behavior? And in what ways would I be hurt by intense doses of verbal male bashing by women who feel angry and wounded by the patriarchy of our culture?

In the 1970s when I was working in sports information at North Dakota State University, I took a course in human development that focused on the identity of women. It was there that I first learned the term *androgynous*. It describes a person who possesses a full range of qualities, including ones that were typically deemed to be masculine and ones that were conventionally considered to be feminine. Examples would include competitive and cooperative, aggressive and nurturing, outspoken and quiet, and skilled in math and English. Becoming an androgynous person is a noble goal; however, for me, it is just as important to value myself for who I am with my unique range of strengths and foibles. I don't identify myself as being a man; then again, I don't perceive myself solely as a woman. Instead, I think of myself as being human—as being a person—as being Helen.

I don't want to gloss over the issues. What is it that people are stumbling onto if there are newspaper articles and NPR conversations about sexual identity? I can remember in the late 1960s when I was first aware of the women's movement. I saw no reason to identify with it. My issues in teaching physical education and putting up with male principals, male athletic directors, and male coaches seemed to have little to do with other issues of the women's movement. It seemed silly to use the term "Ms." However, I now have no place in my vocabulary for either the word "Mrs." or "Miss." These antiquated prefixes define a woman based on whether she has married or not and boil down to whether she has "found her man" or not.

It seemed trivial and misguided to burn bras, and actually, hindsight reveals little or no evidence that any feminist protester burned a brassiere. There were antiwar demonstrations in the late 1960s where protesters burned their draft cards, and at the 1968 Miss America

pageant, feminists threw brassieres, girdles, and other restrictive clothing into a garbage can as their protest against our nation's standards of beauty. Images of draft cards going up in flame and bras being ditched in the trash bucket probably became merged in people's minds, and the rumor of feminists burning their bras got its foothold. Even so, the myth of such activity was a prevalent part of the news media's hype about the women's liberation movement.

Now, in my mind, the act of burning a bra is a great symbol, albeit an expensive gesture considering the high cost of brassieres. There was even an article in the news recently suggesting that ill-fitting, rigid bras worn too long in one day could contribute to a woman's risk of breast cancer. If I ruled the world, going without a brassiere would be the default in our society and would replace the highly advertised, Barbie doll standard that is promoted by fashion magazines and other vendors. Subsequently, brassieres would be worn only when women choose to wear them for comfort or essential health and aesthetic reasons. Fortunately, the girdle phase of the undergarment world, still prevalent when I was in high school and college, has become a thing of the past.

Profiles in Farming

Later in fall 1992, I was back in northwest Iowa during corn harvest. I was done with the video for the Farm Homemakers Guild and would have time to hang around and shoot video footage and black and white photos. Late one afternoon, I stopped at a field along my road at one of the farms a younger sister, Peggy, owns and my brother manages. I saw the combines and wagons at work as I had at the homeplace. The men's club. Not that any of the men are mean spirited and deserving of my animosity. In fact, they are quite gracious, humble people, yet not dirt farmers. I don't think there are any dirt farmers along my road anymore. You can't call someone who has an eight-row combine a dirt farmer.

Don's Story

I shot some footage of Don DeWall driving his John Deere combine and some of Gary Beekmann driving his International Harvester combine, green and red machines in the same field. I followed them with my camera as they moved through rows of corn, sidled up and nosed their augers over the grain wagons, and unloaded the golden corn. I watched them take off again to cut through more rows of corn, Don on the north end of the field, Gary on the south. I watched the distant tractor in another part of the field chop corn stalks. I watched another tractor bring empty green wagons, two at a time, to the field and leave pulling two full wagons. I learned the patterns.

Don is a man in his late sixties who has rented land from our family since the 1950s. In fact, he is also one of my tenants. His father Henry had rented land from my grandfather in 1941, easing Grandpa's work load while Grandpa's only child, my father, was an engineer for John Deere Tractor Company in Waterloo. Dad was working on Grumman aircraft parts for the war effort. There was a shortage of available farm help because many of the young men were in the military at the time. Don worked with his dad for a year, which meant that he also worked for Grandpa, even if indirectly. Then Don joined the army. He was part of an infantry unit that went to the South Pacific in 1944 that helped liberate the Philippines. He says he saw all the battle he ever wanted to see and added, "I would never want to go through something like that again, but I don't regret it." After the peace accord with Japan, Don was part of an occupation force in Japan. He returned to the county to farm in 1946.

In spring 1945 when our family moved from Waterloo to northwest Iowa, Dad was ready to farm. Grandpa didn't need to rent land to Don's dad anymore. A person might say that Henry DeWall was bumped off the land to make room for the landlord's son. It is not an

unusual move. But after Grandpa died in 1956, Dad needed renters for the over 2,000 acres that Grandma and our family inherited. So ever since 1959, Don has been renting land from the family. The parcel that Don's dad had farmed and that Don began to rent in 1959 was the same one where Charles and I picked up corn from the frozen ground in the weeks following Grandpa's death.

Don's combine darted out of its pattern and headed across the field toward the setting sun and stopped. Later I learned that he had driven that direction to find Gary's hired helper, Ray Smith, who Don thought was cutting stalks but had gone home. All I knew is what I saw on that western horizon with the sun beginning to set. Don turned off the engine of his combine, climbed down from the cab, and walked toward me, holding his hand in a funny way under his white leather work glove. Even though he was a long-term renter, I didn't know him extremely well; yet, I thought I knew him well enough to think that he was a gentle guy. Something was wrong. Could he sense my critical vibes sweeping over the field and through the shield of his combine, taking a stab at patriarchy and men in general? Did he want me out of there? Was he thinking, "This interloper. She may be related to the owner, but she has no place here."

I didn't say anything but watched Don move toward me. "Helen," I told myself, "keep cool." Soon I heard Don say something, but I couldn't make out the words. He was 50 paces from me, and there was too much autumn air between us. I looked again at his hand, trying to make out what was he was holding. Don spoke again. I heard him say, "I cut my hand. Can I borrow your car?" I jumped out of my stupor and said, "Sure." I ran toward my car, which was parked behind us, brought it over, and cleared out the gear that was jammed into the passenger seat. By then, Don's farming partner, Gary Beekmann, who has rented land from Dad since 1966, walked over from his combine. Don told Gary he had cut his hand badly in the combine. I told them there were only two seats in my car and it would be better if they took my car. I figured they knew the best route to take to get help and I would only slow them down. Gary and Don drove off.



One of the DeWall family's John Deere tractors and two wagons waiting overnight in a field. 1994.

I stayed behind in the field and simply stood still, soaking in the cold fresh air. I watched the golden skyline in the west as it turned to a mixture of orange and steel blue. As evening settled in, a veil of convoluted stereotypical thinking began to slip from my shoulders. It would take a long time for this experience to sink in. Fortunately, I had done enough photography at sunset in that same field the night before, and I didn't need or want to do more. Standing there in the center of the field, I felt more whole and alive than I had in a long time: alert from the adrenaline that pumped through my arteries; warm from the energy of the land moving up the chakras of my body; fresh from the cold air on my face. Soon, I put my camera in my camera bag, picked up my tripod, and walked to the edge of the field and across the road to Velma and Verle Howard's farm. I could see a light on in their living room. I assumed they were watching the evening news or "Jeopardy." I hoped they were home, and they were. They greeted me and gave me a cup of coffee. We watched out the window every once in a while to see if someone would return with my car. Sooner than expected, we saw the headlights of a car in the field. I walked over and met Gary, who was driving my car.

On the way to the hospital in Pocahontas, Gary and Don had run into Don's wife Geri, who was on her way with dinner for the men in the field. Don switched to her car and they went on to the emergency room. Gary and I talked for only a few minutes, and then I left. It had been a long day. Gary resumed combining. As I drove to Poky (that's the nickname for the nearby town of Pocahontas) to stay with friends, I wondered how much I really wanted to be a farmer, and I certainly saw Gary and Don in a new light. I thought the shock of the accident would cause Don to lie low for a few days, but the next day, he was back in the field combining again. When I asked what had happened, he said he got in a hurry. He needed to oil the chains on the cornhead, but he left the machine running when he climbed out of the cab and down to the front of the combine. That he shouldn't have done. But he said he could oil the chains better if the machine was running. He took the cover off to oil the chains, but the cover slipped. As Don grabbed for it, he got his hand caught in the moving chains, the ones that snap the ear of corn apart from the stalk. Fortunately, Don had on leather gloves that protected him from losing more than the middle finger on his left hand up to the first joint. The combine he was driving was a John Deere 7720. In 1995, he got a John Deere 9600, an eight-row model, with an automatic shutoff. When the driver gets off the seat, or simply stands up, the head shuts off and the chains and knives stop moving.

Gary's Story

Gary's mom is a cousin of Don's dad, and the working connection between Gary and Don goes back to the early 1960s. Gary and his folks moved from Palmer to Poky in the spring of 1959. While he was in high school, he worked for the DeWall boys, Don and his brother Virgil, as hired help doing a lot of haying and corn shelling, mainly for Virgil but also for Don. After Gary returned from the military reserves in February 1963, he again was a hired hand for Don from spring through the fall and drove a feed truck for the Poky co-op in the winter. Gary got a dollar an hour from Don and \$1.15 per hour from the elevator. Gary remembers that as being good pay. He also remembers helping Don build nests in a huge new chicken house in November of 1963 when the bulletin came over the radio that President Kennedy had been shot.

Gary got to know my dad through Don, and in 1966 as a newlywed, he moved to the house on our homeplace farm and rented 200 acres of land. He says that Dad told him, "You know, you don't have to have the best machinery to farm my land. If you buy a new combine for \$7,500 today, in ten years it will be sitting in a grove. But one thing, if you invest in land, it never wears out if you take care of it."

Gary's dad, who always farmed as a tenant, wanted to buy land but was a pessimist about the future so he never took the risk. When Gary worked for the Poky elevator and drove the feed truck routes, he observed that the farmers who owned ground seemed better off financially in terms of net worth than other farmers. And ever since he had been a kid, Gary wanted to own land, so he began to focus on the possibilities of buying land.

Gary's dad continued to bank at his old bank in Palmer, but Gary opened a checking account in Pocahontas because that was where the DeWalls banked. Fortunately, Gary was developing a good reputation, partially because the bankers knew he worked for the DeWall boys, who were highly respected in the community. After Gary began renting from our family, he talked to the loan officer about wanting to buy land rather than purchasing the newest, most sophisticated equipment. He also said that he didn't have the money for a down payment and that he didn't want to ask his dad to sign any papers. Not only was his connection with the DeWalls valuable, but the fact that Gary was renting from Dad also enhanced his standing with the bank. He asked that if he were to borrow money, would someone at the bank be willing to sign the loan papers for him. The bank agreed to loan Gary the money he needed and sign the papers for him. Subsequently in 1971, Gary purchased his first land, assuming another farmer's loan and having the down payment waved. It was 70 acres just west of the field where I got cold in 1956. Gary paid \$600 per acre. He said it was good timing. In 1974, he bought 80 acres west of Poky for \$1,800. Yes, the average price of land was escalating. In 1977, Gary sold his 70- and 80-acre parcels, each at \$2,500 per acre, and bought a 120-acre farm with new buildings, including a new hog setup, six miles south of Rolfe. He paid \$3,440 per acre. The average price for land in the county peaked in 1979. Then there was the depression and farm crisis of the 1980s with the value of land sinking to almost \$750 per acre. Now the value of land has rebounded, and it is inching up close to \$2,225. What does a new combine cost today? A new John Deere 9600, excluding the front platform, costs around \$120,000. A cornhead alone is \$20,000, and a beanhead \$10,000. How many pieces of equipment are sitting in a grove or have been traded in on new equipment since the 1960s? Plenty.

Thirty years after Gary began renting land, he farms a thousand acres. He owns 160 and rents 840. For years Gary and Don DeWall's family continued to cooperate back and forth, shelling, haying, loading hogs, and harvesting. But in 1991 they began to work more closely almost on a daily basis. They bought a 16-row cornplanter together and planted and harvested as a team until the end of 1993.

Gary said that anytime people work together for over 20 years, there are going to be disagreements, but he and the DeWalls didn't have many of them. They would voice their feelings and go on with life. But when they got involved on an everyday work basis, Gary admitted, "It didn't work out like we wanted." So Don, his son Jeff, and Gary decided to split before there were any long-term hard feelings. Don bought Gary's share of the cornplanter. Gary bought his own eight-row planter and said that he had enough work of his own and that the arrangement with the DeWalls had been of no "real advantage to him," at least not in pragmatic terms. After a 30-year farming connection, Gary and the DeWalls don't even load hogs together.

Projections

I realize the image of male bonding that I had projected onto the harvest scene early in the fall of 1992 at the homeplace was just that, it was a projection. And like at a movie theater, with the beam of light from the projection booth landing on the large screen, one could ask where the real image is. Is it on the reel of motion picture film, on the screen, or in the mind of the viewer? Was my metaphorical image of a men's club only in my imagination — a constellation of scenes from my childhood that I was trying to work out — or did the scene

of combines and men at work in that beanfield warrant the analysis I had given it? I often find there is an inner eye at work in my project, an intuition that makes me look at things and photograph them or write about them even if I am not 100 percent clear about what I am seeing at the time.

I am also led to ask questions. Fortunately, some of the middle-aged and older folks along the road have responded freely to my questions. Some of the younger guys like Mick Reigelsberger seem more reticent. In fact, I have not asked them many questions, but I am glad to have learned more about Don and Gary through various conversations. It is hard to get at what really goes on with farming. For instance, what were the reasons the two men stopped working together or what did they think and feel about each other over the years as they worked together, before they split up? How do they view each other now?

Evolving Perspectives

Iowa's corn yield in 1994 was the highest in the state's history with an average of 152 bushels per acre. One afternoon that fall, I went with friends to the tops of the Palmer and Pomeroy elevators to take high-angle photographs of the bumper piles of grain on the ground. Then I returned and photographed the Rolfe elevator. I stood on the railroad tracks two miles west of town and captured the view. The rail tracks were in the foreground; the tall, white concrete silos and huge pile of golden corn in the middle distance; and the blue sky and white pillows of clouds in the distance. It is not an uncommon sight to see grain elevators from far away. They are like sentry towers on the rural landscape. Every town has a grain elevator standing high above its skyline. What is more intriguing is the fact that a person can stand at many points along my road, some places four or five miles away from town, and see not only the elevators in the distance but also the pile of corn beside the silos during a bumper year, waiting to be loaded into grain cars.

Brotherly Assistance

Late that afternoon I went to my farm northeast of Rolfe, intending to plant three trees, apricot and pear replacements for trees that I had planted the previous spring, which died during the summer. I forgot how fast the sun could go down on a late October day. I planted the first tree during full daylight. As the sun was going down, I decided to risk planting another tree, hoping the daylight would last. But it didn't. The sun slipped below the horizon line. I turned on the headlights of my car, pointed them at the spot where I was planting the second tree, and continued to work. The warm day shifted and became a pleasantly cool evening. The air was dense blue and blackish purple. The radiantly twinkling stars were clearly visible. I was energized by my work and from being close to nature. I was aware of the passage of grain trucks and tractors pulling wagons along the gravel road that went by my farm. They were hauling grain to town. I felt whole as I finished the second tree and loaded my car. I tried to start the engine, but it wouldn't start. The battery was run down. I walked up the lane toward the road. A whole convoy of farm equipment went past: tractors, wagons, and combines with headlights like a Martian spacecraft. The crew of anonymous farmers must have finished work for the day. Unfortunately, they passed by my farm before I got to the road and had no way of seeing me or knowing that I needed help. I reached the road and then walked south a half mile to a farmstead. I had never visited the place before but I remotely knew the couple that lived there. I called my tenant who lived across the section, but he was still out harvesting. I thought of calling Dad, but I remembered he was out of town. Then I called my brother Charles and asked if he could come out from town to help. I rather hated to call him and be dependent on him. Besides, I wondered if he would really know how to use jumper cables to start my car.



The Pro Cooperative grain elevator with pile of surplus corn at Rolfe. The tracks belonged to the Chicago Northwestern but were sold to the Union Pacific Railroad. 1994.

Charles came to the neighbors' farm, drove me to my farmstead, helped start my car, and then returned to the road and waited. My car failed again. Charles came back. We jumped it again, and I followed him to town. We stopped in front of his house to talk briefly, and the car died again. We jumped it another time, and I decided if I just kept moving, I could make it to Pocahontas that night. I called my friends in Poky and told them the situation: if I wasn't back within the hour they needed to come look for me. I would take Highway 15 south, and then Highway 3 west to Pocahontas. So I headed out of Rolfe on the highway, rolling through intersections, barely putting my foot on the brake. Fortunately there was little traffic.

Just as I got past the intersection where my road goes west, near Robert and Joanne Brinkman's farm on the highway, my engine died again. Fortunately, there was enough momentum that I was able to steer the car and have it roll into the Brinkmans' yard next to their garage. Their white van was there, and a light was on in the kitchen. I opened the porch door and stood on the porch, ringing the doorbell several times. I even opened the main door and leaned my head inside and hollered, "Is anybody home?" No response. I could see the telephone on the counter just inside the kitchen window. I hesitated to use it, but finally slipped into the kitchen and quickly called my friends in Pocahontas to tell them what had happened and where I was. They said they would come to get me. I felt uncomfortable being in someone else's home without permission, even though Robert's mom, Darlene, had been a very good friend of mine and even though I had gotten to know Robert and Joanne pretty well after his mom's death in the fall of 1993. I left a note for Joanne and Robert, and then went back to my car. Eventually my ride came.

The Reality of Power Brokering

The next day, I called my parents' home, and Dad was there. I told him my dilemma. He had an errand to do in Poky, so he picked me up and took me back to the Brinkmans' farm where we jumped my car. I drove straight into town and Dad followed. I left my Nissan Stanza wagon with the co-op auto mechanic. Then Dad and I both had business to do at Charles' law office on Main Street. We went in together. I thanked Charles for his help and finished my business with him quickly. I could have left then, but I decided to wait in the secretary's area so that I could leave with Dad. The secretary was gone and the door to Charles' office was wide open as it usually is. I am not sure if Dad and Charles were aware that I was still there or if they thought I had left. I overheard a conversation I was not sure I was supposed to hear. They talked about my younger sister, Martha, who lives in Florida, her farm, and conversations they had had with her and her husband. Dad talked about the possibility of getting an interim manager and renter for her. I knew she had had problems for several years with her renters and that Dad had often encouraged her to find new tenants. But why would there be a need for an interim manager if Charles was her manager? Had he gotten fed up with her, or had she gotten fed up with him?

Charles and Dad had a long calculating conversation. How many conversations had they had like this, deciding what tenants should farm what and how much ground one farmer or another should farm in total? They talked in reference to section numbers rather than about whose land they might shift in terms of the tenant relationships. If they shifted rental arrangements, as though they were making maneuvers on a giant chessboard, what effect would that have on my land and who farmed it? Even though I don't know them that well, I feel I have a connection with Don DeWall, his wife, Geri, and their son, Jeff, who rent my land that is near the rest of the family land between Rolfe and Pocahontas. If they shifted the DeWalls around, what would a move on the chessboard mean in terms of the stewardship of my land and my relationship with them?

My overhearing that conversation was a two-part lesson. First, Charles should close the door to his office during sensitive conversations. Second, power brokering is a reality in the farm world. How many similar inside conversations go on like this?

Honoring Grandma

I was beginning to call my farm northeast of town DeElda Farm in honor of my father's mother. DeElda was her name and it is my middle name. It was a way to personalize my farm and to recognize the women's side of land ownership in my family. It is interesting that DeElda Farm is the only land in the family that is not southwest of town in Roosevelt Township. Also, it is the only Gunderson land that originally had Grandma's name written on the deed when Grandpa bought it. The farm is managed by my brother and farmed by a tenant who farms other land for the family. Perhaps I could gradually learn to manage it myself if I can get it unmeshed from the rest of the family system. I started to do that, studying data from Charles, making my own charts, and getting to know the tenants better. I also began to plant trees on the building site. It no longer had buildings except for the concrete foundation of a garage that was moved to Robert and Joanne Brinkman's farm a few years ago so that they could have an extra shed. At the time, I had no thought of returning to live in Iowa. I had agreed with Dad and my tenant that my farmstead would be cleared. I had not thought of calling it DeElda Farm. Dad arranged to have the poor-quality buildings torn down or burned and buried. He looked a long time for a buyer for the garage. Robert finally bought it for \$50. Dad had to keep reminding him to move the building, so I was hesitant to complain or suggest that I would like to build a shed on that foundation again. However, maybe someday I would build a shelter there. At that time, I was getting new trees started there and researching the 17-

acre permanent pasture on the opposite side of the farm. I learned what native prairie plants were there, and I worked with the county conservation board to restore the prairie as much as possible. I called the pasture DeElda Prairie. The name honors not only the women's lineage of my family but the earth and the native state of the Iowa land before it was settled and tilled. Many of them had the attitude of conquering the land and owning it, as opposed to being a part of it.

A Farmer's Car

After Dad and I left Charles' office, I gave Dad a ride home in his car. My car had to stay overnight at the co-op. The problem was bigger than a dead battery. The alternator had gone out and needed to be sent away to be fixed. The mechanic showed me the right way to use jumper cables: two clamps should be put on the good battery but only one clamp on the dead battery with the second clamp connected to the body for grounding the connection; otherwise, there could be damage to the car. The night before, I had trusted that Charles knew the right way to jumpstart a car, but he was not much more confident or competent than I was, and the way he hooked up the cables might have been what caused the damage. But I could not blame him. I deferred to him, even though I realized he might not have known the right connections. I could have gotten out my own jumper cables and read the instructions on the cardboard wrapping. Or I could have asked the neighboring farmer who stopped to see if we needed help to review our cable setup. But I told him that everything was OK.

Dad let me borrow his car until mine was fixed. I went to DeElda Farm to plant my last fruit tree. Then I came back through Rolfe, headed south on the highway, and turned west on my road toward Poky. As I neared the Reigelsbergers' farm on my right, it was late enough in the day that the sun was also on that side of the road — on the north — and beginning to shine obliquely on their mailbox to my left, across the road from their home but facing north and catching the rays of the sun on its front side. Their mailbox is a yellow plastic box shaped like a golden ear of corn. Joe ordered it for Mick and the family when they moved to the farm. The post that holds the box is one that Dan Allen sculpted out of metal for Mick. It is a vibrant green, 12-foot-tall cornstalk with leaves branching out to each side. The pale yellow tassels at the top are made of re-bar rods welded together. The late afternoon light presented a window of opportunity to take a photo of the mailbox. It is only in the summer and in the late afternoon that the sun moves into the north and shines on the front side of barns and other structures that face north. But if a photographer waits too long and the sun begins to set, the tone of the scene becomes too yellow, orange, and garish. I needed to work fast, not only to get the shot I wanted, but also to have time to stop at my parents' farm and say hello. I wanted to report on the status of my car and then to be on to Pocahontas for dinner with friends.

I steered Dad's dusty old car to the side of the road, close to the grass of Reigelsbergers' well-manicured road ditch and yard. It was a 1984 gray and green gas-guzzling Oldsmobile Royal, a boat really. It was not my style and I didn't enjoy having the back seat and trunk full of clutter. However, I have always appreciated the fact that Dad keeps an extra car to loan to family members, and I was content to put up with the farmer things he carries in his car: chains, extra spare tires, work boots, milk jugs filled with water for the radiator, milk cartons stained by engine oil, orange flags for marking tile lines, rags, pieces of white chalk, and signs for his Republican candidates.

I recognized that my Nissan wagon was beginning to have a farm look. It was loaded not only with my camera gear and a step ladder for some trips to get higher perspectives for landscape shots but also with a handsaw and red plastic toolbox that contained such items as a metal tape measure, hammer, pliers, wire cutters, tin snips, pruning shears, a small roll of wire, a ball of twine, and electrician's tape. Also in the car, especially during spring and

early summer, were a spade, sand shovel, tree saplings, and milk jugs to water the trees at DeElda Farm, where the well has been permanently capped to comply with environmental laws for abandoned building sites. Dad agreed that my car was beginning to look like a farmer's car. I took that as a compliment. I was not sure what my city friends would think.

I turned off the ignition of the old Oldsmobile and got out, planning to take a short time to photograph the mailbox and be on my way. I set up my tripod and camera. Then I heard two clear voices wafting across the yard. "Hey, that's our neighbor's car." I straightened up from my work, looked over, and saw Kaitlin and Joseph hovering at the edge of the sidewalk next to the hedge alongside their house. They seemed tempted to run out and talk to me, yet it also seemed that an invisible shield kept them where they were. I would discover later that Sue and Mick have a rule that the twins are not to go any closer to the road than that sidewalk. The traffic goes by too fast and there is the danger of them getting hurt. When I heard their cheery voices and looked in their direction, I was caught in a mixture of feelings. I chuckled to myself and felt very happy that Kaitlin and Joseph had gotten to know Dad well enough that they would call him "neighbor" and be protective of his car. But since I didn't know why they clung to the sidewalk, I thought perhaps they weren't supposed to go out and talk to strangers or people like me if Sue wasn't with them. I finished taking photographs, put my gear in the old car, and then walked over for a brief chat with the twins. I asked if they knew that their neighbor was my dad. I was not sure that the concept of my having a dad and him being their neighbor registered with Kaitlin and Joseph. I realized that someday it would and wondered what they would remember of him. Would they mourn for him when he departs this earth? I hardly remember their great-grandparents, Lee and Eva, who were my neighbors. They moved from the road in 1953 when I was eight. The twins asked me



Reigelsberger mail box. 1994.

why I had not come yet to photograph them getting on the school bus. I was surprised that they remembered. I told them that I wasn't a morning person and that 7:30 a.m. was awfully early for me to get to their place, but that I would soon try. They also asked me how I liked their new bicycles that stood next to the hedge. The last thing they told me was, "Stop by sometime." Gosh gee, I liked these two new kids on the road and they liked me. They were catching the neighborly spirit.

Farming Together

The next day, I returned to DeElda Farm and planted walnut trees that had arrived via the United Parcel Service. My journey back through Rolfe goes south on the highway, then west on my road. It is a route I have taken many times. I slowed almost to a stop by the first abandoned farmstead on the south side of the road. The only buildings left were an old wooden granary, a windmill tower, and a steel grain bin. It was a Brinkman farm, where the hired hands who worked for Robert Brinkman's grandfather, H.D. Brinkman, had lived. Robert now farms the land. On that day, he was driving his combine, harvesting corn in the field. There was an array of wagons and Mick Reigelsberger's pickup truck was parked in the head rows where the corn had already been harvested. I drove on but slowed down again at the section line where there was an opening to the field on the south side of the road and a dirt road to the north. I pulled into the field and parked my car so I could sit and observe the activity. I wondered if I should go back to take photos. About that time, Dan Allen zipped by in his neon blue pickup truck and entered Robert's field. It was to the east of me. When I looked back to the west in the direction of the Reigelsbergers' farm and my parents' place, I saw a tractor and wagons coming toward me. The sun was again right for a photo, and I wanted to finish a roll of Kodak Gold 200ASA film that had three exposures left. I got my shots and saw that Roger Allen was the driver. He followed Dan into Robert's field. It was obvious that Mick Reigelsberger and the Allen brothers were done with their own combining and were lending a hand to Robert to help him finish his harvest.



Mick Reigelsberger and Robert Brinkman team together during planting season. 1995.

The 1995 season was the last year Mick and the Allen brothers farmed closely together. The Allens took on more land this year. They bought 160 acres — the first land they ever owned — and have begun renting my younger sister Martha's land along the road. It had been the subject of the conversation that I overheard between my brother and father. Because Roger and Dan had so much new ground to farm, it meant they could not continue to share equipment and manpower with Mick. They needed to go on their own and purchase a planter and combine. Instead, Mick and Robert are farming together this year. It seems to be a good relationship. They were in high school together and continue to be good friends. Although they drifted apart at one time, Robert says they are close and can talk about anything. Robert's dad David died in 1988 and his mom Darlene in 1993. Mick's dad Joe has been struggling with cancer.

A few weeks ago, it was interesting to watch Mick and Robert when they planted corn. Robert drove Mick's corn planter while Mick delivered the hybrid seed in his white pickup truck and waited for Robert to finish his rounds. I thought of how much they had grown up since I knew them as youngsters. I am aware of some of the demands in their lives. Mick is dealing with his father's illness. Robert is facing complex probate issues and wondering if he can manage to keep the farm. Both are married and have the responsibility for two young children.

Thinking about these men in their early thirties helped me reflect on Dad as a young farmer and father at age 38 when his own father, my grandfather, died. I realized that 38 is a young age and that the challenges he faced were big and stressful. There were no guarantees that things would work out.

A few days after watching Robert and Mick plant corn, I stopped at Velma and Verle Howard's home. I wanted to pick up some walnuts that Verle had hulled for me in his hand corn sheller. I asked Velma if I was intruding on their lunch hour. She said no, that Verle was across the road working at Paul Harrold's for the day and that Paul's mom Marjorie would feed the workers. As often is the case, Velma offered me a cup of coffee, and we sat at her round oak table in the kitchen and talked. I wondered if she knew about the shift in partnerships, of the Allens going on their own and Robert and Mick farming together. I asked if she thought there were any hard feelings between Mick and the Allens or if she thought the arrangement between Mick and Robert would work out. She surprised me and said that one of the key things in a farming relationship is whether or not the wives get along. She added that Sue Reigelsberger and Joanne Brinkman get along well. I suspect that means the farming arrangement is set for a while. It also means that Kaitlin and Joseph will probably be seeing a lot of Brinkman children, Jacob and Thomas.



The last buildings at the farm where the Jordan family lived on the south side of Section 10, Roosevelt Township. Both buildings have been razed, and the land is used to grow corn and soybeans. 1994.



The buildings at the Shimon farm. Circa 1987.

THE WEST FARMS

The Farm Where the Jordans Lived

Russel and Mary Jane Jordan and their children moved to Pocahontas County in 1951. At first they rented 280 acres along the road but eventually contracted 560 acres, which was most of the section, and moved to a building site a mile north of the road. Their children were of an age range similar to our family, resulting in some close friendships. The Jordan driveway was across the road from the lane that led to the Otto farm. At one time, at least eight children would get on the school bus when it stopped at the rise in the road between the two farms to pick up the Ottos from the south side of the road and the Jordans from the north. In 1975, the Jordans moved back to rural Atlantic in southwest Iowa where Russel farmed his family's homeplace farm.



Russel and Mary Jane Jordan. Circa 1945. *The Russel and Mary Jane Jordan collection.*

One of the Jordan daughters, Jeanne, is a film editor in the Boston area, working on PBS-style programs. She and her cinematographer husband, Steve Ascher, produced a documentary about her father's homeplace that had been in the family since the Civil War. Russel and Mary Jane nearly lost it to the bank in the early 1990s. The program, titled *Troublesome Creek: A Midwestern*, won the Grand Jury Prize and the Audience Award at the Sundance Film Festival and was nominated for an Academy Award in 1996. It was shown in theaters across the nation and around the world. It also became part of the public television series, *The American Experience*.

On a Sunday afternoon in 1995, the Shared Ministry of Rolfe (a union of the town's Methodists and Presbyterians) held a worship service to commemorate the closing of the Presbyterian Church and deconsecrate the building. Following the events, I headed back to Pocahontas where I was staying with friends. However, as I drove west along my road, I got a jolt. The last buildings on the Jordan farm had been torn down. I pulled to the side of the road and cried, then continued toward Pocahontas, but the hymn tune "We Gather Together to Ask the Lord's Blessing" kept circulating in my head and a deep poignancy reverberated through my whole system. I knew my reactions went deeper than mere nostalgia for a lost set of buildings. I thought about Russel and Mary Jane who had lived on that farm — and another farm a mile north in the same section — for 24 years before returning to Atlantic. I had some good conversations with them as part of my project. I knew she was dealing with Lou Gehrig's disease and related health problems. However, I had not been in touch with the family for several months. I was so disturbed by the image of the cleared buildings that I called their daughter Pam on Monday and left a message on her machine saying I was interested in knowing how her mom was doing. Pam called back Thursday morning to say her mom had died the night before.

As a youngster, I loved to go to the Jordan farm and tag after Mary Jane while she worked in her garden. She seemed like a second mom even though she had six children of her own. The pastor at her funeral service spoke often about her unconditional love. There was probably not a person at the chapel or cemetery who would disagree. When I think of Mary Jane, it is her love that first comes to my mind. I miss her.

Going back to 1992, on the day after Thanksgiving, I had the opportunity to visit Russel and Mary Jane in their home in Atlantic. Among other things, I asked them how they had met:

Russel: Well, Mary Jane was going to college at Maryville, Missouri. There were a couple of guys from Wiota who went to school there, and she was dating one of them.

Mary Jane: I had a car, they didn't. So I would bring them home for weekends.

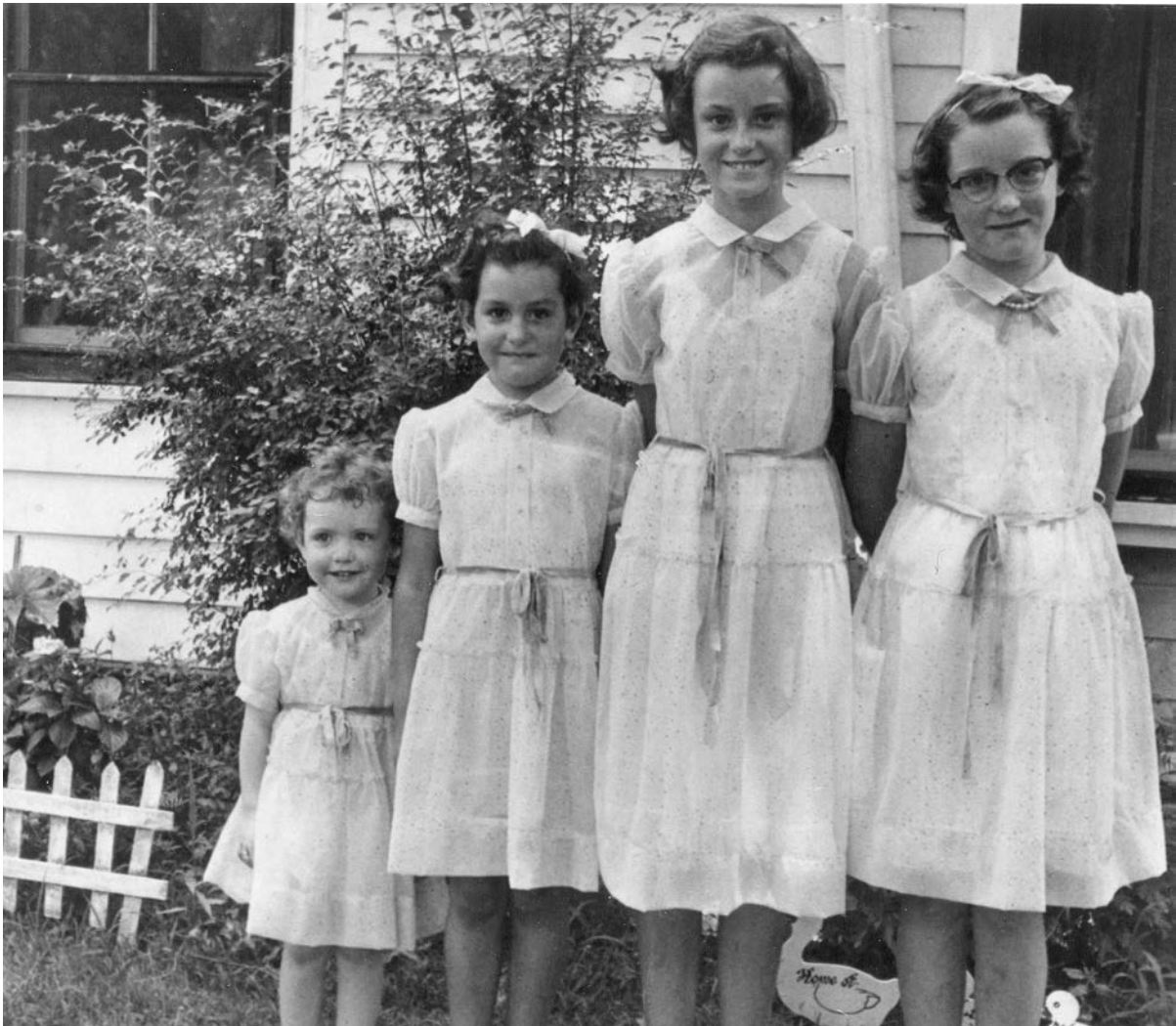
Russel: There was always a celebration in Wiota in August, and [the fellows] were home from summer school. Her date brought Mary Jane over to this homecoming celebration. But he had to work in a booth, so he left her with the other guy, and the other guy introduced Mary Jane and me. We spent a couple hours dancing through the evening, and we got some things going there that lasted over 50 years.

Mary Jane: (giggles) It will be 52 years next year. I've always appreciated the fact that I could stay home and take care of my six kids. I did substitute teach in later years in Pocahontas and Rolfe. They've been wonderful years, and our family — as I discovered after my heart

attack — was all together and such a support for me that I am very thankful this Thanksgiving to be here because it was pretty touchy several times.

I told Russel and Mary Jane about seeing Jeanne's video clip of their sale and asked what it was that sustained them in difficult times:

Mary Jane: We're still dealing with farm credit and the bank, which was very hard on us. But our love for each other, to begin with, and for our family. And then faith — but our faith is a quiet, supporting faith. It's not extreme but it's always there. And we never feel that things are hopeless. We feel that there is an answer, and we will discover it eventually, and things will work out. Especially Russ. He is an optimist. He was an optimist while I was in the hospital. He held the kids all up,



Left to right: Jeanne Jordan (producer of the film *Troublesome Creek*), Janet Jordan Sharpe, Pam Jordan Wolfe, and Judy Jordan Marnin. Russel suggested Mary Jane buy herself a new Easter dress. Instead, she bought fabric and made new Easter dresses for each of her daughters. 1952. *The Russel and Mary Jane Jordan collection*.

and they have told me how optimistic he was. It's just that we have been happy together, and we depend on each other. And it will sustain you through anything — if you have that special kind of love and faith.

Helen: What was it like to get the kids ready on a school morning?

Mary Jane: As of this day, I wonder — and I wonder how your mother — how we got all you kids all ready. But it was hectic every morning, getting all those kids ready.

Russel: One of the big things — the older ones kind of help take care of the little ones.

Mary Jane: I insisted they eat breakfast, and I always have. And I think when they went to college, they forgot all about it. As Russ said, since there was so much difference in age. Pam was 13 when Jon was born. The older girls would help the younger ones get ready. It was as if I had two families, the three older girls then Jeanne and the two boys.

Russel: It does seem like it would be almost an impossibility to get them all ready.

Mary Jane: I know.

Russel: I don't really know how we did do that. Mary Jane did it, I didn't.

Mary Jane: (giggles) But everything was a mess when they left, and I would have to go around and pick up everything.

Russel: I think the kids pretty much went out at the same time to the bus.

Mary Jane: I have a picture of all of them ready to take off on the bus. (Sighs) I don't know how I ever got that picture taken before the bus came. And some of them like Judy were always ready — she was so organized. She would never be late, and Pam was usually busy getting some of the littler ones ready.

Helen: Roles have shifted these days for what men and women do in families. How would you describe your roles then?

Russel: I was kind of the breadwinner and so forth, and Mary Jane took care of the kids and getting them ready.

Mary Jane: (chuckles)

Russel: I just gave her support. We never disagreed about how to discipline any kid — at least not in front of the kids. If she said something, I gave her support.

Mary Jane: The same if he reprimanded [someone], because that was very important. And we never quarreled in front of our kids.

Russel: She pretty well took care of getting them ready for school, and I was out feeding the cattle and waved at them as they went out the driveway.

Mary Jane: And now with our boys, especially with Jon, it's so different. And Jim, too. Jim will cook when he has to, and they have a different role than Russ had.

Russel: Of course, Jim's wife, she teaches school. She has to get ready, too.

Mary Jane: They have three children.

Russel: They ride to school with her, so Jim doesn't go out of the house much until he gets them all squared away and gets them off.

The Jordans were strong Democrats, and even though my parents were Republicans, I had a secret admiration for Russel and Mary Jane, who were the only liberals I knew in the township. In 1992, we also discussed politics:

Mary Jane: I don't like the way they use the labels "liberal and conservative." People have misconstrued the whole meaning of either one. Some people call liberals a bad name, and some call conservatives a bad name.

Russel: Don't you think the Republicans and the Democrats really want the same thing for the country, but they think we ought to go about it in a different way? I think we put a little too much emphasis on Republicans and Democrats. It seems to me that after a guy gets elected to office, he ought to be working for the good of the state or the nation or the people and not be so doggone worried about whether his party is going to reelect him or not.

Helen: What I see as a difference — and of course, you can't generalize — is that the Democrats have had a bit more empathy for the underdog.

Mary Jane: Yes, I think so. They're more down-to-earth.

Russel: If wanting the kids to have a good hot lunch at school and wanting a young mother that some guy went off and left with a couple of kids to get a little help, if wanting all that to take place is being a liberal, well, I'm glad to admit I'm a liberal because that's what I think we ought to be doing. I've never been much of a supporter of Ronald Reagan. I thought he was a poor actor and an even poorer president. But when he was running for his second term, I heard a farmer in Texas describing what he thought ought to be done for the farm situation. And he almost word for word said what I would probably had said if someone had asked me the same question. And here he was, supporting Ronald Reagan, thinking Reagan would do that for him. Of course, I thought Reagan would be the last guy that would do it. So that made me wonder if we aren't trying to achieve the same thing and spinning our wheels in both directions, trying to get it done.

Helen: Have you ever been a Republican?

Russel: Not really. My father was a Democrat and my grandfather was a Republican clear back in Civil War times, but he switched over to being a Democrat. And the story is that people asked him why he switched, and he said, "I didn't change. I'm the same as I have always been. It's the party that changed." My dad was always a Democrat, but I really never voted a straight ticket until just this November. I got kind of fed up with George Bush, and I thought he was saying some things that weren't accurate. I kind of got fed up with him and some of the Republican tricks that they tried to pull and so I decided, "Well, I'll vote a straight ticket, and I know there are some Republicans on [the ballot] that deserve my vote, but tough luck, you aren't goin' to get it."

Helen: So how did you vote on the Equal Rights Amendment in Iowa [in the 1992 election]?

Russel: I voted for it.

Mary Jane: We both voted for it, and all of our family voted for it. And we were very disappointed.

Russel: I was dumbfounded that it didn't pass. I can't imagine why anyone would vote against it, but I guess ...

Mary Jane: Well, the opponents brought in so many weird arguments against it that had nothing to do with it, and some people must have been impressed.

Russel: Would you have supported it?

Helen: Absolutely, I would have.

Russel: I thought you would.

Mary Jane: Oh, I thought you would, too.

Russel: I don't see any reason to not ...

Mary Jane: Russ has always been in favor of women anyway. He had four sisters and four daughters, and I guess he couldn't afford to do anything else but support women.

Russel: I'm very supportive of women because I think a lot of women are real sharp and have abilities to see things that men don't really have. I think I got the point driven home when I was on the school board up at Rolfe. Sometimes we got complaints from people in the district, and it seemed to me that when the women would have anything to say, they would always have some substance and know what they were talking about; whereas the men would more or less be mad at some teacher or mad at the superintendent ...

Mary Jane: For no good reason.



Mary Jane and Russel Jordan at their home in Atlantic, Iowa. 1992.

Russel: But the ladies, when they came, they had a real legitimate reason to be complaining. And I thought, “Why aren’t these gals on the school board instead of some of the men who are picking over whether the kid is going to start on the football team or whether he isn’t?”

Helen: Do you consider yourself to be a farmer?

Mary Jane: Yes. I was happiest on the farm. When I was growing up, I never thought I would marry a farmer.

Russel: Oh, didn’t you?

Mary Jane: I became a schoolteacher, but [farming] appealed to me, and I always loved living on the farm. And so, yes. Because I love to garden and always had big gardens, and I do all the bookkeeping. So it’s been interesting being a farmer’s wife. And I don’t think Russ ever wanted to do anything else. When he was in high school, his superintendent thought he would have made a good lawyer, which he would have.

Russel: You know, Rolfe was a real unusual place. The first time I went to the Rolfe area, Nels Pedersen took to us the farm, and we looked the

farm over, and we decided to rent it. I didn't get into Rolfe. But then we had to do some fall plowing, and Ezra Tebbin who lived on the farm — he and Charlton [the landlord] were having a dispute. Ezra didn't want to give up part of the land, and Charlton wanted him to. So Ezra didn't want to do the plowing. So Nels said to me, "I'll go up with you, and we'll find somebody to do the plowing." Then we got into Rolfe, and there were a half a dozen old guys, sitting on benches around Main Street. Some of them didn't look too clean, and I thought, "By gosh, I think maybe we should make Pocahontas our headquarters. This doesn't look too good." So we went into Freeman's Restaurant, and there was a big crowd of people. So Bennie Allen — he was kind of a big operator and had three or four guys working for him — and they all came into the café to eat. Nels Pedersen knew Bennie and went over and got him and introduced me to him. And Nels told Bennie, "Russel is moving down on the Charlton farm, and he wants some fall plowing done. Would you be interested in plowing it?" "Yeah, probably," Bennie said. He always smoked a pipe and was kind of a big feeler sort of a guy. "Yeah," he said, "If we didn't have to do it this week — if you give me a little time." I said, "Just so you get it plowed before the ground freezes is all I care about." He said, "Well, I've got these guys over combining beans and as soon as we get the beans combined, I'll meet you over there at the farm at 2:30, and we'll see what's got to be done." So we went over and figured out how much to plow, and he told me how much he wanted, and it was reasonable. So I said, "Fine, you go ahead and do it." So then we did other things in Rolfe, and gradually, I got to thinking, "Well, Rolfe isn't too bad a town." Then when we got moved up there, we had a Rolfe telephone, and the kids went to school at Rolfe — hardly ever did go to Pocahontas. We did practically everything in Rolfe. I wanted to buy cattle and went into the bank before I moved, and Guy Butler [the bank president] was there. So I searched him out and said, "I understand you're the banker." "Ya, sort of," he said. His hair was disheveled and I thought, "He doesn't really look like a banker." But he said, "I won't be able to deal with you, but I've got a guy in here that is moving into town, and he's going to be the banker, and you'll have to get acquainted with him." So it was Bob Dixon. Actually, I was Bob Dixon's first customer. So I went in and told him we were moving onto a farm and wanted to buy some cattle and to borrow some money. He said, "Well, you come in and we'll take care of you." So there, we had the bank lined up. And then I found Spike Robinson, the John Deere dealer, and Rickard's Hardware, and I thought, "This is all we need. We don't need anything from Pocahontas. It wasn't long until I didn't even notice the guys sitting on the bench. They all turned out to be pretty nice guys anyway. I kind of hate to go back and see the place. The buildings — a lot of them are gone, and there are no implement stores anymore. It's just kind of a grain elevator place. I don't have anything against an elevator, but towns

can't survive with just an elevator. The town doesn't seem the same. I feel bad about it.

Helen: I never thought that farming wouldn't be valued.

Russel: It shouldn't be that way. The loss of the family farm and family farmers will be a real loss to the nation because it's an efficient way of producing food and it's a way of life. I don't say we ought to all have just 80 or 160 acres. We need more land to utilize modern concepts, but we still should have ...

Mary Jane: More young farmers.

Russel: And we're coming into a real critical area where the average age of the farmers in Iowa is getting pretty close to 60 years old. If we don't get something going to get this in the hands of younger people, I'm afraid that corporations like Cargill and the Japanese conglomerates will be taking over the farming situation. That will be real bad. But the price of land has gotten higher and with the economics of the farming situation, it's going to be pretty hard to get these young guys to [take it over] on a large scale unless they get a little help.

When I got ready to leave Rolfe — we lived in the area for 24 years — I could stand out back of the house and count 15 farms where the buildings were either abandoned or gone completely, but where people had actually been living when I moved there. The theory is that every time seven farm families go out of business, a business in town goes. So you can see, this was just one neighborhood, but it was happening all around there.

The Shimon Farm

Only a set of steel grain bins stands on the site that Marshall and Marjorie Otto rented and farmed from 1948 to 1963. While living there, the family consisted of eight children. Several of them were close in age to the kids in my family. Marshall and Marjorie had two more children after they moved from the neighborhood.

Shirley and Judy were the oldest siblings and two of my better friends. I would often walk or ride my bicycle to their place to play with them or the Jordan girls who lived across the road. One time, I tried riding a calf in the Otto feedlot but fell off in the soupy manure. Both girls were smart and diligent about their homework. In fact, Shirley was the salutatorian of the class of 1962, and Judy was the valedictorian when she and I graduated in 1963. Fortunately, I was able to sit next to Judy on the school bus and smooth out my homework.

Judy was also a speedy runner. I recall in elementary school, when our class dashed out of the building for recess, that she was one of the first students to get to the other end of the playground. Although the school started girls' basketball when Judy and I were freshmen, she and Shirley did not participate. They had chores, such as milking the cows, that needed to be done morning and night, and could not stay in town after school. Two years later the school began a girls' track and field program. Because it was a springtime sport and the cows didn't have to be milked until a later hour, Shirley and Judy were allowed to join the squad. I never realized that when practice was over, they still had chores to do at home.

Judy claims that her family never thought they were poor even though they realized their clothing was second rate and they were allowed to purchase new shoes only once a year. She also says that there were classmates at school who more photogenic and affluent than her and her siblings, but the gap in wealth didn't bother her.

I didn't think of the Ottos as being poor. I realized when I visited their home that they had only two small bedrooms for all their children. In contrast, my family had more bedrooms that were larger and, at most, two children shared a room. I also realized when I visited the Otto home that they did not have a dishwasher. We did at our house. However, when I visited



The gate and lane at the Shimon farm with grain bins in the distance. 1994.

the Ottos, I was mesmerized and impressed with the swishing of water when they washed their drinking glasses. I am happy to say that I do not have a dishwasher, that I enjoy washing dishes by hand, and that when I rinse my drinking glasses, I think of the Otto family and some fun times at their farm. To me, the Ottos led a simple life centered on basic conservative beliefs. I did not view them as being poor. Instead, I thought they were affable, intelligent, hard working, resourceful, and indifferent to popular social trends.

A couple of years ago, Marjorie loaned me a reel of home movies that she had taken of the farm in the 1950s. It was intriguing to see the farm operations and fun to watch the girls, wearing dresses and walking on stilts. Judy says one of her fondest memories of the farm is that of long summer days and writing poetry while shepherding their sheep as they grazed on grass in the road ditch.

When the Ottos traveled, they never stayed in a motel or ate in a restaurant. In the 1950s, a trip meant that five girls would be seated across the back seat of the family's small, two-door car. They leaned on each other's shoulders while their two young brothers, one an infant, sat in front between their parents. In the early 1960s, the Ottos had a red Rambler station wagon. The Ottos butchered meat from livestock they raised on their farm and had plenty of it stored in their freezer. Marjorie took out packages of frozen ground beef and wrapped them in several layers of newspaper to take on trips. She also packed a camp stove. When it was mealtime, the family stopped at roadside parks, cooked the meat, and served it with homemade bread and vegetables from their garden. On rare occasions, the family stopped at grocery stores to purchase a loaf of bread or other essential items.

On the days when they planned to visit relatives in Minnesota, Marshall and Marjorie loaded their sleeping children into the car at 4 o'clock in the morning. When the family arrived at their destination, it was time for breakfast. A reciprocal event happened when their Minnesota relatives came to Iowa. The Otto children would wake up in the morning and discover all sorts of cousins sleeping at their home who would soon join them for breakfast. Judy says the families were both equally poor.

Judy says that they never stopped for soda pop. Instead, she imagines that they drank water. She says that the only time she recalls having soda pop as a child was when she was nearly four years old. It was on the day her younger sister, Kathleen, was born and Shirley was in kindergarten. Judy's dad took her to the City Service gas station in Rolfe and bought her an Orange Crush soda for five cents. Judy calls the outing a "memory of indulgence."

Judy also recalls when she was around 13 years old and ate in a restaurant for the first time. It was Mother's Day. The Ottos were friends of a Polish couple who lived in Pocahontas. Mrs. Moskalski worked at the Town Pump café on the southwest edge of town. She made special arrangements for the Ottos to have their own table and a family-style meal with lots of good food. Judy says, "It was the first time I remember that my mother did not cook a meal, and it was grand theater, a real experience."

The Ottos were Baptists, belonging to independent congregations that were a part of the General Association of Regular Baptists. When the family moved to the Rolfe area, they drove to Algona some 30 miles away for Sunday worship. Later, a mission pastor began a Baptist church in Pocahontas, and the Ottos joined the congregation. One time they invited me to a wiener roast. It was fun until I realized there was an agenda and that the evening would end around the bonfire with testimonials. Everyone was encouraged to come forward and be saved. I did not rise to the occasion, but my younger sister, Peggy, with the encouragement of some of the younger Otto girls, met with the pastor after the bonfire rally and was saved.

Judy and I had an interesting experience on our senior class trip. The all-day outing started early in the morning with our class of 36 students and a couple of advisers all traveling by school bus to Omaha. We saw the sites of the city. For sure, we toured Boys Town, and we probably also went to the Joslyn Art Museum. I recall little else of the day until the evening when we were scheduled to go to an amusement park across the Missouri River in Council Bluffs. When we got there, the place was closed. The class chose instead to go to a grade B movie at a theater in a run-down part of town. However, I knew that Judy and her family, as strong Baptists, did not believe in going to movies. I chose to not go to the show. Instead, Judy and I went to a shabby restaurant on a dimly lit street. We sat in a booth, ordered something simple, perhaps some pop, because we had already eaten dinner and Judy had little spending money. We talked, did some homework, and went back and sat on the bus. Finally, the show was over, and the rest of the class loaded onto the bus for the four-hour drive back to Rolfe. In some ways, my choice to be with Judy instead of going to the movie was unusual. I can't recall any prior experience of standing by someone who was in the minority. On one hand, I had no other option. She was my friend, and I knew her family's beliefs about movies. On the other hand, I was miffed that the amusement park was closed and that the title of the movie was so unappealing. It seemed foolish for the class to go to the show simply because there was nothing else to do. Indeed, I think I had a more interesting time being with Judy at the restaurant than the class had at the movie. Besides, the class advisers went to the show with the other students, and Judy and I were trusted to be on our own. I don't know about her, but I appreciated that trust and felt pretty grown up.

I recently asked Judy if her attitudes toward attending movies had changed during her adult years. She responded by saying that the General Association of Regular Baptists was very strict. When she was young, she and her family assumed the rules against smoking, drinking, dancing, card playing, and going to movies — what she calls a whole package of “don't do” rules — were the norm. However, over the years, even though they are still conservative Christians, she and her family have adopted a much different attitude. For instance, they occasionally go to movies or play goofy card games.

After high school, Judy attended Cedarville College, a liberal arts school in Ohio where Shirley was a sophomore. After a year, Judy transferred to Omaha Baptist College. In 1967, the Baptists moved their campus to Ankeny, Iowa, where Judy got her undergraduate degree. She says that she worked almost full time while she was a student. She was a psychiatric technician at a psychiatric hospital, worked in sales for the J.C. Penney Company, and later took a job with a loan company. After graduating from college, Judy moved to the suburbs of Chicago and worked for the Baptist Publishing Company where she wrote, edited, and typed materials for publication. Eventually she worked in the development office and as a reference librarian at her alma mater in Ankeny. The school is now known as Faith Baptist Bible College and Theological Seminary. When Judy was in her mid-30s, she married and focused on being a homemaker. She and her husband live in northern California. The youngest of their three children, twin girls, graduated from high school in 2003 — 40 years after Judy and I graduated from Rolfe.

Shirley got a double degree at Cedarville, majoring in both math and physical science. After graduation, she took a job as a computer programmer for two years at Northwestern Bell in Omaha. Next she moved to the San Francisco Bay area to work as a programmer for the Missiles and Space Division of the Lockheed Corporation located in Sunnyvale. She then married and says that she retired to be a mother. However, she took university classes and

obtained an accounting certificate. Eventually she worked as an accountant for a large San Jose school district. She and her husband retired in 2002, sold their house, and moved to northern Arkansas after being in the bay area for 34 years. None of the Otto siblings live in Iowa. Two of the ten live in California, and the rest live in the Midwest.

Marjorie Joens had grown up near Plover a few miles northwest of Rolfe. Marshall Otto was raised in South Dakota. They met each other through family connections, and prior to their marriage, her older sister had married his brother. Marjorie and Marshall were aware of the Shimon farm because her parents, Henry and Esther Joens, moved to the neighborhood and had been farming the nearby Grant farm for five years. Marjorie and Marshall ended up renting the Shimon land and living there from 1948 to 1963.

After they left Rolfe, the Ottos moved to Carroll, Iowa. They were there six years and managed a motel. Marshall also got supplemental work at a seed corn company and selling appliances at a hardware store. Later the family moved to a farm near Cresco in northeast Iowa. In the 1980s, they moved to Arkansas where Marshall and Marjorie lived in semi-retirement. Marshall died of a massive heart attack in 1994. Marjorie continues to live in Arkansas. She is related to several people in the township between Rolfe and Pocahontas who are connected to the Joens family. Robert Joens, until he began a phased retirement in 2002, farmed the Grant property. He lives a mile from where the Ottos resided on the Shimon farm.

The farm along the road where the Ottos lived belongs to Margaret Shimon and her family of Pocahontas. Her husband, Bernie, died in 1994. He was a retired pharmacist who



Grain bins at the Marge Shimon farm, northeast quarter, Section 15, Roosevelt Township. 1989.



had inherited the land. His grandfather, Albert Shimon, bought the place in 1892 for one of his sons to live on and farm. That means that in 1992, the place qualified as the first Century Farm along the road. Marjorie and Bernie's former son-in-law, Bruce Wheatley from south of Pocahontas, farms the land now.

One person who has particularly impressed me in my road project is Agnes Sefcik who once lived on the Shimon farm. I met her and her son, Dennis, in 1992 when I was 47 years old. At the time, I had my share of frustrations with my brother Charles who was managing not only his own land but also the land that my sisters and I owned. At least once or twice a year, some communication from Charles about my farm would pique my anger, and I would stew for several days, thinking I would never have the knowledge nor courage to manage my own land. One of the fortunate aspects of this documentary project is to be able to be close to the culture that I grew up in but be able to step outside the mind-set of my family and learn about other people and their perspectives.

Agnes had been gracious early on in my project and loaned me photographs to copy. We also had a fine telephone conversation, and I looked forward to interviewing her. But when I met with her at her farm in 1992, she said very little in response to my questions. I couldn't tell if she was shy, didn't like me, or simply had not had the time to build trust in me. My interview that same year with her son, Dennis, who is a Roman Catholic priest and was serving a parish in Laurens at the time, made up in length and detail for the sparsity of remarks from his mother. When I asked about his mother, he said:

She was one of the lucky girls because her dad permitted her to go to high school, and she graduated in 1929. She and Dad married in 1933 and lived on what we referred to as the Shimon place. That's where the two oldest boys were born, Albert in '35 and me in '37. Then we moved in March of 1940 to the place southwest of Pocahontas where Mother still resides to this day. Mom and Dad started as tenants on the Shimon place, then when they moved onto [their new] place, they purchased it, and it was the homeplace for us, the Adolph Sefcik family.

According to Dennis, his mother was a very conventional farm homemaker. She took care of the housework, the raising of the kids, the garden, and the chickens and didn't want to be

bothered with any of the details of the farm business. Her husband took care of that. She was aware that various papers such as those for the payment of income and property taxes would arrive at their home, but she didn't know what they were about. Dennis went on to say:



Left photo: Agnes Sefcik. 1940. *The Agnes Sefcik collection*. Right photo: Agnes and son, Dennis Sefcik. 1993.

Dad just wrote out the check and that was the end of that. And borrowing money, he would go to the bank; of course, he had such a relationship with the bank that he could go to the bank and borrow just on his name. When the loan was due, he would pay it, and that was the end of that.

My dad died in 1966 at the age of 57. Now at that time, my mother had just learned how to drive a car and got a driver's license at the age of 56; and the only reason she did that is because Dad insisted she do it. Now she knew hardly anything of the farm operation. She knew she had to sign her name when they were buying farms, and she knew she had to sign her name on mortgages, and she knew what she was signing, but for the rest of the operation, she didn't know zip about it.

She often says there were two people who helped her learn about agriculture. One was the attorney that Dad had for many years. His name was Frank Shaw. Now there are pros and cons of who liked him and didn't like him, but that's a separate story. Dad had excellent trust in him, and Frank always dealt fairly with Dad and gave him excellent advice. So when Dad died, Mom went to Frank, and he steered her in the right direction to make the decisions that had to be made; and of course, she did very well with it. The second man, believe it or not, was the man at the grain elevator whose name was Eldon Anderson. Now Eldon guided her through some of those decisions because he knew

that she had a tendency to not trust someone until she knew him very well. So he would just present her options and say, “Now you just think about it. Many of these options are going to be all right, but I want you to think about it, then in a week, give me a call on the phone, and I’ll do it however you want it.” And she learned to trust him. So dealing with elevator procedures — the payment of bills and reading a bill — she learned all that. And now she can pick up the computer sheet and tell you the bushels and the foreign matter in there, the moisture content and the dockage, shipping and storage, whatever it is. But you see, two critical people helped her learn all that.

Dennis also described all the various details of farm business, from seed selection to choice of fertilizer to shipping arrangements to bookkeeping, that his mother was still doing the year of our interview (1992) when she was in her mid-eighties. I left the interview inspired and thought, “By Jove, I should set a goal of managing my own land by the time I am 56,” the age Agnes was when she began making decisions about her farm. The timing would work out that I began managing my land when I was 52. Fortunately, both my father and brother have been extremely cooperative. But without Agnes as an inspiration, perhaps I would still be stewing twice a year about how unfair it was that only my brother, and none of the girls in my family, was groomed to make decisions about our land.



Adolph Sefcik and his sons Dennis (left) and Albert (right) at the Shimon farm. 1939. *The Agnes Sefcik collection.*

The Grant Farm

Don Grant and his brother Duncan grew up with their parents, Cap and Addie, on an 80-acre farm that the family bought in 1920. Don was gifted at telling stories about rural life and willing to reflect on the vast changes.

One of his reminiscences is about the plowed field on the north side of Lizard Creek where there was a pasture that his dad rented in the 1920s and 30s and where Duncan and Don played baseball. Don said farm teams from various towns would play there regularly. Some of his teammates lived downstream a few miles and would walk up Lizard Creek, pick up my dad at his farm, get Bob Sernett, then make their way up the creek to Cap's pasture/baseball field. The boys used planter disks for bases and had to be careful where they placed "home plate." If the catcher stood with his back to the ditch, a wild pitch or foul ball could end up in the creek. And if the diamond were turned the other direction, with "home plate" away from the creek and the outfielders standing with their backs to creek, they had to be careful that line drives and home runs didn't also end up in the ditch. It had a steep incline and tall grasses and was a treacherous place to go to find a lost ball.

Don's parents, Cap and Addie, died in the early 50s, then various members of the Joens family lived on the farm. The place has been abandoned since the 1960s. The last buildings were torn down in the early 1980s. Don sold his share of the family's 80 acres to his brother, but Duncan died and the land was inherited by Duncan's wife, Lois Grant.

Don affectionately and proudly called his dad a *dirt farmer*. By that, Don meant Cap lived a simple life, had little money, and relied on hard work, knowledge of the land, and weather patterns rather than capital resources to survive. Don also meant that his dad was comfortable with having dirt under his fingernails and that Cap loved the soil and figured if he was good to it, the soil would be good to him. Don remembers watching his folks struggle, his dad's heart attack at the age of 41, and looking west for rain in the drought of 1936 when the farm was in jeopardy of being lost.



Top photo: Don Grant on left and Duncan Grant on right with their collie dog, Scottie. Circa 1925. *The Don and Rosie Grant collection*. Bottom photo: Lizard Creek. The plowed field is where Cap Grant rented pastureland, and his boys and their friends played baseball in the 1930s. 1994.

Don was just as affectionate and proud when he talked about his mom. He often claimed that she was a master gardener and cook. Addie also had an accredited flock of white Leghorn chickens and got a premium price when she sold eggs to the hatcheries in town. The extra income helped the family make it through the Depression. Don said that they ate the Leghorn roosters:

My mother canned them, boiled them, pressure-cooked them. She had two-quart jars of chicken in the basement, and so we would eat chicken and we'd eat eggs. And occasionally a hog, maybe a steer, and those were really a highlight. That's why I couldn't stand eggs or chickens for years.

The Grant family also shipped eggs in a six-dozen case by train to Don's uncle in Chicago. He sold the eggs for 50 cents a dozen, whereas locally Addie was getting only a dime in the store and 20 cents at the hatchery. His uncle sent the check and case back by train.

Addie had at least one goose, maybe a couple that were butchered for Thanksgiving, or maybe a duck, but never a turkey. They would have the Thanksgiving meal at their house, including lots of pies.

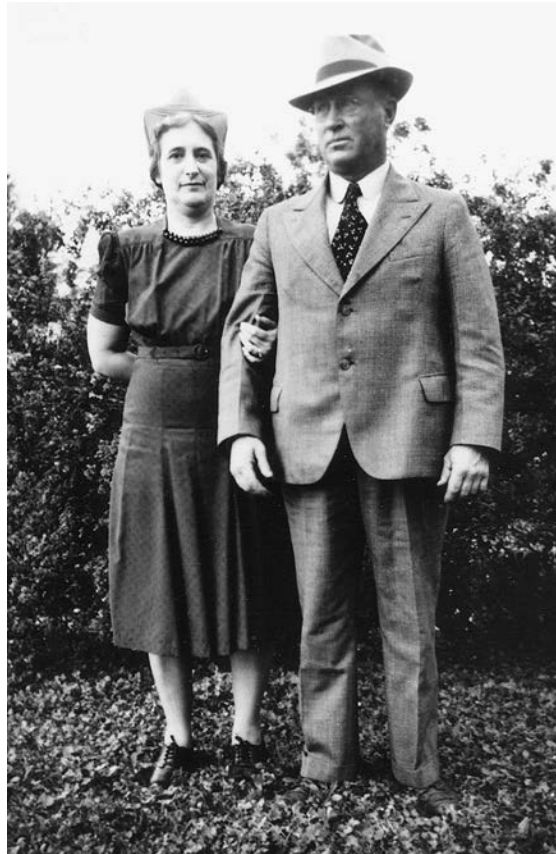
She had apple trees, cherry trees, a strawberry bed, and raspberry bushes. She also had a big grape arbor and made grape juice. Don said, "Anything you could grow in a garden, she grew. Tomatoes, lots of tomatoes ..." And he added, "There was something good to eat in that garden at any time of summer."



The Grant farm, north side, Section 15, Roosevelt Township. Circa 1938. The *Don and Rosie Grant* collection.

Addie was a master pickle maker, but Don got tired of helping her by carrying water and changing the brine. They also had a tin canner for canning sweet corn. His grandma and aunt would come to the farm and get 50 or 100 cans. Then the family would prepare another 100 cans to keep and another 100 cans for giving away. Don said:

Mother was always taking a basket of something into town. When we went to town, she knew somebody that needed something to eat. She would take a few jars of this and a few cans of that in and give it to somebody. She had enough in the storm cellar when she died to last an entire family of four for over two years.



Addie and Cap Grant. Circa 1948. *The Don and Rosie Grant collection.*

Don's wife, Rosie, says that Addie cooked on a cookstove and didn't have any cupboard space but could put a meal on the table like there was nothing to it.

Cap and Addie also butchered their own meat and would stay up late at night cutting the pieces. Don recalls Addie rendering lard and packing it in jars. He said with fondness:

That was pretty tremendous because she always made doughnuts while she was rendering the lard. And coming home from school, I could smell those from a mile away. There would always be a dish towel at the end of the stove, piled with doughnuts.

Addie also played the piano and made sun bonnets that were prize items for purchase at church bazaars.

Don and Rosie met when they were students at Iowa State College. She had grown up in Minnesota. When she was only two years old, her mother died. Her father, Matt, never remarried. He was a musician and entrepreneur. Rosie says every time she hears the song lyrics, “A hat isn’t a hat unless it’s worn with a rakish tilt,” she can envision her dad with his hat over one eye — “just as jaunty as could be.” She also says Matt was a gentle and conscientious man and someone she could turn to about anything she needed to talk about.



Rosie Gulden Grant. Circa 1925. *The Don and Rosie Grant collection.*

I’ve known Don and Rosie for over a decade, and they have told me many stories about Matt. My impression is that he has been a great influence on both Don and Rosie. They are salt-of-the-earth people, funny, tender, gracious, and tolerant — not much different than how they have described Matt.

Although Don had been a childhood crony of my father’s and they did things like putting up a ham radio antenna together, I did not know Don and Rosie until I began this project. It is a gift to have gotten to know them. They have made me feel at home.

I recall a certain day in 1993 when I drove to my road for a photo excursion. As I turned onto the road, I was stewing about the obsessive nature of my project, about all the trips I had taken down that road, and the hundreds of frames of film and videotape I had already shot. I knew it was valuable to persist and pursue a project in depth, but I had also come close to thinking it was futile to try to find anything new. I breathed deeply and said to myself and the

universe, “May I see something I haven’t seen before.” In the next instance, I looked toward the fence near the place where the Grant building site used to be and saw a horseshoe. It was tucked inside barbed wire. The wire was stretched around a wooden post that stood as a sentry on one side of the lane opening into the cornfield.

The fence was ripped out in 1997 because with modern agriculture, there is no longer a need for fences since there are no longer any hogs, horses, sheep, or cattle to keep from roaming the countryside. I made arrangements with the Grant tenant, Bob Joens, who lived a mile away, to obtain the horseshoe. I asked how long it had been on the fence. He that said it had been there as long as he knew and that he had farmed for the Grant family for 35 years.

Don worked for Collins Radio during the first half of his career, then became an engineering professor at Iowa State University. Rosie was an eighth-grade English teacher in Ames. They have six children and several grandchildren. At least a few are superb gardeners and musicians, following in the tradition of their parents and grandparents.



A horseshoe on a fence post near the entrance to the field where the Grant building site used to be. 1994.

The Farm at the End of the Road



Above: Paul Harrold harvests corn at the westernmost farm. Southwest corner, Section 9, Roosevelt Township. 1994. Below: A warning sign for a dirt road that was the last section of the road. 1995.

Sometimes, when I was growing up, the farm at the west end of the road was inhabited, sometimes it was not. The school bus didn't always go there, and when it did, it had to travel a mile on a dirt road that was sometimes muddy and treacherous with a bend at the end where the farmsite sat in a large grove of trees. It seemed like a dead end but was only a T-intersection. When the road conditions were questionable, John Hopkins, the school bus driver, would edge the bus to the beginning of that dirt road, peer ahead, and discern whether to take that road or go around the entire section to get to the farm. The kids on the bus would get caught up in the decision and cheer when Hoppy would forge ahead, taking the direct route on the questionable road and making our ride to school shorter.

According to Joe Reigelsberger, people used to say this farm was at the "center of nowhere" since it not only marked the boundary between school districts, but between phone territories and other jurisdictions.

Cheralellen Young lived on that farm. Her dad was a hired hand for the owner. When Cheralellen and family moved to the farm in 1957, in the middle of her sophomore



year of high school, it was confusing when she, her sister, and brother waited for the Rolfe school bus. Part of the reason was that they had never lived in the country nor ridden a bus nor did they know other youngsters on the route. But another reason was that buses from the Pocahontas, Havelock, and Rolfe districts all turned around where they waited. Now neither Havelock nor Rolfe have districts of their own and are part of the Pocahontas Area Community Schools. Rolfe graduated its last senior class in 1990. The town lost its high school and elementary school but continued to be the site of the PACS Middle School for over a decade.

This farm is also where Joy Cornwell's great-grandparents, Herman and Elizabeth Wiegman, and their children lived from 1888 to 1913. Until recent years, the farm was owned by out-of-state people, Dallas Ives and his sister Sally Ives Quigley. They were also on our school bus route, and Dallas was a classmate of mine in high school and at Iowa State. After graduating from ISU in physics, he went to NASA in Houston where he worked until retirement, doing computer programming for the space shuttle. His older sister, Carolyn, was enough older than he that she went to country school for her first years of education. Their mother, Mildred Taylor Ives, moved to Lake Havasu after her husband, Arlo Ives, died. Then she moved to southern California and later to Oregon to be close to her daughter Sally, who is a physical therapist. Mildred died in 1998, and I felt deep sadness at the loss of another strong figure in my rural heritage.

Paul Harrold rented the farm from the Ives family for several years, has now purchased 80 acres of the land, and continues to farm it. The silo was torn down in 1995, and the county used the rubble from it and the concrete feedlot to prevent further erosion in a portion of Lizard Creek along Highway 3. The mile-long dirt road that traveled to the west farm was closed in the 1991, making it more difficult for Paul to have access to the fields.



Farm "ruins" at the west end of road, including a feedlot pump, rolls of barb wire, tin, and the foundation of a silo. The place is now completely cleared and tilled for corn and soybeans. 1989.



Roger
DeWolf¹



Don
Grant



Rosie
Gulden
Grant



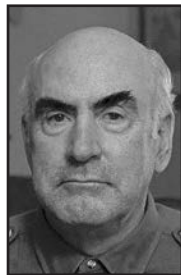
Deane
Gunderson



Marion
Abbott
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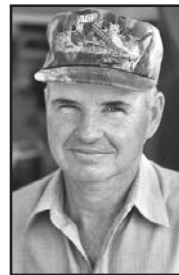
Mary Jane
King
Jordan



Russel
Jordan



Marjorie
Davis
Harrold



Paul
Harrold



Wanda
Peers
Hodgell



Velma
Benton
Howard



Verle
Howard



LaVonne
Page
Howland



Joe
Reigelsberger



Norine
Arnold
Reigelsberger



Agnes
Bunda
Sefcik



Dennis
Sefcik



Marjorie
George
Simonson²



Lucile
Caryl
Taylor³



Phyllis
DeWolf
Thompson

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2. Photograph used with permission from the Landmark Christian Media Group of Greensboro, North Carolina.

3. Photograph used with permission from Saul Studio of Humboldt, Iowa.

PEOPLE AND THEIR STORIES

Introduction

My road is like a long, thin ribbon. There is a gentle ripple to it as it rises and falls with the undulations in the prairie landscape. This ribbon has been the connecting strand as I contacted people, asked to interview them, and collected their thoughts and anecdotes about their rural heritage. Of course, each family's history is unique, and family members have varying perspectives. Indeed, no two people remember the road and life along it in the same way.

When I started this project, I thought that I would focus on my peers who rode the school bus with me. However, most of the interviews were with people of my parents' generation when they were in their mid-70s. There were three reasons for beginning with them. First, it was relatively easy to approach the septuagenarians and convince them that their perspectives should be recorded. Second, they had long-range perspectives with anecdotes reaching back as far as the 1920s. Third, there was the risk that they would be dead or not fully functional if I waited another decade to record their thoughts. As it is, some have died and others are frail with diminished memory and not capable of the quality of conversations that we initially had. Of course, others still have excellent memory.

I did interview one of my peers, Paul Harrold, who was six years behind me in school. He lives with his mother, Marjorie Harrold, on a farm along the road. I had not known their family well and was happy to interview the two of them together. Subsequently, I have felt comfortable enough to stop by their place for an occasional chat and do things such as borrow a Model M Farmall tractor from Paul or pick apples with Marjorie. Indeed, I feel enriched by the relationships that have resulted from this project.

Conversely, I felt uncomfortable about asking other people who live or farm along my road for recorded interviews. There were several reasons for my discomfort. First, I had the impression that many of these people did not seem to think that their perspectives were as important to the historical record as the reflections and anecdotes of septuagenarians or octogenarians. Second, I felt intimidated around some of them. At times, I had little or no trouble engaging in casual conversation with certain farmers while they were unloading grain at a bin site or at the local cafe. However, I never had the gumption to make appointments for more formal interviews with them. I feared that they would laugh and turn me down. Third, there were probably those who were aware of my bias against large-scale agriculture, intuited that I was not fond of their aggressive style of farming, and were reluctant to be interviewed by someone whose agenda was quite different than their own.

I have spoken by phone or in person with several of my other peers about their memories of the road; yet, I have not recorded our conversations nor fleshed out their perspectives for this project. After conducting a dozen oral history interviews, I began to realize that logging, transcribing, and interpreting the material that I had already gathered was a big enough challenge. To arrange for and conduct interviews with other peers who are now dispersed to the far reaches of the United States would have been a daunting task. Perhaps some future researcher will rise to the challenge.

The gravel roads were created in the 1920s and 1930s atop the old dirt roads that were originally carved into place with horse-drawn plows and scrapers, using the soil from the ditches for the base of the road. The metaphor of the ribbon is helpful because it represents the fluid nature of the road. Sure, there are more rigid definitions for Iowa's country roads.

Pocahontas County engineer Steve Camp says that the top of an ordinary gravel road is 24 feet wide with a 66-foot right-of-way from fence line to fence line. There is a subgrade layer of earth and then a base of rock with a surface of new rock, such as gravel, that is trucked in about every two years and bladed smooth for farm-to-market traffic. He suggests that if a new road were to be built, it would be done differently than the established roads. However, he says, "We are left with what history has given us, and it is not economically viable to change the roads." Even as an engineer, Steve agrees that the analogy of a ribbon is a good one for country roads because they follow the ebb and flow of the topography and can shift their position after decade upon decade of use. If viewed from an airplane or the top of a grain elevator, the roads definitely look like a pattern of ribbons floating along the surface of the land.



Roosevelt township gravel road heads west between fields of corn and soybeans toward the Howard farm on left and Harrold farm on right. 1995.

A metaphor such as a ribbon is especially important for this chapter that consists solely of oral history material. If understood metaphorically or perhaps mythically, the road extends backward and forward through time, perhaps like a ribbon of DNA. In one sense, this ribbon represents the social flow of people who have migrated to and from the road. In another sense, the ribbon winds through the minds of many people. It has no rigid definitions. It is no longer a nearly straight-line object that spans five miles of Iowa farmland; it is a symbol of the collective imagination that generates many feelings, reflections, and stories.

I am thankful for the storytellers who have participated in this project, and I use the term storyteller with great respect. The real fun and meaning in conducting interviews and listening to the recordings of these people has more to do with how they said what they said than with the content of their remarks. Unfortunately, not even the best tape recordings nor transcriptions of these conversations are as wonderful as the actual encounters with the participants. Although conducting this oral history project was hard work and presented a fair number of challenges, there were moments that were truly sacred or transcendent. These storytellers have told their personal stories so that the rest of us can understand what life was all about at a certain place and time.

The following material consists entirely of reflections and anecdotes from the dozen interviews that I conducted from about 1992 to 2002. Because seeing this kind of material on the printed page is different than listening to it, I have done some minor editing to make it more readable. Some reminiscences are funny; some are poignant; some are rather common. For instance, there are lots of people raised in rural Iowa prior to the 1950s who could tell about the big meals that women served to the crews of threshers who came to their farms. Other recollections are unique to a particular family or individual. Whatever the case, all the segments of interview material in this chapter have their own colors, shapes, and textures and are organized here like beads strung on a necklace. These segments can also be likened to strands of thread or yarn. When woven together, they exemplify the cultural fabric of the rural area where I grew up.

The Words of the People

Road Conditions

Don Grant: Denzel Johnson was our mailman. That was back before women were able to do things like that (chuckle). It was always a mail “man.” He had a car most of the time, but I can remember when there were old mud roads, and in the worst weather, he would come around in a buggy. It was a high-wheeled buggy with a cover on it and side curtains for real bad weather in the winter or summer. Otherwise, he drove a car. And that was a big event. There wasn’t much else happening. I can remember as a kid watching for the mailman because if we got a newspaper, we got it through the mail, and we could see him about half a mile west, slogging through the mud. I can remember him driving his car on muddy roads when he probably should have brought the horse, and I can still see him walking along that west road with his bag of mail; he had gotten stuck and was walking. My dad got a lumber wagon out to give him a ride, and my mother fed him, of course. She fed everybody who went by even if she had to throw herself down in front of their car. Dad took him down the road, and a couple of neighbors hitched up a wagon and took him the rest of the way because it was almost dark by the time he got over there.

At some time when I wasn’t too old, there was a big road improvement project, and my brother, Dunc, and I would watch. They were grading the road with horses and hand graders, a thing that slid along the bottom and scooped dirt. Some of them had wheels, and they would scoop loads up and dump them on the road, digging the ditches out that way. One of the grader operators was a woman. That was the first time I saw a woman working on equal terms with a man at anything other than working in the house. That was unheard of, but she was as good as any man. There’s no reason why she shouldn’t have been. That was an early breakthrough of the sexual barrier to women working at men’s jobs for equal pay. I’ll never forget the fact that there was a woman running one of those things. I don’t know if there was any emotion other than, “Hey, she’s pretty good! She’s doing it just like the men do.”

One year, the road was muddy with deep ruts, and when a set of ruts got too deep, you moved over and made another set while it was wet. This was usually in the spring and fall. In the winter, the ruts were frozen, and if you were lucky, they were frozen before they got too deep. But driving a car in the winter — you hoped you remembered where the ruts were so you could take another path outside of them. If you got stuck in those things, you would have to get out, jack the car up, and shove it through a rut. Of course with the old Model Ts, tires were fragile. I have said that no one really appreciates a flat tire unless you have had one in a Model T and had to patch it, too. To take it off, the old rims were a bearcat to get apart. You’re there in the mud with your car jacked up, and you’re trying to get this tire off, patch it, pump it up, get the tire back on the rim, put it back on the wheel, drop it back down, and then hoped you can get out of the mud.

Moving Day

Don Grant: Everybody helped everybody else move, that you knew. Back before moving vans and trucks, a lot of moving was done with any kind of vehicle you had. And it usually was a hayrack because a hayrack was big enough to put a bed and mattresses on, pull the racks with horses, and hope you didn’t load them down too much on the old mud roads. Even the first gravel roads were a little bottomless until they got them built up. If you knew who was moving, say the Joneses were moving from their old place down here, and somebody was moving from here to the place where the Joneses were living, you had to coordinate the routes you took because there was only one rut, and two hayracks don’t pass worth a damn on the old narrow country roads. I can remember people having to wait at a corner because they should have gone around the other way.

Tempers could be a little short because it was cold and wet. The first of March was always the worst day of the year. You tried to cover stuff, but you didn't have lots of cheap plastic to cover things with back in those days. And you were moving into a house and it was cold. You moved the stoves, in most cases the space heaters, and in many cases the cookstove. That was a beautiful job to lift a cookstove around, get the chimneys hooked up, and get the space heaters hooked up. All the doors were open, and here were people carrying stuff in. They had muddy boots, walking all over the house, but were trying to get things in the right room the best they could so they were settled as much as they could be. And the women were trying to clean the floors, which they couldn't do until everything was in. Then some fool came in carrying something and tracked mud all over the floor. There really wasn't any other way to do it. We couldn't stop and take our overshoes off.

I used to be glad when we would leave. I wasn't very old, but I could help carry little stuff in. I did feel sorry for the poor women. I still remember the faces of the women as they were looking at the devastation; it was going to take them days to clean it up. Everybody was cold and wet, and it would be two days before we could get the house warmed up. You didn't even have the stove in, and they had to get supper some way. There wasn't anyplace to make coffee, so some of the other women would come along with a coffee pot full of coffee; of course, it would be getting cold. Utter chaos and misery is all I can remember about moving. Dropping mattresses off the hayrack into the mud. Nothing ever went well on moving day that I can remember. There was nothing good about it. I don't remember ever helping anybody move when the weather was nice and things went well. My wife is a mover, and I'm not. I hate moving, and I think part of it harks back to those moving days. Now all you do is hire a van.

Maintaining the Road

Deane Gunderson: The county maintenance, as far as snow, is five times better than it used to be because of how their trucks have multiple uses now. It used to be they would have maybe three snowplows for the whole county, not counting the towns. So you would wait until the snowplow could come out and get by your place. But now they have their big rock-hauling trucks that haul rock onto the roadbeds in the summertime and spring. Those trucks are also useful as snowplows because they can be loaded up with rock and have a snow blade put on them. Those big, heavy, dual-axle trucks can push more snow than the old snowplows used to. Easily.

Marion Gunderson: One thing I remember about this road is that Don Grant's mother was not well her last years. I suppose, especially the last year, the road clearing crew kept our road open so that if she had to go to the hospital or have any help, people would be able to get to her.

Deane: There was one particularly wet spring. Our road from here east, especially the last mile, had water standing in the tracks. The tracks were about six or eight inches deep, and part of the bottom of the tracks got fairly firm. You just drove that road to town and splashed the water out of the tracks. Of course it ran back in again, but it was like that for weeks after weeks.

Driving to School

Verle Howard: I first had a Model A that we drove to school, but I didn't take any other kids. Then when I started taking the Reigelsbergers and the Zemans, I had a four-door to haul all those kids. I think I got enough from hauling them to pay for my gas. It was a real hassle waiting on the girls. Nobody would ever be ready on time, and tempers flew. Mary Therese Reigelsberger was a bearcat. (chuckle) All the fellows smoked, and we would smoke up a storm the last two miles before the school; and of course, our coats would stink of cigarettes. I had a twin sister [Doris] who would come home and tattle, and all hell would break loose. (chuckle)

The First School Bus

Helen: Your husband, Monk, started a service station in Rolfe. Tell me about your role in the business and with the first school bus.

Lucile Taylor: I became a part of the oil business, the Royal 400, right away when we were married in '42. Of course, '41 was Pearl Harbor, and in May of '43, Monk got a call from the president: they needed him. It didn't make any difference that he was 30 years old and married. So he enlisted because he didn't want to go in the army, but he hated to leave his business. Like I told you, that was his first love. So I didn't go back to teaching school, I just kept the little old station going, and I drove the tank wagon. Some of the boys from the farm didn't have to go, and I used to think, "Well, gee, if we just had a granddad or dad with a big farm, we wouldn't be over there in the service." But I hauled the gas out to the farms. There wasn't a power takeoff on our old truck. You pailed it with a five-gallon pail, and those farm boys were really good [to help]. If they knew I was coming with gas, they would be there to pail the gas for me. We had a hired man at the station, and we hauled all our gas out of Fort Dodge. So I would drive to Fort Dodge to get that. Then we got the first school bus in Rolfe. We owned the truck, and the school owned the chassis, and the kids paid us every month — or the parents paid for the kids to ride on the bus. Of course, it wasn't as big a bus as they've got now. The big farm boys were riding the bus, too, and we carried a scoop shovel. You know, they didn't always call school off, and if we needed to scoop a little to get out of a driveway or something, why those boys, Roger Witt, John Shimon, and Norb Alig, were really good help. They rode the bus every day. There was Arlen Christensen, too. They were really good [boys]. If you needed help, they knew how to use those scoops.



A bus from the Pocahontas Area Community School District travels along the road after letting Kaitlin and Joseph Reigelsberger off at their farm home. Circa 1994.

Marjorie Simonson: The first school bus was terrible. It just had benches. There was a bench along the middle of it, and that was where the exhaust pipe went back. So you had to be real careful you didn't burn your legs on that pipe. But if it was real cold, everybody tried to sit in the middle by the pipe. I thought that was the craziest bus, and later I thought, "That's dangerous."

Traveling Sales People

Helen: What do you remember about traveling sales people who came to our place?

Marion Gunderson: Oh we had ice cream, we had milk delivery, we had the Minnesota Woolen Mills, we had, I don't know what all. The milkman we got to know pretty well because he came, what, twice a week or so.

Deane Gunderson: I remember some of them. I don't remember how often they came. The Fuller Brush man would come.

Marion: The Watkin's man came.

Deane: The Watkin's guy and magazine salesmen.

Marion: Some of them we welcomed because we needed their services, and others we weren't too happy to see because they were a nuisance.

Deane: Seed corn salesmen. Everybody wanted you to just plant a bushel because it would just be terrific, you know.

Helen: I remember when they used to give the first plastic bags that I knew of. They came from Pioneer.

Marion: Yes, and I still have some of those; they're the best plastic bags that there are.

Helen: Do they still give them out?

Marion: Nope, I don't think so. I haven't gotten any from Joe for a long time. But I like them.

Deane: Do you mean the bags that the seed came in?

Marion: No. The kind I use in the kitchen.

Animals

Velma Howard: When Karen and Kelley were small, they wanted ponies. Don Shoemaker from Rolfe advertised two ponies. So we bought the ponies from him. I only remember Buttercup's name. Anyway, at that time, we had fences around the buildings, and there was a wire gate. Those ponies could figure out how to unhook that gate. Every time the kids tried to pasture them in the area between the house and the barn, those ponies would work around until they could get out. And away they would go, back to Don Shoemaker's place. Then Verle would take the girls in the car and go to town. They would find the ponies, and the girls would have to ride the ponies home or they would hang onto the reins and make the ponies run along behind the car. Verle would just mutter and storm all the way home. Finally, the kids didn't ride the ponies anymore, and the ponies were old. One of Verle's cousins, Gary, who lived south of Palmer, was here. He had little girls, and those little girls spent the whole afternoon riding the ponies. So Verle gave him the ponies, and he took the ponies home. Gary kept the ponies until they died of old age. He, too, cussed Buttercup because she was always the one that managed to get out.

Verle Howard: We even had a milk cow.

Velma: We had a milk cow for almost three years. It was Randy's chore to milk the cow. And then Randy went to Washington, D.C. — he won an REC trip in his junior year of high school — and Verle had to do the milking. The old cow kicked him out of the barn, and she was shipped to the locker and butchered after that.



Chicken at water trough at the TJ Family Farms near McCallsburg, Iowa.

Mary Jane Jordan: We always had chickens.

Russel Jordan: In fact, when we lived at the south place, we had a hatching flock from Beckord's Hatchery. They would take our eggs for hatching eggs, and they would bring roosters to put with the hens so the eggs would be fertile. And these roosters — they called them Barred Rock — they were gray and white speckled and ornery. They would never tackle me when I would gather eggs.

Mary Jane: But they would me.

Russel: Yes, they would fly at Mary Jane.

Mary Jane: And scratch my legs.

Russel: So one day, I had to go somewhere and said, "Well, you'll have to gather the eggs." And she said, "Well, I hate to do that because those roosters will attack me." So I said, "I tell you what you can do. Put on my coveralls and my overshoes and my cap, and those roosters will never know the difference. You can go in there and get the eggs, and everything will be fine." But she hardly got in the door when one flew right at her. And how they knew the difference, I don't know.

Mary Jane: It was really bad for the kids because they couldn't go gather the eggs either. The roosters were just so ornery.

Helen: Did you clean chickens?

Mary Jane: I always dressed chickens for our family, but I never dressed them for anyone else.

Helen: All by yourself, or did you get the kids to help out?

Mary Jane: No. I did it by myself as a rule. Russ would help sometimes.

Russel: I would cut their heads off and pick the feathers. Then Mary Jane would do the rest.

Mary Jane: Jim and Gini still raise chickens on our farm.

Russel: But nowadays, there's a place at Kimballton, Iowa. Jim and Gini put their chickens in a crate the night before and take them up before six o'clock in the morning. The place then cleans the chickens and has them ready for the freezer.



Young pigs at Faber, Marjorie, and Paul Harrold's farm. 1989.

Farm Activism

Helen: Was your family ever involved in farm activism?

Don Grant: You named your worst-looking hog Herbie Hoover, and that's about the most violent that it got. You were too busy trying to make a living and working. My dad belonged to the Farmers' Union. I can remember going to meetings where there were some heated discussions on occasion, but not to the point of activism. They would have a meeting and thoroughly denounce Herbert Hoover, and that was about as close as they came to violence. Then they would all go home and go to work again. It never got to the point of dumping milk or any picket lines.

Helen: In terms of farm unions or activism, did you ever run into a picket line?

Russel Jordan: They had that going on in about 1958 when the NFO (National Farmers Organization) was born. I went to a meeting over in Pocahontas, and there were a lot of people over there. There were people from somewhere telling about the NFO coming into being. We were interested in it, but I never got involved. I kind of supported their theory, but in my estimation, there were always a few flaws in it, and I didn't think it would work. Their theory was if people don't give you the amount of money you want for your hogs, well, don't sell them, hold them off the market until they give you what you want. Well, when a pig gets ready for market, you can't keep him for six months more.

Mary Jane Jordan: It gets too heavy.

Russel: So it seemed to me there were a few flaws in their thinking. The thinking is good, but it isn't like some product that you can put on the cold storage shelf and wait until people will pay the price — you've got a perishable product.

Childhood Entertainment

Helen: How old were you when you moved to the place where you lived during most of your growing up years?

Don Grant: I know we lived there when I was two years old because I decided to go to school with Dunc one day. We went to Roosevelt #5 a half mile west and a mile south, and I had on just a diaper, or whatever they used for diapers in those days. My mother was getting dinner for cornpickers or some other crew. She was busy, and I took off. She missed me and could see me walking along the west road, going south with Duncan. She really didn't have time to come and get me then, and she knew I was with him and a couple of neighbor kids. She knew the teacher and knew I would be well taken care of. So she came down and got me at noon, and I apparently had a wonderful time.

Helen: Your folks and my grandparents both belonged to the Country Jakes. Tell me about the group.

Don: The Country Jakes were young people who had grown up together and got married about the same time. I remember on a moonlit night, a cold one with a lot of snow, bundling up in the bobsled and going ten miles to the Vaughn farm north of Rolfe. Dad wore a big sheepskin coat. He put the team in the barn or threw blankets over them outside before going inside to the party. We kids went along. We had a lantern hanging on a stick on the sled, but we didn't really need it because the moon at night was beautiful. I can remember snuggling in with horse blankets and straw and soapstones we heated before we left. Then we came home. It seemed like two o'clock in the morning, but it was probably 10:30 at night.

Helen: What are some of your favorite memories of the farm?

Don: My dad said very little, and I think that's partly because he couldn't hear. We didn't have talks in the field because he couldn't hear me. Some of my fondest memories are of when we would take a load of corn or oats to town to sell. When I got big enough, we would take two wagons. Then when we came home after unloading and buying the groceries, we would tie my team on behind, and I would sit in the spring seat with him on his wagon. He loved peanuts. We'd have a sack of peanuts then a bag of jellybeans so we wouldn't get thirsty. Those are some great times that I remember.

Helen: What did you do for recreation when you were a youngster?

Joe Reigelsberger: We would walk down to the creek with an old gunnysack, and two kids would stand on either side of the sack and seine upstream with it. We put the sack down into the water, walked quickly about six or eight feet, lifted it up, and then looked to see if we had some minnows and little fish in it, put them in a bucket, then brought them home, and put them in the stock tank.

Norine Reigelsberger: We used to wade and play and have a swing in the creek near us when I was growing up. The creek had real fine sand on the bottom, and it felt good between our toes. There were loads of real tiny shells. We just played with those. We didn't really catch anything.

I don't think that children nowadays have nearly the imagination to make do with nothing like we did. I mean, well, they still play with boxes, but we did a lot of things without all the toys they have now. It seems like the minute a new toy comes out, the children have it, while we hardly ever had any toys. We couldn't afford them because we were raised in the Depression. I had one doll, and my mother made clothes for it. That was my big entertainment; everything was centered around this doll. Things just aren't that way anymore. I think maybe they're losing something by not having to create some of their own entertainment out of nothing. You know, I was in seventh grade before I ever had a bicycle. Can you imagine that?

And look at the kids now. How many bicycles has our grandson, John, had? He's nine. How many bicycles has he had? He's on his second bicycle, and he wants another one.

Electricity and the Radio

Marjorie Harrold: I remember when we first got electricity; before that, we just had the icebox.

Paul Harrold: Here?

Marjorie: No, we had electricity when we came here. I think it was '38 when electricity came through the country. The first thing we got was a refrigerator, that and an electric motor for the washing machine. I always remember that because there was always that little old gas thing on the old Maytags. I can remember sometimes, especially in the winter when it was cold, Mama would step on that thing and step on that thing to get it to go.

Paul: A step starter.

Marjorie: We had a pedal that we stepped on, and sometimes it started and sometimes it didn't. It was such an aggravation.

Paul: Here we had a DELCO battery system.

Marjorie: Years ago, it was built with DELCO.

Paul: This was a fairly modern house for its time because it had both an upstairs and a downstairs bathroom.

Marjorie Simonson: I remember when we got electricity. Of course, all the light fixtures were just a bulb. They had this strange little, cream-colored holder and a pull string. I remember especially that my mother had a gas motor on the washing machine, and when that washing machine got changed over to electricity, we couldn't believe how quiet it was. So that was really different to have electricity.

Don Grant: I lived at home for about four years before I started to college in the fall of 1940. In the winters, I worked in Rickard's Hardware Store. I worked around the store for a while as a clerk and floor sweeper. I took care of batteries back when there were battery radios; everybody brought their batteries in to be charged on Saturday night and took another one home with them. I would work whenever I could; it wasn't a very formal job, but Ed gave me some money once in a while. I enjoyed it, and I was helped by learning radio servicing from Ralph [Rickard]. I did some radio servicing and put batteries in cars in the winter and stuff like that, all those good jobs. Besides learning something about radios there, I took a correspondence course, and did a lot of reading about them, and did a lot of playing around with them.

I built a lot of little one-tube radios, and I think I got up to three tubes, which is a real big radio. I had a battery radio by my bed at night and listened to places like KDKA in Pittsburgh, San Antonio, Salt Lake City, Omaha, and WSN in Nashville. Back then there were clear channel stations, and then there were two or three Mexican stations where people had been run out of the United States to Mexico, like Dr. Baker who was "installing monkey glands in men" at the time. (chuckle) That's why he was in Mexico and not in the United States. Preachers who had been run out for something or other were selling everything including religion from Mexico. They were these boomer stations with a half million watts. So that's what I did. I listened to music. I could listen to anything there was; and there were nice clear stations.

Then the REA came through. Well, of course, I was an expert in electricity by then. I found out later I wasn't, but that's another story. Soon people started wiring farms. Rickard's had a pretty good operation set up. Ralph would sell the jobs; Brownie, Keith, Dale, Erwin O'Brecht, and I would go around and wire the farms; and Ralph would go around and sell them the fixtures. Then the clients would all go into the store, and Ed would sell them the appliances

like the refrigerators, stoves, and things. It worked out pretty well. Ed Rickard was a good, honest guy; he gave a good price and quality workmanship. It was sort of interesting.

There were still some of the old ethnic communities like Norwegians, Danes, Bohemians, and Irish. There was still an ethnic influence. I think it was Madge Johansen who was the king Dane. In other words, he was the patriarch of the Danish community, and it was Madge's farm that we wired first. We would wire one farm in this community, and everybody would come in and look at it. This would be complete with appliances and everything else. We would do the whole thing. Then they would get together over there on Sunday afternoon, and everybody would look at the setup and see if it was OK. If it was, then Madge and a couple of his assistant patriarchs would come into Rickard's store with a list of 10 to 20 interested customers and tell Ed, "You wire these farms." That was the way Ed did it: one quality job then more quality jobs.

Helen: Did you wire your own farm?

Don: Well, I wired it because I knew how to do it. I got a good price on the wiring supplies, and didn't need any help. So I wired it. I wasn't as excited as my mother about getting electricity on the farm. My dad never showed excitement about it. I knew he was, but he never said anything about it. I know he liked throwing that switch for the first time in the barn. He went out; did chores; and turned on the lights in the barn on the shadowed side, the yard light, and lights in all the other buildings.

Electricity was a real revolution, I think, particularly for women. Now they had something to work with. The refrigerator was probably a big part of it. I don't think the electric stove was that big of deal because a lot of them already had bottled-gas stoves. My mother never thought the electric stove held a candle to the old cookstove. She knew how to run it. It took her a while to get used to the heat adjustments on the electric stove. Electricity on the farm was a godsend.

Pumping water was another big piece if you didn't have a water system and if you didn't have a windmill. Just the fact that we could pump water anytime we wanted to anywhere we wanted to. We just threw a switch and didn't have to worry about starting an old gasoline engine. We didn't have to grease the windmill anymore if we didn't want to. But most of the farmers continued to keep them and grease them.

I started bringing home immediately the appliances that I could afford, the small ones, and started making payments on some others. I spent most of my salary on appliances for the house. I guess I probably wanted them as much as my mother — say there was a little selfishness connected with it. I'd like to say I was doing this all for my mother, but I got a lot of satisfaction out of seeing her using things like a mixer that she could make malted milks with. That was a big deal. We didn't have to go to the soda fountain at the drugstore. I was interested in radios, and with electricity I could be a ham and do things I hadn't done before with them. I think a soldering iron was the biggest deal. I could plug that in, and I didn't have to fire up a blowtorch if I wanted to solder something.

When I got interested in radio, my friends and I bought little books and studied for the tests and practiced code. Jerry Thompson, Brownie Rickard, and I practiced together. When we thought we were ready, we went down to Des Moines to some government building and took the test. We had to be able to send and receive code at thirteen words per minute and pass a written test in radio fundamentals to get the ham license. We went down together. I think Brownie didn't pass the first time, but Jerry and I did. Then I went home and started building a rig; that's what we called it. It consisted initially of a one-tube affair, the 6L6. I know that's very meaningful to you (chuckle). We would put together a power supply out of junk — I did anyway — tearing old radios apart and getting the power supply out of them.

Then there was the stringing of an antenna. That was the toughest part. That meant you had to have some poles or a couple of trees strategically placed. I did have one tree strategically

placed, as a matter of fact, a whole row of trees. I wangled an old telephone pole. I don't know how tall it was, maybe 20 feet, but that wasn't high enough. I found an old piece of pipe on the farm and decided I could attach it to the top of the pole with some conduit straps or something. Then I wired a pulley on the top of it and thought, "Well, I can get my antenna from that tree out there to this pole." But it had to be insulated. Then I climbed the tree — got up there — well, I don't know if I climbed the tree or not. The antenna had to be insulated from the tree and at the other end. I had an insulator at the end of the antenna, and I tied a rope on that and put it down through the pulley. That pipe was heavy to climb up on a ladder with and try to hold it and nail straps. That's what your dad did one Sunday afternoon. He came over and helped me put the pipe up and then went home. Subsequently, I pulled the antenna, and it had a lead. In it was a twisted pair of wires in the middle that came right down, right into this little room in the corner of our house. That was my ham shack. I had everything ready to go and all tested out and hooked the antenna on. It was late in the afternoon by then, and we had company for dinner. I got it all fired up, and it worked. I tested it with a little flashlight bulb with a loop of wire soldered to it, and I held that down over a coil, tuned everything to a maximum brightness on that bulb, and ran the lead in and out of the house. I was real anxious to try it out — just crazy to see if there was really anybody out there. I built my receiver, it was checked out, and everything was ready to go. (pause) I found my old log book, which I bought after the occasion, and all is duly recorded in there (chuckle), my first contact. I tried it out and found there were people out there in the real world who actually heard my signal. This key I pounded out. I think maybe I contacted Jerry Thompson first, and then it was supertime. A storm was moving in, which I hadn't really noticed.

This is the high point of my life. Hurricane Andrew could have come by and flattened the place, and I wouldn't have noticed until I got this first contact. While we were eating supper, a big bolt of lightning hit someplace real close, and I didn't think of my antenna in time. Normally, there would be a big switch on the rig and a ground wire down to a stake pounded in the ground so it would be grounded in case of lightning. Well, I didn't have any kind of lightning protection on it at all, and I smelled the smell of burning Baco-lite. Then a bell rang in my head, I rushed into the room, and there was smoke coming out of my receiver (chuckle). Lightning had hit it and had blown the switch off of my receiver. Fortunately, I had it plugged in the right direction so the hot wire went to the ground and didn't go through the whole radio; it just went through the switch. I didn't think of the antenna right away. I checked out the receiver and the transmitter and everything lit up. But I wasn't about to go on the air with lightning out there because nobody could hear me anyway — too much static. I think maybe I looked out the window, and in a lightning flash, I saw my antenna lying on the ground. I did nothing until the next day. I found out that the lightning had cut my lead into chunks three or four feet long, not neatly, but it really hadn't damaged the antenna. I put it back up and went on from there. That occupied most of my time.

Marjorie Simonson: On the day Pearl Harbor was attacked, my parents thought my brother was stationed there; he wasn't there and had gone to the Aleutian Islands. So, it was fortunate he wasn't there. But I remember that day because they were so upset. It was a cloudy, foggy day. Also that day, the neighbor lady died. That was the first time I ever experienced somebody that I knew dying. So it was different.

Helen: How did you hear about Pearl Harbor?

Marjorie: On the radio. It was toward five o'clock in the afternoon when we heard it. It was my job to go out and get the cobs to bring in for the cookstove and fill the cob box. My dad was doing chores, and my mother came out and told him that Pearl Harbor had been bombed.

Marjorie: I remember my girlfriend and me when the "Hit Parade" came on the radio. We would always get on the telephone and chat about what our favorite song was and where it

was going to place on the “Hit Parade.” Of course, if we were on the phone and other people on the line wanted to, they would click the receiver up and down. We called it “rubbering” when somebody listened in on someone else’s conversation.

Babysitting

Marjorie Simonson: I babysat for everybody in the neighborhood. I was with Mrs. DeWolf when Jack was born. I was with the Healds when Rachel and Raymond were toddlers. I was also with Anita Beckord, Fay Wax, and Clement Shimon. Because of my dad, if somebody called and wanted me to babysit, I didn’t dare say, “No, I’m busy.” To him, these were his neighbors and friends, and he thought it would reflect on him if I didn’t babysit. But I remember, too, that it was the time of gas rationing when I worked for the Healds. Evidently, the rationing was really bad right then because I worked six days, and I was supposed to get to come home on Sundays. We didn’t really live that far from the Healds, I suppose maybe 5 to 6 miles. But my dad didn’t have enough gas to come get me, and the Healds didn’t think it was their responsibility to take me home, so I would have to stay on Sundays, too. And then, the Healds were the type of people where you didn’t do anything on Sunday. You weren’t supposed to sew. That was their philosophy: Sunday was a day of rest, and that’s just exactly what it was. But that wasn’t my idea of what to do on Sundays.

I remember Mrs. Heald was very particular. We would set the table at night for breakfast in the morning, and maybe I would have to scrub the floors or just any number of things. I think the first job I had was for Helen Heald, and I started out at three dollars a week. Now that was pretty good money, but she thought I did a good job, so by the end of the summer, I was getting a dollar a day which was six dollars a week. Then before school started, I got to take off a few days. I always got to go up to Okoboji — I don’t know who took me — and spend a day up there. That was my vacation. I went to the amusement park, rode the rides, and then I bought my own clothes for school.

Living Simply

Helen: My understanding from what you have told me is that Verle’s parents owned a farm in Calhoun County but lost it in about 1930. Then they rented near Ware about the time he started school. After that, they rented near Havelock, and then moved to a place southeast of Poky before buying this farm in 1940, the year before he graduated from high school in Poky in 1941. I’m wondering, Velma, did your folks lose their farm, too?

Velma Howard: My parents didn’t “lose” a farm. They sold. They had bought my mother’s family farm in Missouri, and they were just making ends meet and couldn’t keep the payments up, so they sold the farm. Dad was a hired man for one year, and then he managed to rent a farm down by Lanesboro. From there, they went to Jefferson and rented for several years before they bought the farm at Curlew. They always had to struggle to make ends meet, or at least that’s the way I remember it.

Helen: When you graduated from high school, Verle, did you ever think you would end up back on this farm?

Verle Howard: Yeah, I had a slight idea that I would, and more so than ever after I traveled around the world for a few years.

Helen: Why is that?

Verle: For one thing, you are your own boss, pretty much. You make your life what it is, and that’s the way it is on the farm. You have nobody breathing down your neck. (chuckle) If you do, you can tell them to go chase whatever they want to, and it doesn’t make any difference to you. It doesn’t hurt your business a damn bit.

Helen: How much are farmers really their own boss when you consider all the government policies and other things that seem to go against farming?

Verle: Well, at least you still have choices. You don't have to enroll in the programs. You're still more your own boss than punching a time clock where they have to meet production schedules. Actually, you make what life is on the farm for yourselves. I can see where it would get pretty tough on the farmer if you didn't want to do anything. (chuckle)

Helen: How would you describe the lifestyle that you have cut out for yourself here?

Verle: I wouldn't want to change it.

Velma: Our operation is small by normal standards. And if we had a family, there is no way we could operate the way we do. We would have to have more land or another job. But when you are two old people with rocking chair money, you don't need to farm a lot of land — just enough to keep you active.

Helen: You two have often said that you are holding things together with baling wire. Could you explain what that phrase means?

Verle: When your machinery starts giving you little problems when you're in the field, a piece of wire will tie it together until you get done — that's what we call, "We're running on baling wire."

Velma: When I was growing up, we used that term. When machinery wore out in those days, they couldn't afford to trade it in — and we can't now on our 160 acres. So we hold the equipment together with baling wire for one more year. You repair it rather than trading it in on new; we repair it.

Verle: And then you say, "We baling wired it together for another year."

Velma: If the baling wire holds out, we'll be OK.

Verle: I have the required equipment to farm. When I quit farming a half section, I never sold any machinery.

Velma: You have bought a different picker.

Verle: But fundamentally, I still have the equipment I had when I was farming a half section. I do all my own maintenance on it, and it hasn't really cost me anything.



Buckets of corn cobs at Living History Farms. 1986.

Marjorie Harrold: Back a few years ago, people, especially those who went through the Depression years, didn't waste one thing. They were very aware of costs and money because, for a while, they didn't have any.

Paul Harrold: Tell the story about coming home from school every night and picking up the cobs.

Marjorie: I would go to the pigpen and pick up cobs. Oh, I hated that job. You see, we had a cob stove to cook our meals on, and we didn't have enough cobs. We saved them when we shelled corn, but by the time the next year rolled around, we didn't have any left. And we fed hogs ear corn — threw it out on the ground — and the hogs chewed the corn off. Then we had to pick up the cobs, and can't you imagine somebody with a basket of cobs that came out of the pigpen sitting by their stove these days? But we thought nothing of it.

Helen: It might attract flies, and it might smell.

Marjorie: The smell was the worst. Of course, I don't think our pigpens were smelly then like they are now because we fed them out on the ground.

Paul: Probably not as many pigs per square foot, either.

Marjorie: Yeah, it isn't like now when hogs are so shut up.

Helen: At one time you were raising your two children on your 50 percent share of 240 acres. How did you manage that?

Marjorie: I think people used to do it all the time. Nobody farmed big farms until recent years, and the farms get bigger all the time. Our seed and other inputs weren't as expensive as they are now. And we didn't have to have the big machines in order to farm because we didn't have that many acres. Our kids didn't have all the latest stuff either. They went with what they had and that was it. I sewed. They always wore homemade things. We ate canned goods out of the basement, I had a deep freeze, and we had our own meat butchered. So we had plenty to eat and something to wear, and I guess that's all we worried about.

Helen: Has your family had a pattern of communicating pretty well?

Marjorie: Our kids always were a part of the discussions.

Paul: For instance on September 4, 1983, we got quite a hailstorm. It hit the homeplace here and the other places we were farming — 100 percent damage on corn and beans. We just sat down at the table and talked it over. We didn't know what to do. The windows were out of the house, and all the buildings and the roof was damaged.

Marjorie: That was just a year after we had bought this place from my parents' estate. We just didn't know what we were going to do.

Paul: We had hail insurance, but we didn't have as much coverage as we should have had. One thing, we didn't have any feed for our livestock unless we bought it. So that was the first year this place didn't have cattle. We had some hogs. We did go through the field with the combine and got thirteen bushels per acre of salvaged corn. I think we got four bushels per acre of beans. We had gotten a new combine in 1976 and never had a rock run through it until 1983, trying to gather more beans but got the rocks with them. It was hard — the decision part, the management part — to try to pull through the winter and have enough money to buy seed for the next year. We had no bean seed to fall back on. We always kept bean seed back. We would buy new seed to plant, and then we would harvest that new seed, then plant it again the following year. We would keep buying some new seed each year. But that year, we didn't have any to fall back on, so we had to buy all new bean seed. That was just a little tough, and we had our payments to make at the Land Bank. That went on whether we had a crop or not. Plus in 1982, our drainage ditch was cleaned, and we had a \$57 per acre charge on this farm to pay for that, but we had ten years to pay for it. It was 9 percent interest through the county.

Marjorie: Our family was real close. When the kids were little, our supptime was always our time to take a little time and talk things over. Like when they started to school, we all made it a point that we were together at the table at supptime, and we would discuss whatever they came home from school with. They would always have something to tell us about what somebody did that day or what they did that was fun, and we always made a point to talk things over. I think that kept us close. Even when they were in high school, we always tried to have a time when we could talk about things. And of course, they always kept track of what

was going on at home, too. They would have to know what we did that day. Paul was always interested in what was going on, and whenever he came home from school, he always went out and helped with whatever Fay was doing. Paulelda probably wasn't quite as interested, but she always kept track of what was going on.

Paul: Even when she was off to college, she wrote a letter home every week, and she asked what we were doing or how the dog was doing. She kept track of the seasons and what work we would be doing. Of course, she asked about us and how we were doing first.

Marjorie: Always a letter every week. You just looked forward to it because you knew it was going to come.

Paul: Mom always wrote one back every week.

Marjorie: If there were problems among us, we would discuss them. And any business, I tried to have Paul and Paulelda know what was going on, so there shouldn't be any problem for them when I drop over.

Neighboring

Helen: What can you tell me about neighboring, especially since you live just across the road from Velma and Verle?

Marjorie Harrold: Verle's folks moved there the year before my folks moved here. There weren't any better neighbors. Of course, that was back when farmers worked together with haying, and they were threshing yet, too. My dad and Verle's dad did all kinds of things together. That was the war years, too, and we didn't have any help, so we had to depend on our neighbors.

Verle Howard: We get along, I would say, ideally. Paul never bothers me. I never bother him, but if I need another hand, I just hold my hand up, and he'll be here. And it works both ways. For instance, if he is out sorting hogs, and I go out of the house in the morning, it's nothing for me to go over and help him sort a load of hogs. By the same token, if I need something, he would drop everything and come over. There are a lot of jobs that I can't do alone; I have to have two more hands. All I have to do is let him know what I'm going to do, and he's here. And you don't even have to let him know. He'll come over and tell me.

This spring, I had some wet plowing that I had plowed, and it was flabby. He came over and said, "Verle, why don't you come over and get my big disc and that big engine of mine and disc that spring plowing again." So he didn't wait for me to go over and get his outfit. He brought it up in the field and came in the house and said, "Well, Verle, come on out, and I'll show you the main points of this engine and how to operate it and where to run the RPM." So I disked 70 acres, and Paul came back over again and said, "Verle, if I were you, I would hit that again, and then I would hit it with your own little disc." It gives you an idea of what kind of neighbors you've got. I disced the whole field twice, filled the tractor full of fuel, took it back over, and put it in his yard.

Velma Howard: In the wintertime, Marjorie and Norine and I get together, usually three times during the winter. We each take a turn hosting and having coffee. If Marjorie stops over, it's not an invited thing. We drink coffee together when we happen to stop by each other's homes. We talk on the phone, maybe once or twice a week. We wave to each other when we go to our mailboxes or when we are mowing the lawns. We exchange recipes over the telephone. If she has some extra garden stuff that she knows we don't have, she brings us a sack, and if I have something, I take her a sack. We don't make a point of entertaining each other — we're just here. We each know that the other is there.

Verle: As a rule, we each know when the other is gone.

Velma: We make a point of telling each other if we are going to be gone, so we can watch their place and they watch ours.

Paul Harrold: When we want to go somewhere, we just tell the Howards if we are going to be gone for a while.

Marjorie Harrold: We kind of watch. If anything looks strange, we'll see what's happening.

Paul: It's pretty hard not to look across the road during the day when we are just an eighth of a mile apart.

Marjorie: We know what each other is doing.

Helen: It's nice that you have similar standards in terms of keeping your farms clean. Because you are so close, it would be horrible to look over at someone else's eyesore.

Paul: Well, I don't imagine they like the pigpens being across from their front yard.

Helen: I think the setup is nice because Velma and Verle can feel like there are animals around but not have to have their own.

Marjorie: They can look over and see ours. (chuckle) But sometimes on Sunday when the wind comes out of the north, it's not so good.

Paul: And I am sure in the summertime, considering they don't have their own livestock, they probably would just as soon not have their neighbors' flies, either.

Paul: We used to go back and forth with the Jordans. I call those the fun days, when we were baling together, and families were helping each other. The girls would be out running the tractor. At baling time, they would either be running the baler or raking, or mowing, or pulling the rope on the forklift operation at the haymow.

Marjorie: We used to get together for oyster soup suppers and stuff. And the kids would always come. Of course, they always had to play school. Janet was always the teacher, and she would have the little kids lined up on the davenport.

Paul: Did I play school?

Marjorie: Oh, you were in there, too.

Paul: I can't believe that. (chuckle)

Marjorie: She put you in your seat (chuckle) and told you what to do. The Jordans mention so many times about how we used to get together for supper, and the kids could play.

Helen: In terms of the cycle of independence and cooperation in farming, where are we with that today?

Marjorie: When a serious problem comes up, they still ...

Paul: The serious problems, yes, they still group together.

Marjorie: Farmers always help each other.

Paul: But we are further apart now as far as our daily lives as we have ever been with neighbors.

Marjorie: It is because so many times the farm next to you will be farmed by somebody who comes from quite a distance. You don't know him well enough and don't have much to do with them.

Paul: We're in a position where we still neighbor a lot because of corn shelling. If Verle wants a tool or I want some help, all we have to do is go back and forth. The same way with George Diedrich. He or Verle always ran the baler. But there is less of that being done.

Marjorie: They are getting to the age where they can't do it anymore.

Paul: So we are more independent, I guess you could say. We've got all our own equipment; that has come about over the years, but before that, we used things together. We still do somewhat, but not like we used to.

Marjorie: That reminds me of when Faber farmed Mrs. Ives' ground over there. Anyway, he came up alongside Philip Brinkman's ground. Gus was out working, and Fay got off to visit. Of course, that was just normal for Fay. Gus talked about that. He went home and told his mom.

Paul: That probably never happened before.

Marjorie: Nobody had even stopped to visit with him like that — he thought that was just great. People used to do that quite often. Anyway, when Fay passed away, Gus wanted to make sure to come over the evening before the funeral. His mom said that Gus never forgot Fay because he stopped and talked to him.

Paul: Took some time.

Marjorie: Gus thought that was so nice.

Russel Jordan: We had just lived in the Rolfe area a few days when a terrible blizzard came. We had just barely got moved in. And golly, I went out the day after it stopped snowing and blowing, and there were snowdrifts fifteen feet high all over the yard. We had just lived there a couple of days. Someone had told me that Mrs. Grant was real ill and needed medication. And in fact, I think someone had called and wanted to know if the roads were open and wanted to see if they could get medication out. So I told Mary Jane, “I think I’ll walk into town and see if we’ve got any mail in there and maybe get a few groceries.”

Mary Jane Jordan: We had party lines then. (chuckle)

Russel: So she said if I was going to walk into town, that she had heard about this Mrs. Grant needing medication. She said, “I’ll call down there and see if they have gotten her medication. Maybe you can bring that back.” It was fairly cold, but it was a nice clear day, so she called down there. Mrs. Grant had gotten the medication. Within just a few minutes, Mrs. Howard, Harry’s wife, called Mary Jane and said, “How’s he planning on going to town?” She had heard on the party line that I was going to town. “Well,” Mary Jane said, “He’s going to walk.” “Well,” Mrs. Howard said, “Don’t let him go, the snow is so deep, he might not make it.” Mary Jane said, “Well, you don’t know him. He’ll get there and back.” So I started out anyway, and I walked down to that corner where the road is now closed, and I went by where the Chism family used to live and some people named the Glenn Samuels lived there at that time. So Glenn saw me coming down the road, came down to the end of his lane, and said, “What are you doing?” And I said, “Well, I’m going to town.” We got acquainted that way, and he said, “Can you ride a horse?” I said, “Ya, I could ride a horse if I had one.” “Well,” he said, “I’ve got a couple of saddle horses. So if you want to come up, we’ll get on them, and I’ll go with you.” So we got on the horses, went to town, and got the mail. The train came through, and the horse tried to throw me off, but I managed to hang onto the saddle horn and stayed with him. But we got the mail back. And we did buy a few groceries and that way I got familiar with yet another neighbor.

The Land

Mary Jane Jordan: Up in that flat country [Pocahontas County in northwest Iowa], when the snow stopped, it was against buildings and against the farmsteads, but down here [Cass County in southwest Iowa] there are hills, so we just don’t get that much snow.

Russel: I always kind of liked the level land, but I don’t know if Mary Jane got used to it.

Mary Jane: I like the hills better.

Russel: She likes the scenic hills. One thing that I never really did get to liking about the flat land was hitting rocks — something I wasn’t used to at all. The first time I hit a rock, my plow unhooked, the tractor lurched ahead, and I thought, “What the heck has happened now?” I never got to liking those rocks, but I did get used to dealing with them and found out they weren’t as much of a problem as I thought they might be. The glacier came in there, and that’s the reason it’s level. In the process of leveling things off, it left rocks. Here in the Atlantic area, there is a timber-type soil that got its fertility from timber vegetation; there are two completely different soil types but both are productive and fairly easy to work.



Field of knee-high corn south of Deane and Marion Gunderson's farm home. 1996.

Mary Jane: I always appreciated the land because it produced so well, but what I didn't appreciate were the ponds that were sometimes sitting in the fields. My dad remembered northern Iowa as having muskrats years ago before they did all the tiling, and he wasn't enthused about us moving up there because he envisioned the flat land with ponds. The first time my folks came up to visit, we had that storm, and all the water was standing in the fields. But it was always amazing to me that the tiling system took care of things like that.

Russel: I was wondering about it, too, when all this water showed up. And when we came up, we drove around and looked a little bit, and I said, "I don't believe this is a normal situation." We went over by where your granddad owned some ground. Of course, I didn't know who owned it at that time, but it turned out it was some of John Gunderson's ground, and right in the middle of a pond there were a couple of haystacks. And I said, "I don't believe that man would have put those haystacks there if he had thought there was going to be two feet of water there. I don't believe this is a normal situation. So I think we better wait a while before we make too much of an assessment." Then Harry Howard came down and told me — I suppose he thought the same thing — and that's one of the first times I got acquainted with him. He said, "It looks pretty bad now with all the water around," but added, "I want to tell you, this is the garden spot of the world, right here."

Changes in Farm Technology

Helen: How would you describe the changes that are happening in farming?

Norine Reigelsberger: Just in my lifetime, there have been a lot of changes. I have seen my dad use horses for farming. I remember the first tractor we got was an Allis Chalmers.



Mick Reigelsberger plants corn. Circa 1998.

I suppose I was about seven or eight. It was one of those that didn't have rubber tires on it; it just had steel wheels. Now we have four-wheel-drive tractors and combines and all this sophisticated equipment. Even the way we run our operation is so much more sophisticated. You use the computer for so many more things now; then you never heard of a computer. And it has been a scary thing for us at the age we are to start in using it.

Dennis Sefcik: In the '40s, we had forced mechanization because of the war. We had a section of history coming through here where people could still survive simply with horses — the diehards, so to speak — who would say, "They'll never get me to have that noisy, rackety thing going up and down my field because I like these horses. They are nice and quiet, and I do my thing, and I feed them oats." So you have that kind of guy who could still eke out a living on a horse farm, which would be maybe an eighty-acre farm, surely never more than a quarter section, but at least an eighty. He could eke out a living. But the guy next door who had that tractor would say, "I can run that threshing machine, and I can get it done faster than you can with any of your equipment." And then he would say to himself, "I can't get ten guys to haul bundles and stuff anymore, I'm going to get my own machine and do my own thing, and I'm going to make it a combine. Now, I can do this myself. I don't need ten guys. We don't have ten guys. The military has taken them. They're at jobs, gone here and there. So I can farm this — I can do more than that eighty. I can do this whole quarter now. I can rent this quarter, give half away to my landlord, and I still have the same thing you do with your horses. And I got it all done faster." See how the change was coming. But they still needed horses to do things like mow the ditch. So that went for a while until they decided, "Well, let's mount a mower on the back of one of these tractors, and then we'll go up and down the ditches with



Freddie Voss cultivates corn near Varina, Iowa. Circa 1990.

that tractor. We'll get one of these little tractors and mow the ditches. My ditches are just as good as your ditches with your horses, and I don't have to feed them all winter just to go up and down the ditch. I put gas in the tractor, put the mower on, go up and down, and I am done. I take the mower off, and I'm ready to do something else."

For us, in our family, that transition was most noticeable in the '40s because in the early '40s, we still had a pair of horses that was kept primarily for mowing ditches and for some more of those little projects. I can remember riding one of those great big workhorses. They have those big, strong, broad backs, and when I got off, I couldn't even walk. I was just kind of stiff. I can remember one day I was riding that horse around, and some little pigs got out underneath the fence. Of course, I had to chase them and get them back in. I got off that horse, but I couldn't run fast enough to catch that pig. Then after about five minutes, I got limbered up and was ready to go again. That was the end of the horse era that I remember; it was pushed pretty heavily by the war and the war effort.

Now when your grandfather, John, was working with the horses, he was cultivating one row at a time. Then he probably went to one of those modern, two-row cultivators with about four horses on it. That was big time, and boy, you could get a lot done in a day's time. Well, today, if you are at eight-row equipment, you're at the bottom of the pole. From there you go up. A fair number are at twelve-row equipment and some are even higher. So a person asks how that affects all the equipment. If you look at the new equipment, you can harvest six rows of corn at one time. Now remember, John started out taking one ear off the stalk and throwing it into a wagon box. One ear at a time, one stalk at a time, and maybe he had three or four guys picking on that load. Well, now, that combine goes through the field faster than I can drive that horse from one end of the field to the other. That combine is not only going to get there faster, it's going to do six rows at one time.

Helen: What was the transition from horses to tractors like for your family?

Paul Harrold: One of Mother's brothers would cultivate with the horses, and the other one would cultivate with the tractor.

Marjorie Harrold: When we first had a tractor, the older brother drove it, and the younger one stayed with the horses. He liked to work horses, so it worked out all right. During the war years, we still planted with the horses and cultivated with them, too. Then because there wasn't enough help, you needed to get things done a little faster, and you made some kind of a hitch so you could hitch the planter to the tractor. That was all those war years, you see. From the time we moved up here until ...

Paul: You graduated from high school in Rolfe in '45.

Marjorie: Until I graduated, that was wartime. Well, I learned how to drive the tractor, work in the field, and run the milking machine. You see, my dad milked cows at that time, too. I just plain had to be a chore person and helper. I helped my dad pick corn, and I always hauled it in, elevated it, and did the milking at night.

Helen: What was it like to pick corn?

Don Grant: It seemed rather futile to take that big wagon out in the field and pick those little ears of corn and throw them in that box. It took all morning to get one full if you worked like crazy. Then you went in, dumped the wagon out, went out in the afternoon, and you did that again. All you were doing was filling the box and emptying it, and you did that for about a month or month and a half. You hoped it didn't snow, but it usually rained, and it was pretty muddy and messy. There was enough frost on the ears to get my mittens wet early in the morning, and they stayed wet all day even though it warmed up a little. But I kind of liked it, (laughs) but it was very futile. And I still think about it now. That was the dumbest thing we ever did on the farm — throwing the little things in a box and then dumping them out, starting all over again, and trying to get it done by Thanksgiving.

There was a social aspect of corn picking in regard to who got out to the field first. Of course, there were no airplanes and no cars and tractors making a lot of noise when you went out and picked by hand with a wagon. So it was quiet at daybreak. And you hurried out into the field so you could be the first one to start hitting that bangboard with an ear of corn because the sound would travel a long ways. Then you would stop and listen to see if your neighbor was out there. If he wasn't out yet, you would keep throwing the ears in there, and finally you would hear this bangboard banging from a ways away. You could tell who was out in the field picking, who got out first, and what order they got out in. That was part of the game, and then you would give your neighbors a bad time when you saw them on Saturday night and say, "I beat you out to the field."

One of the great triumphs in my life was when I outshocked my dad in the oatfield, and when I outpicked him in the cornfield. He was pretty good!

Helen: How come there are so many farms with a Model M Farmall tractor still around?

Verle Howard: It's a good, functional tractor. It's a good chore tractor with adequate power.

Velma Howard: And it never wears out, does it?

Verle: No, it's a good, sound tractor.

Dennis Sefcik: The reason there were Internationals was not the equipment but the salesman. It was the salesman who was very good at getting this equipment out to the farmers, probably giving them a freebie like a little cornplanter book, maybe a pencil, you know, the trinket junk. The second thing was if they gave you good service on it. If you had



Harvesting corn at Living History Farms. 1986.

some trouble with it, they claimed they would come out and bring the district man. A farmer would think, “Oh man, that’s a really big deal. They really care about me and my tractor.”

For our family, our heritage has always been “red.” That started with Matt Sefcik, who started out with his first tractor being a Fordson, From there he went to a 1020 McCormick Deering, then from the McCormick-Deering — now notice the name changes here — he went to a 1937 Farmall. Now remember, corporations are buying and selling up on the top level, but we’re still red tractors here. A Farmall F20 could not outpull a Universal Minneapolis, the same type of tractor. It could not outpull it; yet it outsold it. It outsold it because it was about \$100 cheaper and because of the salesmanship on it. It was painted gray. The Minneapolis was a gray color, but we painted it red to make it look sharper. So in about 1937, the companies start painting all those Farmalls red. Now what do you like seeing going down the field, a piece of red equipment, nice and shiny, or some shade of gray? See now how the salesman works? The salesman is the one who starts that heritage. Now if the grandfather here, the original man making the transition into mechanized equipment, started out red, chances are, his kids are going to do that. So my dad is all red equipment. My brother is all red equipment. See how it went on down? Now my mother’s side is exactly the other side. They started out with the John Deeres — the A, B, G, and whatever — all the way up the line. But of course, red is always better than green. And of course, when you get together on Sunday afternoon, there’s the argument, “Well, ours could outpull that green” or “We can outpull those red ones.” So it isn’t so much that the implement is going to be able to do so much more or less, but it’s the salesmanship behind it.

I can also remember Dad being bold and forward in testing out his tractors to make sure they were running at best efficiency and horsepower rating. That wasn't done by a lot of farmers because they weren't sure that it was worth it. But he said it was worth it, "because otherwise you are wasting money on fuel and not getting efficient use of the engines."

Helen: Why John Deere tractors?

Mary Jane Jordan: His first John Deere was one that his dad had.

Russel Jordan: I got started with John Deeres, so you got going on something and you get addicted to it. It wasn't that they were all that much better than the others. (pause) I liked them and the simplicity of them, and they were good and economical to run. When we moved up to Rolfe, I got acquainted with Spike, the John Deere dealer. I always liked to deal with him. Sometimes we would dicker around and get about half mad at each other, but we really liked each other.

Mary Jane: They would always make a deal.

Russel: But Spike claimed he lost money on every deal.

Helen: My grandfather, John, quit high school after his sophomore year but was a successful farmer. I'm not sure how he would manage in today's world of agriculture.

Dennis Sefcik: There is no possible way he could do that today because he would not have exposure to anything dealing with computers. He had no exposure to dealing with commercial fertilizer. He had no exposure to high-tech machines. So you see, as long as he worked hard, planted the right crops, and harvested on time, he was going to make money. But today, that won't work. You can work from morning to night, twenty-four hours a day, all year long if you want, and you'll go broke. You have to have the education to make it. Buying and selling of grain in advance. Chemicals. Some chemicals today cost as much as five and six hundred dollars a gallon. You can't afford to waste that kind of money on something that you don't know anything about. You must know how it works, the rate of application, and the safety procedures involved. If you don't know that, you don't belong in the business. The same with seed corn. When he was buying seed corn, he could probably get it for five to ten dollars a bushel at most. Today, if you get seed corn for less than sixty-five to seventy dollars a bushel, you've got a bargain. The same with seed beans. Now seed beans we can probably get for fifteen dollars a bushel. And in his day, he was probably buying it for a buck or two bucks a bushel.

The way it operates today; you can't operate just with hard work. That will not cut the mustard. Something goes wrong on the machine, and the light is flashing — well, you've got to know what that means and how seriously to take that flashing light. Does it mean "Stop, and stop immediately, and shut it down" or does that mean "I can go for another half day"? That makes an awfully lot of difference on equipment. So if you don't know that, and you don't know how the electronics work on equipment, you're lost.

If John would come back today and get into one of those combines, I'm sure he would think he was in a Star Trek ship. He couldn't relate. "What's that supposed to do?" Because for him, the left foot was for the clutch, the right foot was for the brake, and the hand over here was to put it in gear. That's all he needed to know. But you see, today, this over here adjusts the air conditioning, this adjusts the temperature, this is the windshield wiper, this adjusts the remote mirrors, this adjusts the speed of the implement, this adjusts the tension — this puts it into four-wheel drive. Those are all things we have to know when we sit down to ride in that piece of equipment. It isn't hard work. It doesn't take a lot of muscles. In fact, I know a lot of women who do the combining for their husbands. It's no problem, you know, because everything is power steering and power this and that. But you see, when he was finishing up in agriculture, power equipment was just starting to come in.

Corn Prices and Input Costs

Helen: What does it cost a farmer to produce a bushel of corn?

Russel Jordan: Of course, it all depends on if you have your farm paid for or whether you are paying interest. I think the experts say you should figure the interest charges in even if you do own the farm. So I suppose that \$2.20 would be a basic minimum [for what it costs to produce a bushel of corn]. The inputs have gone up from 300 to 500 percent. I have a story I like to tell about when we were getting ready to move [from Rolfe back to southwest Iowa]. I needed to get a new pickup, and I was getting two dollars or more for corn in 1973. It might have been even close to three dollars. I went into Bill Brinkman's [Chevrolet dealership] in Rolfe and told him I wanted a $\frac{3}{4}$ ton pickup and he said he would have to go in the office and do a little figuring. He came out and said it would cost \$3,400 for a $\frac{3}{4}$ ton pickup with power steering and all the things I needed. Today, a pickup like that would cost \$12–14,000, and I am getting less for the corn than I did then. So, you see, all of what you put into [farming] has gone up from 300 to 500 percent.



Patriotism and surplus corn at the Pro Cooperative elevator, Rolfe, Iowa. Circa 2001.

In 1946, corn was \$2.46 a bushel because I have a friend who said he got out of the service in 1946, came home, and he had to buy corn to feed his livestock until he [harvested his own new crop] and had to pay \$2.46 a bushel. The reason he remembers [the price] is because it was 1946 and \$2.46. Now he has to pay \$30,000–50,000 for a tractor, \$15,000–20,000 for a pickup truck, [but] he is getting \$1.80 at best for corn and has to pay all those higher inputs. I don't know what to do about all this, but something isn't lining up right. We can't keep this up forever if those inequities stay in place.

The Threshing Run

Helen: What do you remember about threshing along this road?

Verle Howard: When we moved here in 1940, they still ran threshing machines, and everyone who had grain furnished a man either to haul grain or to haul bundles. The Grants owned the threshing machine at first. Then my folks bought a threshing machine when Grants decided to quit, and we threshed for several years. That was when you really had the neighborhood working together. The women always served great big meals — wherever you



Threshing oats at the Mary and Wesley Hronek farm. Southwest quarter, Section 17, Roosevelt Township. Circa 1920. *The collection of Mary and Wesley's daughter, Irene Drobney.*

were, they had to feed the crew. The crews had six or eight bundle racks, which meant six or eight men hauling bundles and pitching them into the threshing machine and maybe one or two spike pitchers in the field that helped the fellas load their bundles. Then, of course, they had the grain haulers that hauled the grain from the threshing machine to the farms and elevated it into the cribs. In some cases, they might even scoop some into a bin for the farmers, but it entailed a lot of work. You cut the grain in bundles, shocked it, let it dry out — or cure — and then you threshed it. When the threshing was all done, the crew always had a great big picnic. That was “settling up day.” You always paid the owner of the rig for the threshing. I think they got about a penny and a half or two cents a bushel for threshing it.

Don Grant: Threshing was an old tradition that I wish was still alive, but there aren’t enough farmers living close enough to each other now, and the crops are harvested with combines anyway. However, I realize that progress wiped it out, and it was a laborious way to do things. The threshing run was as much social as it was physical and necessary to harvest the grain. People worked together. Somebody owned the threshing machine and ran it; the kids hauled the bundles; and the old men hauled the grain, compared how much they hauled, told lies, and harassed the young guys. It was a great thing because the grandfathers always came out for threshing to run the elevator and put the grain in the bin. They hung around the rig to tell everyone how to do it. Threshing got them back into farming. They had an important part, and they were respected by the younger people for their opinion and their knowledge.

I guess ten would have been the standard number of people in a run. They would go from place to place. The way of determining who was first depended on whose oats were ready first; they made some sort of a mythical determination. Quite often it was geographical, and they started at one end of the road and followed on down to the other end.

And the fathers and the sons and the grandfathers played games, mostly in bundle hauling. This was on Wednesday and Saturday nights because the first person there in the morning was the start of a run, and then you pulled loads into the machine in the order that you arrived in the morning. You went out and loaded up your bundles onto hayracks, then came up to the machine, and number one started a run. Everybody hauled the same number of loads of bundles. So the game you played, if you were number one, was that on your last round you stalled and got up to the machine to unload at 5:01, which was the time after which you would not have to go back out for another load. You were the kingpin and everyone’s workday hinged on you. This was particularly important on Saturday nights because you wouldn’t start a new round after five o’clock. That was the rule.

Helen: Sounds pretty complex.

Don: Say, on Saturday night that quitting time was five o’clock — that’s when you

stopped going back out to the field to get another load. So you wanted to make sure you didn't get unloaded before five o'clock. If you did, you started another round, and everybody had to haul another load. So the fathers would get up and help you pitch bundles to try to get you unloaded before five o'clock and send you out again. Well, one of the really neat ways for a kid to keep that from happening was to find some bundles that were a little wet and strategically locate them in the rack where only you knew where they were. Because if you throw a couple of wet bundles right smack into the teeth of the threshing machine, it stalls the machine. That means the crew has to take the door off and clean all this out. Well, you ain't going to finish before five o'clock. The fathers, having been boys themselves, know exactly what you're doing, and they're inspecting the hayrack to see if they can spot the wet bundles. The trick is to divert them with conversation, and as you work your way to the wet bundles you stored so carefully, you grab them before the fathers can see them and throw the bundles right into the teeth, and then stand there and say, "Oh, what a shame," as the rig comes to a halt and the belt flips off the drive wheel.

Helen: What about meals on threshing day?

Don: Fantastic. The women sort of traveled around the run and helped each other serve. Those who had the big coffee pots — the big coffee pots made the whole run. And a big oil tablecloth — they would have one or two of them that would make the whole run. They each had something to contribute to the whole run, and they would go help. And the women would try to outdo each other in the meals that they put forth. That was a big bonus. Of course, the kids benefited from that. They were always hungry.

Marjorie Simonson: I remember the threshing ring and how you would spray for the flies (giggle) before the threshers came. Mother would pull all the shades in the house to try and keep it cool. You would get these big washtubs and put them outdoors and fill them with water early in the morning so the men could wash their hands. Every woman on that threshing run would try to outdo the previous one, but some of them were not good cooks. So when Dad would come home from threshing, Mother would ask, "Well, what did you have today?" And he would tell her. Then she would ask, "Well, was it good?" It was like a contest. You didn't make your pies the day before. You made them the same day. Well, my gosh, if you are making five or six pies — early in the morning in a cookstove, no less — can you imagine what that was like?

LaVonne Howland: I can just remember the threshing machine coming twice. When you had them coming to your home, a woman's work was very hard because in a rural area, electricity just plain didn't get there. Towns got it first. There weren't a lot of farms that had electricity because of the fact that it cost a tremendous amount of money, and you paid for it to get to your door. A lot of the farms didn't have it. So you had your wood cookstove, and you had to carry water. You started very early in the morning.

When it came to threshing, the thing I remember is you started carrying the water in right away. You started carrying the wood and the cobs because you had to get things going. You had to get something baked for the lunch in the morning for those threshers, and of course, you didn't have cold cereal for breakfast. I mean, we had breakfast that consisted of pancakes and eggs or things of this sort because of the type of work that was done. Then you got breakfast out of the way as quickly as you could because you had to get in the oven whatever you were going to make for coffee. If it was cake, you had to get it in, get it baked, and get it out because you were feeding several workers at noon, which meant several pies. You had to get the meat going. You had all of this. Then as soon as you had all that figured out, you've got to figure out what you are going to serve for lunch that afternoon and probably that night



A kitchen washstand at Living History Farms. Circa 1986.

for supper. So it was continuous all day long. The same way when the men were in the fields, planting, mowing hay, or whatever. You had to be planning because the type of work they were doing was hard, and they needed something for coffee. At noon, you didn't just have a lunch, you had a full meal, and the same way at night. So you were always carrying in wood, carrying in the cobs, carrying the ashes out, carrying the water in, and such.

The women, from my standpoint, were always cooking. Laundry was done much differently than it is today. The thing I remember is heating the water; you carried it in and heated it. I can remember using the scrub board and then the first washing machine. It ran on kerosene and made this horrible noise, and you stuck an exhaust hose outside to let out the fumes. Then ironing was done with the iron that you set on top of the stove, and you had at least two so you could keep rotating them. I think we had three so that two were hot while one was being used so we could keep them going. The dishes. Running water was just not heard of...

Helen: This was even when you were on the Brinkman farm?

LaVonne: Yes, we did get cold water inside at the north place. I remember the kerosene lamps. Women didn't work outside the home back then, not many anyway. There were a few who were a teacher or a nurse, but the majority were at home. That was a full-time job.

Men, Women, and Couples

Rosie Grant: We had decided we were going to be married, but I had never met his family. I was here [Ames, Iowa] in summer school, so I took the bus up, and he met me in Humboldt. Well, to this day, I have no conception of distance. It's very difficult to visualize how far it is. And I had no idea how far his parents' farm outside of Rolfe was from Humboldt. We would drive by these farms, and there would be chickens walking on the porch. I made up my mind if we got to his house and there were chickens on the porch, I wasn't getting out of the car, I was coming back to Ames. Well, we drove for quite a while, and I was a nervous wreck.

Finally, we came to this little house. It was painted white, and it had a blue roof and blue shutters. It was just a tiny house, but the yard was beautiful — nicely cut grass and flowers. There was a fence all around it and not a chicken in sight. From the gate and the fence all the way up to the back door, there were flowers along the sidewalk on both sides. I saw that when we turned in, and I thought, “Thank God.” I wouldn’t have gotten out of the car if it had been otherwise. There was this little white house with white ruffle curtains and flowers and no chickens, so I went in and met his mother and father.

I used to like to go to town on Saturday nights with Don’s mother. You would go early and park the car on Main Street, and then you could sit in the car and watch everyone in town. People would come by the car and talk. Don’s mother would buy her groceries, and then she and other ladies would sit on the benches out in front of the grocery store and visit. I loved it, and it’s a shame that it is part of the past. It was such a special time, and the stores were open late on Saturday night.

Don Grant: I remember Eickenberry’s Grocery Store and Webb’s Drug Store. The men would go down to the pool hall and play cards. Saturday night was an institution, and in the summers, Wednesday night was also a night when people went to town. I am not sure why, maybe to shop twice a week or as an excuse to have a little social function in the summer when everyone was working hard. It was a big deal. You got to see your friends. You were working all day long and usually on your farm, and so you didn’t go to town every day like they do now, several times a day. It was a social event for the farm wives, for the women who worked all day long, as did the men. On Saturday night, you went in to do your shopping; and back when everyone milked a few cows, you went in and took your cream can. Everyone raised chickens to sell eggs. You would sell them at the grocery store usually, or they did have a produce house that bought them. You would sell eggs, then buy the groceries, and then spend the rest of the evening sitting in cars. And as Rosie said, women would sit in front of the store on benches and the men would stand on street corners and talk, or some of them would go down to the pool hall and play pitch or rummy or something until 10 or 10:30 and then go home.

When we got old enough to be able to use the car, we might drive over to Pocahontas — why, I’m not sure except there were different girls there. You drove up and down the street and looked and then went home. That was the substance of our riotous evening. Or we might go over to a movie in Pocahontas because they had a little better theater, and it was something else to do.

Helen: I’m wondering, Mother, when it was that you first got an inkling that you and Dad would be moving to Pocahontas County and this farm?

Marion Gunderson: It was about February of ’45 when your dad announced one day that we were going to move back to the farm. (pause) I wasn’t too happy about it (pause). And as I think back on it, I think he had a lot of nerve bringing the city girl to the farm to live. But I guess I adjusted. It was lonely for a while. Then one day, Mildred and Arlo Ives came over, and we formed a little bridge club, and I began to make friends. My mother had told me, “Now, Marion, if you have trouble making friends, just go to church.” That does work because you do meet people there.

Helen: What was it like to propose to Mother that the family would move to the farm?

Deane Gunderson: I don’t remember how it came to the time of actually making the decision. (pause) It might be true that I always knew I would do that.

Marion: Bear in mind, it was the war years when we first moved in. We couldn’t get a furnace, so we heated the big, two-story house with a warm morning heater in the dining room. We couldn’t get a bathtub, so we took our baths in the divided sink in the kitchen.

Deane: Shower in the basement finally.

Marion: And the house wasn't in very good condition, but we did do some painting and wallpapering and got lots of rugs to put down. We didn't have wall-to-wall carpeting. We changed early on from a gas stove to an electric stove. There was a back porch that had a closed-off room that we used for storage. That's where I put all the hand-me-down clothes for you kids. The first winter that we were on the farm — I have told this so many times, that I am beginning to wonder if it was really true or if it was legend — the electricity was off for ten days. Here I was with three children, the oldest barely three years old, and trying to cook for a family. Of course, we had the warm morning heater, so we stayed warm. I had to warm baby bottles and do whatever else needed to be done. It was pretty tricky.

Helen: When you moved to the farm, did you figure you would build a new house?

Marion: Your father said we would build one "within three years," but it took ten.

Helen: Oh, I guess I didn't know about that.

Deane: You learn something new every day.

Helen: Was that part of your prenuptial agreement?

Marion: No. Well, that was the understanding I had anyway. (pause) We had good times in the old house.

Deane: I can't believe that I had said that we would have built a new house in three years.

Marion: You may have just said, "Well, maybe we could build in three years, or something like that."

Deane: That's a dangerous thing to say. Oh well. (chuckle)

Helen: What surprised me, Marjorie, when I asked you how you and Faber had met, was when you said you used to love to go dancing.

Marjorie Harrold: That's where I met him.

Paul Harrold: You always went to dances, and apparently he did, too.

Marjorie: Well, back then, that was our entertainment. There were all these dance halls around, and now there isn't even one. I guess you can still go to Fort Dodge, but Twin Lakes had a dance hall, the Ridotto [near Havelock] had one, and Fort Dodge — we always went down there.

Paul: Storm Lake.

Marjorie: Yes, Storm Lake — the Cobblestone. They had good movies back then, and now you don't know what to go to.

Helen: Did you and Fay keep dancing then?

Marjorie: Oh, yeah, we did, but of course, it got to be less and less. (pause) We really liked to go. That was the way young people got together then. I got to go to one dance a week. See, that was back in the days when you didn't go by yourself. My folks would always go to the show and drop me off at the dance hall. After I met Fay, he would come and get me, and they didn't have to take me anymore. (chuckle)

Helen: Was that in Pocahontas?

Marjorie: No, we would go to Ft. Dodge to the Larimore.

Paul: That wasn't too bad for back in those days — going to Ft. Dodge from here.

Marjorie: Of course, I did the driving. (chuckle) But I didn't go by myself.

Paul: That was 40 miles.

Marjorie: We usually went on Sunday night. I would go to the dance, my folks would go to the movie, we would come home, and all week we would be busy working.

Helen: Do you go to movies now?

Marjorie: Yes, Paul and I took off two or three weeks ago.

Paul: And went to *The Sister Act*.

Marjorie: (chuckle) Have you seen that?

Paul: We went to *Fried Green Tomatoes*.

Marjorie: We used to go to a lot of movies. Like on Sunday afternoons, Pocahontas always had a matinee, and my folks would let me drive over. There always were such good shows, too. I liked musicals, and there were a lot of those.

Helen: They say that for a long time on the farm, a woman's work went as far as the chicken house because the woman was responsible in the house, and she was responsible for the chickens, and the men might help with the chickens, but they would never come any closer to doing housework.

Marjorie: That's right.

Helen: Did you experience any of that?

Marjorie: Well, no. Fay always helped me. He dried the dishes after every meal unless he was in a big hurry. Sometimes he would come in, and I was a little behind with dinner or something, and he pitched in and helped.

Paul: I'd set the table.

Marjorie: Of course, he never helped me much with cleaning or washing, but he always helped me around the house. And he could take care of the kids when they were babies, just as good as a woman. (Chuckle)

Helen: I never knew Faber. How would you describe him?

Marjorie: He was always a happy person. He loved to joke. (chuckle) He never found many faults with anybody. He saw the good in everything.

Paul: He had a lot of getup.

Norine Reigelsberger: When we were first married, the ASCS office wanted me to go over there and work — offered me a job — and Joe wouldn't let me because he thought I should be home and be a homemaker.

Joe Reigelsberger: Gosh, I sure made a mistake then, didn't I? (chuckle)

Norine: You did.

Joe: If I had let you go, think of the fabulous retirement you would have.

Norine: Well, that's a mistake you made right there.

Joe: Yup, I goofed up.

Norine: You sure did. (chuckle) So anyway, that took care of that. I never ever thought of working after that. But when Mick, our youngest son, started to school, I thought, "This is going to be just terrible. I just won't be able to stand this being home all day without anyone being around." So I was just really bored, and that's when I worked in Ft. Dodge. One year of that was enough. I think that was probably the worst winter we've ever had. I drove home in some of the most awful blizzards you could imagine, and by spring, I had had it.

And you know, not having started out working from the very beginning, I didn't feel my family was cooperating with the fact that I had a job outside the home. When I came home, it was all still here, and I was expected to do everything that I had done before. By the time school was out I had had it, and then the job got to be more than I wanted.

I had started the job on a part-time basis, and it got to be almost full-time. So that got to be more than I wanted to do. When I started, I told them I wanted the summers off because I wanted to be home with my children. I was supposed to go back in the fall, and all summer I kept thinking, "I don't want to go back," but I didn't have the nerve to tell them I didn't want to come back. I finally did, and they weren't very happy, but that was the way it was. You see, things now are different. The husbands help do everything now, but they didn't then.

Joe: She just found out that year that I wasn't gifted with these abilities to cook and wash and things like that. I'm just not handy at those jobs.

Helen: What was the power balance like between your parents?

Don Grant: I think they pretty much made the decisions together. I don't think it ever occurred to my father that he would do any housework; that was my mother's job. I also don't think he recognized that she was doing the fieldwork — gardening was fieldwork. We had a field garden and a house garden. The men did the field garden, and my mother did the house garden. I don't think they ever had a conflict there. I also don't think it ever occurred to my mother — or at least she didn't verbalize it — that she wasn't part of the management team. I think they made their decisions regarding the farm, the big decisions, together. Dad made the decisions on hogs. My mother made the decisions about when he was going to butcher hogs. She made the decision when he was going to butcher the steer because that was food. They bought a new car; they did that together. They bought machinery. My dad made that decision, but they sat down and talked about the financial aspects of buying the tractor, then my dad would decide what tractor to get. Other than that, I don't think there was a conflict or abuse on either side.

Most men think they make all the decisions, but if you study them carefully, they are allowed to verbalize the decision in many cases because there are a lot of women out there that are smart enough to let them do that. Really, the women are making the decision because they are smarter, but they're also smart enough to let him think he did it. That's the ball game there. He's happy.

Verle Howard: Verle teases me all the time about having "his dog house." When we got the new recliner, rather than burn the old one, he put it down in the chicken house so he could have his "dog house."

Verle Howard: Well, I do a lot of work down there in the wintertime. I build toy chests and ...

Velma: And then, our daughter, Hope, and her husband got a new TV, and again, rather than throw it away, they brought it to the farm for the chicken house, but it never got to the chicken house. It got put in the playhouse. That's why he has two places to go — he has the playhouse and the chicken house.

Helen: So, are you in charge of the house?

Velma and Verle: (chuckle)

Velma: I guess so.

Verle: You better believe she is.

Velma: I don't spend any more time in his chicken house than I have to.



Velma Benton (Howard) and Verle Howard. 1944. *The Velma and Verle Howard collection*.

Verle: I clean my shoes and take my boots off at the door of the house.

Velma: Well, doesn't everyone?

Verle: I can't even sneak in the door and cross the kitchen and get a cup of coffee with my dirty shoes on.

Helen: How was it that you started wearing suspenders?

Verle: Well, every time I got off the tractor or got on the tractor, I had to pull my britches up. I got so sick and tired of it that I said I was going to get some suspenders. And I was in the Farm and Home Store one day, and I saw these suspenders. I put them on and haven't taken them off.

Helen: Do you call this farm your homeplace?

Velma: This is the homeplace to the kids because Grandpa and Grandma Howard lived here, and now we're here. And when we talk family reunions, which we have been trying to have every other year at least, they always think it should be at the farm.

Helen: What's that like?

Velma: Sheer bedlam. (chuckles) I'm not exaggerating one bit. We rented campers about four years ago, and the kids were all here. We set up a tent, too.

Helen: What do the grandkids like to do?

Velma: The adults sit around and eat and visit and tease and generally enjoy themselves. And we play games with the kids. The grandkids like to dig out all the old games that their parents had when they were that age, and they make forts in the bales of straw in the haymow. They like to play badminton, horseshoes, basketball, volleyball, and whatever strikes their fancy. The grownups, usually the men, go golfing, and the women sit around and swear because the men don't come home. (chuckle) You know, like most families.

Dealing with Change

Don Grant: Another thing I remember was the big old cottonwood tree we had by the road. It was there forever. It was big when I was little, and what was left of it was still there the last time I was back. This old thing was a symbol of indestructibility because cottonwood trees draw lightning, and I don't know how many times this thing got hit. It stood there and took the best shots: ripped bark off, chunks out, and branches off. It was not very lively when I left, but it was always the thing I looked at when I went home. This old cottonwood tree was a symbol of the place. The elements were not going to beat it.¹

Helen: What do you feel about the changes happening along the road?

Joe Reigelsberger: It's kind of nostalgic. You feel like an era is going by that you wish wasn't. It seems like kind of a shame.

Norine Reigelsberger: It makes you wonder what is going to happen in the future. As fast as things have changed in the last fifty years, it makes you wonder how many places are going to be left on this road. Are all these four places going to be here, or are we going to be minus some more?

Joe: They tell us it is progress. Whether it is or not, I'm not sure.

Marion Gunderson: In talking about our barn and how we tore it down, I think of the abandoned farmsteads. There's a house right now over on the Plover Road that is abandoned and literally rotting away. And it's sad to see a house go like that. I would rather see it die a dignified death.

Deane Gunderson: It seems to me that there ought to be a county commission, but here

1. The Grant farmstead and cottonwood tree were cleared in the 1980s, and Don died in 2001.

you go with another government program, almost like Lady Bird's campaign to get rid of junkyards. Somebody ought to have the privilege to go out and burn down some of those buildings that obviously can't be used for anything.

Helen: Velma, if you were giving a program at church on loss and had to give a miniature sermon, or give some advice, or read some poetry or scripture, what would you pick out?

Velma Howard: My goodness, that's a big question.

Velma and Verle Howard: (chuckle)

Velma: I don't know what I would choose to say. It would probably depend on the mood I was in when they asked me to do it.

Verle: I would tell them, "Just take it as it comes. Don't worry about tomorrow. It will take care of itself. You worry about today."

LaVonne Howland: The church has an important role. It gives a rural community a place to come — to gather together, very much like the old days — to thank God for the fruits of the year during harvest. Also, it is a place for people to replenish themselves. Things have changed because what people want today and where they put their priorities makes the church's role more difficult. When our grandfathers were on the farms, the church was first. When you went to town, you went to the church; you went to the quilting bee. The church was the hub. Today, the church is closer to last in importance. We have kind of become mixed up, and yet the church needs to function to help keep peace in the turmoil. People still need that solace. They forget that they need it more than just occasionally, and the church needs to be there to provide it through illnesses, a crisis, the loss of crops, severe weather, hailstorm, and the drought that we experienced.

Helen: As a parish priest, how do you help your people deal with loss?

Dennis Sefcik: A lot of times, the best thing I can offer in a grieving situation is simply presence, just the fact that I am there. I don't have to say anything or say "the right words." I don't think that's necessary. I have been in so many of those grieving situations over the years, Catholic and non-Catholic. A lot of times, just being there and a comment like "We'll all help you carry the load the best we can," just a comment like that, is enough to help them through it. I can think, too, of specific cases where the right words weren't even necessary. The presence was. It isn't necessarily just death either. It doesn't have to be death. It can be a financial reversal. It can be the loss of a farm.

I can remember talking with one person when his creditors were going to foreclose and take the family farm. This was in the '80s. What can I possibly offer that particular man? I can't pull out a checkbook and write a check to pay the taxes and save the land. But the fact that I listened and understood the pain he was going through, I think, was enough to keep him from committing suicide because of that deal. I don't know how he has turned out since that; I've never followed him. I encountered him only in that one set of circumstances. How he has eventually gotten through this, I don't know, but I do know he lost the farm. This is really hard when you are talking about a family inheritance. And it's gone, zero. The creditors, they don't care. "Put the money on the line, forget all this family stuff." They don't care. Especially if it's a bank owned outside the community, which most of the banks are now. They care even less. They don't care what your name is and what your family tie to the farm is. "Forget it. Either pay the money or go. We don't care what happens to you." That attitude was very clear to farmers, especially through the '80s when we had to go through losing a bank a month in this part of the country.

Helen: I think we both realize that farmers could get buffeted pretty badly if each morning they looked out the window and thought, "Oh, my God," either how bad or how good things



The Rolfe Presbyterian Church. It is the church I was raised in and the church that LaVonne and my parents belonged to until the 1990s when the Presbyterians and Methodists formed the Shared Ministry of Rolfe. Velma and Verle, who were Methodists, also belong to the Shared Ministries. Before the organization razed the Presbyterian building in 1996, the bell was removed and stored on my parents' farm for possible future use. 1982.



are because each day is different and unpredictable. There's the unpredictability of nature, the risks facing farmers, and the losses that a person suffers as a part of life.

Dennis: See, that's why you will find that people in agriculture have a nice, wholesome presentation of themselves to God. I think it comes easy for them. You stop to think, "Now that guy cannot go out in that field until it's dry." I don't care how big the equipment he's got, how ready the crop is, he's not going out until it's dry. He's got to wait until nature dries that soil. He can't get a helicopter out there and dry the field off. It ain't going to happen. So he's got to wait for nature to dry that soil. So when it's dry, then he can plant it. Now he's got the input of how he wants to till it and how deep and so on; but then, really, he doesn't have any control over the growth of that, either. He can make it grow a little faster with fertilizers and herbicides and so on, but the fact that it is going to grow is out of his power. So then it grows. Now, he also doesn't have any control over whether it is going to mature. Now in 1991, he didn't have any control over that frost and how it cut down the yield of his beans. Now if that frost had waited just another ten days, he could have noticeably increased the yield of his beans. But he didn't have any control over that, yet he went ahead and he harvested. So he learns very early in the game that he doesn't have a whole lot of control over the growth of that. Now he can make it sound like he decided this and that, but when you get him down to his basic heart, he's got to say, "Someone else is controlling all the water supply, the drought, and the hail. Somebody else controls all that, I don't."

Sustenance has to come from their faith, their belief in God, and personal prayer life but also in that community of people sharing experiences together and carrying the load together. It doesn't mean we have to get together every now and then and talk about what a big load we are carrying. It means that I am aware of my neighbor, down the street or down the mile, and I know if I need something, I can always go there. They'll always help me. And that feeling is also a very sustaining thing.



The old section of the Clinton-Garfield Cemetery southeast of Rolfe. The Pro Cooperative grain elevators are in the background. 2000.

DEALING WITH DEATH

A Day of Mourning

Don Grant died on September 29, 2001. I had visited him on Thursday, September 13, two days after the World Trade Center and Pentagon were attacked on September 11. Then on the national day of mourning on Friday, September 14, I wrote an essay in response to the events of the week. It included the following portion that begins with reference to a photo excursion I had taken with a friend, Janis Pyle. She wanted me to bring my camera and help her document farms and other places of her rural heritage in central Iowa. It was on that outing that I saw Don for the last time.



Janis and I talked about the attacks on New York and Washington and how people would be quick to retaliate rather than understand that the best form of national defense is to share power and resources more equitably in the world.

Janis and I also talked at length about rural and small-town life and how the agricultural economy is in really bad shape. It is hard for some people to realize how bad things are because the tragedy of the farm scene doesn't have the kind of visual impact for television as airliners hitting the Twin Towers and the subsequent collapse of those icons of American prosperity.

The farms we visited were like so many around the Rolfe area, vastly different than when they thrived with activity in past decades.

We went to the McCallsburg cemetery, where Janis feels a close attachment. She asked if I had anything to stand on so she could get a better view. I remembered that my friends Mark and Connie live on a farm near McCallsburg and suggested going to their place to see if they had a stepladder that we could borrow. Mark and Connie are both active in the Practical Farmers of Iowa organization, and Mark once served in Haiti for the Mennonite mission program. He is quick to point out that mission work is not the same as missionary work — that is, no proselytizing.

We found Mark in his machine shed listening to NPR and preparing his combine for harvest. He was most willing to loan us a stepladder. He also took time to talk with Janis and me about the attacks on Tuesday and about the farm economy. Again, there was a concurrence of thought that vengeance and hate and domination of the world were not the right attitudes. And again, there was a discussion of the rural economy. I said that my income for the last farm year was pretty good but that 40 percent of my net income had come from government subsidies. I asked Mark how the federal government's budget shortage and the events of this week would affect the farm economy. He responded that he knew many farmers who said they weren't going to survive financially even with government assistance.

I am reminded that a friend from Rolfe recently wrote an e-mail saying:

Pocahontas County is dying. There is little new economic development occurring, and the businesses that remain are barely surviving. Each year a few close and no new ones take their place. We are forced to leave the area to shop.

A heaviness also settled on me after Janis and I paid a surprise visit to an older couple in Colo. I had originally met Don and Rosie Grant in the early 1990s when I interviewed him for my documentary project about the road I grew up on. The farm where Don grew up is one of those places along the road that is now cleared and covered with row crops each year — corn and soybeans. Janis had met the couple when she frequented the small cafes in the Colo area. During that time, Don and Rosie kept insisting that Janis should look me up because our work of documenting our rural heritage was so similar. Janis followed their advice, and that's how we became friends; however, the four of us had never gotten together at the same time.

One of the grandest things about my road project has been getting to meet fine people and hear their stories. Don and Rosie were terrific, not only in letting me record lots of their stories and loaning me some great old photos of the Grant farm, but in making me feel at home when I moved back to Iowa. Rosie had always been a great Catholic and advised me to pray to Anthony, the saint of travel, for help in finding an apartment when I moved back to Iowa in 1993. Everyone that I know who knows Don and Rosie has great respect for the couple. Both are thoughtful, yet have a great sense of humor. They tend to have liberal thoughts and have an admirable tolerance and compassion for people. I've known for a number of years that Rosie is dealing with Parkinson's disease. I also knew that Don was getting thinner and thinner the past few times I visited him.

Janis and I have spoken often about the sense of being called to the kind of work we do, documenting our rural heritage and how we often don't know where it will lead us. Neither of us had thought of visiting Don and Rosie yesterday until we were driving past Colo. The clouds had gotten too gray for doing photography, and a light rain had begun to fall. It wasn't time for lunch, and we were in no hurry to be anywhere, so it seemed most appropriate to stop and see the Grants.

It was as if the Spirit had led us to Don and Rosie's house. Their daughter, Ellen from Tennessee, greeted us at the door. Something seemed vastly different, and I realized when I saw him that Don was not the same man I knew when I first met him some 10 years ago. He was dressed for the day and sitting in his easy chair. He conversed with us some but was frail and mainly quiet. We had not only a good visit, but one to cherish. Don has cancer and has decided not to fight it with chemotherapy or radiation. Our conversation had its moments of tenderness, sobriety, and humor — of hugs, tears, and smiles — even some chuckles.

Rosie wanted to show us the gift she had received for her 80th birthday last March from "Old Dad," a term she uses endearingly for Don. Ellen brought in a small, antique, shining white, porcelain music box shaped like an old-fashioned Victrola record player and played it for us. The five of us smiled when we heard the tune that went, "Let me call you sweetheart."

Rosie and Don are a pair of lovebirds. But the love isn't that of young love such as the times when they were dating at Iowa State and visited Don's folks and necked in the hammock. Nor was it like when Don was a radar cadet at Yale University and he and Rosie ate at the restaurant in New Haven where Glenn Miller dined; nor when the couple danced at the Friday night cadet dances where Miller and his band performed; nor when they were married in 1944 at the Catholic chapel on the Yale campus, the day after Don was commissioned and before being shipped out to Florida and later to Europe as part of the Air Corp's Pathfinder Division.

This day, the love was mature and pervasive, touching each heart in the room, enveloping us in a sacred circle. We were silent, and the air stood still. The sound was as pure as the ringing of a bell in a Tibetan meditation hall, and the music — speaking a language of its own — said everything that needed to be said. It enabled us to feel both the intense sorrow and the beauty of the day. Even though none of us used the word *goodbye*, it seems that was what our encounter was about.



Don and Rosie Grant at Yale. 1944. *The Don and Rosie Grant collection.*

Not only did Don run around with my dad when they were kids, but Don's parents, Cap and Addie Grant, were friends of my grandparents, John and DeElda Gunderson. They all belonged to a couples' club called the Country Jakes, but being good Methodists, they couldn't play anything that resembled poker. Instead, they used a special deck of cards to play a game called Somerset.

The loss of Don will not only be the loss of a friend I have known for a decade but will be the loss of one of my father's friends. Don's death is also symbolic; it represents the loss of the ancestors who settled or built our small towns and rural neighborhoods.

My heart is usually heavy at this time of year because October is the anniversary of my grandfather John's death in 1956 when I was 11. He and I were very close, and I understand some of the reasons for our closeness. Unfortunately, I hardly grieved his passing until I was in my forties. I keep thinking that I will get past the grief but wonder how long it will take.

I am also reminded of the yin and yang of life — that there is always light and darkness in the world. How often do we know of an octogenarian who dies the same day that a new child is born into a family? Don and Rosie's son John and his wife are about to have their first child. How often is an exquisite work of art with long-lasting impact created during a time of intense duress?

Often, I think of the traditional hymn "Now Thank We All Our God" and the social context in which it was written. As the web site, *cyberhymnal.org*, reports:

Martin Rinkart

Martin Rinkart (1586–1649) was a Lutheran minister in Eilenburg, Saxony. During the Thirty Years' War, the walled city of Eilenburg saw a steady stream of refugees pour through its gates. The Swedish army surrounded the city, and famine and plague were rampant. Eight hundred homes were destroyed, and the people began to perish. There was a tremendous strain on the pastors who had to conduct dozens of funerals daily. Finally, the pastors, too, succumbed, and Rinkart was the only one left—doing 50 funerals a day. When the Swedes demanded a huge ransom, Rinkart left the safety of the walls to plead for mercy. The Swedish commander, impressed by his faith and courage, lowered his demands. Soon afterward, the Thirty Years' War ended, and Rinkart wrote this hymn for a grand celebration service. It is a testament to his faith that, after such misery, he was able to write a hymn of abiding trust and gratitude toward God.

Now Thank We All Our God

Now thank we all our God, with heart and hands and voices,
Who wondrous things has done, in Whom this world rejoices;
Who from our mothers' arms has blessed us on our way
With countless gifts of love, and still is ours today.

O may this bounteous God through all our life be near us,
With ever joyful hearts and blessed peace to cheer us;
And keep us still in grace, and guide us when perplexed;
And free us from all ills, in this world and the next.

The Death of Don Grant

Don Grant died on Saturday, September 29, 2001, but I didn't know of his death until Monday, October 1st. I learned of his death when I read an e-mail letter from my older sister Clara in Omaha with a link to Don's obituary in the *Des Moines Register*. I couldn't believe this day had come — the day of reading the obituary of one Don Grant. During the previous week, I had been vacationing at my mother's cottage on Lake Okoboji in northwest Iowa. The only good news about reading of Don's death was that I was back home and learned of his passing in time to attend his wake and funeral service.



Don Grant. Circa 1924. *The Don and Rosie Grant collection.*

I had an appointment in Des Moines on the day of the wake and arrived late at St. Mary's Catholic Church in Colo. The Rosary and other prayers had already been said, and people had publicly reminisced about Don. By the time I arrived, people were talking in small clusters in various parts of the sanctuary. As I had anticipated, I recognized no one except Rosie and her daughter, Ellen, who had hosted my friend, Janis, and me when we visited Don and Rosie on September 13 at their home. I felt for Ellen in many ways, including her role as helpmate to her parents for at least a week by herself. She had not gone home after Janis and I had paid

our visit. Instead, she stayed on as a hostess and sentry and was later joined by her brother Jim for a week and then by all her siblings. I saw Ellen at the side of the sanctuary, walked over, and we gave each other a long hug. It seemed as though I was an extra sister who knew the weight Ellen had carried and was willing to provide a shoulder for her to cry on and a heart to connect with.

I moved to the front of the sanctuary intending to speak to Rosie, but on my way, I found myself going past the simple pine casket and stopped to look at Don. I could engage in a long discourse about the pros and cons of being able to see a deceased person. Part of my belief is that a person's spirit is released upon breathing his or her last breath. What we see in the casket is analogous to the brown, crusty body of a cicada that I once saw sitting on a wooden fence post. The insect had morphed into a new green creature, was sitting an inch away from its former shell, and was drying off in the rays of the sun with a iridescent drop of water rolling down its back. I watched for several minutes. I even got my camera and took several photographs. Then in a moment when I turned my attention the other way, the cicada vanished.

I also believe that even though the body in the casket is not truly the person we once knew, it is a focal point for coming to terms with the finality of that person's life and reflecting on who the person was and what he or she meant to us. Don's face was bland and pious looking. There was little about him that portrayed the feisty, fun man I had known during the last 12 years nor the boyhood friend my father had known. However, one needed to appreciate the job the undertaker did of preparing the body, considering how emaciated Don had probably become when cancer took its final toll.



Rosie and Don Grant. 1990.

I grinned when I realized that the family did not require Don to be dressed in his best suit and tie. Instead, he lay in the casket with a red Iowa State University cardigan sweater with an embroidered emblem of the university sports mascot. It was not the current mean rendition of the cardinal mascot but the spunky Cy that Iowa State used when Don and his family returned to Ames in the fall of 1968.

I also chuckled when I saw a rosary in Don's hands. He was raised in a Methodist family on a farm located between Protestant families of German and Scandinavian descent and Catholic families of Bohemian descent. There were taboos against mixed dating and marriages, but Don was not the kind of person easily influenced by taboos. After all, he had been married 57 years to Rosie, a devote Irish Catholic. While in college, his roommate was engaged to her roommate, and the two wanted to line Rosie and Don up, but neither Rosie nor Don wanted to be lined up.

There were times when Don and Rosie visited his folks at their farm and times when Rosie visited Cap and Addie by herself when Don was in the service. Cap and Addie were gracious toward Rosie, rising above any disparaging comments people in the community might have made because their daughter-in-law was a Catholic.

In an interview with the Grants, I asked Don about the kind of modeling he had in learning to deal with hard times. He responded:

The biggest thing I have learned is the value of faith, and a lot of that Rosie has taught me. My dad had faith in the soil and himself. It was probably in God, but he never verbalized it and maybe wouldn't have known how to verbalize it. I guess his faith was in God and that he believed God would take care of him if he took care of what God had given him to take care of. But there was no talk of that.

There was a time after high school when Don thought of becoming a Methodist minister. Instead, 10 years after marrying Rosie, he became a Catholic. His conversion, he said, was the result of seeing the connections between Rosie's faith and the beliefs that Cap and Addie had been "leaning on" but never verbalized.

It was awesome to look upon Don from my perspective of having worked with photographs of him from boyhood to manhood, having interviewed him, and having transcribed and edited his stories. I realized that the Don who was lying in the casket and the Don who had taken flight like a cicada was and is a complex being. He is a mysterious soul influenced by many eras — if not multiple lifetimes — within the one grand life he spent on this earth.

I turned toward Rosie, who was sitting in the front pew near the center aisle. She finished her conversations with other people and turned her attention to me. I knelt beside her to talk and give her a hug. She seemed to be doing exceptionally well, considering she has had Parkinson's disease for several years. I had expected that Rosie's grief would compound her illness and that she would be fragile. Instead she was strong — conversant with a positive outlook.

When I left Rosie, I felt lost. I sensed that the people gathered in the various clusters were old friends catching up on lost years. I moved to a side pew by myself and watched. I studied physical features, mannerisms, and expressions to discern which people were Don and Rosie's offspring. I had met Ellen's other sisters, Annie and Mary Margaret, about ten years earlier at a family gathering at Don and Rosie's home. It was much like a circus with lots of children coming and going, and at the wake, I couldn't remember which sister was which. I knew at some point I would be able to meet the family, but I had no idea how they would receive me.

As I waited, dare I say, what seemed an eternally long time, I noticed a lanky young man, probably the age of a college student, approach the casket and stand by it for several minutes. I perceived an extraordinary amount of comfort on his part — a gentleness and a love. Not wanting to stare, I shifted my gaze to other people or facets of the sanctuary. Finally, I looked back toward the young man and saw a beautiful grin on his face. I interpreted it as a sign that he recognized the ways he had benefited from knowing Don and was saying farewell to his

friend, knowing that Don would be OK. The next day, I learned that the young man was one of Don's grandsons and that his name is Matt.

Eventually I approached some of the clusters of people and introduced myself to more of Don and Rosie's children. By the end of the next day, I had met them all and found them to be much like their parents — fun, hospitable, and caring about me in a way that was a welcome surprise. They hardly knew me but took me in almost as though I were a cousin.

Wednesday morning when I arrived at the funeral, the sanctuary was nearly full, and again I knew no one but family members. Soon though, I saw some Unitarian friends, Roger and Kay, and slid into a pew next to them. Roger had been a colleague of Don's in the Iowa State engineering department.

As the priests and family members escorted the casket from the main entrance of the church through the center aisle to the front of the sanctuary, a CD player in the balcony played a recording of Ella Fitzgerald singing "September Song" with the familiar lyrics, "Oh, it's a long, long while from May to December." How in character for the family to choose that song since Don and Rosie have both been fans of big band music. The song represented an era and conveyed a sense of love and loss as effectively, in fact, more effectively, than a conventional hymn would have done.

Then there was the Mass. The fine congregational singing was led by a small group that included Don and Rosie's daughter, Mary Margaret, playing the guitar and their granddaughter, also named Rosie, who sang with the group. Ellen was one of the eucharistic ministers.

When it was time to celebrate the Sacrament of Holy Communion, I walked forward to receive the bread and wine. It had been a long time since my days as an active Presbyterian when I looked forward to the Eucharist. As a Unitarian — well, let me simply say that I have let go of certain traditions and that the Unitarian Fellowship in Ames does not do Holy Communion. However, at the funeral, I was eager to get back to the roots of the Christian experience and tap the well that sustains Rosie's faith. I wanted to participate in the sacrament even though I was apprehensive about picking up a cold or incurring some other malady by drinking from a common communion cup.

A friend of the family read a fun poem she had written called "Old Dad," and the priest spoke fine words and told great stories about Don. Among Father Seda's remarks was his observation of something I had already realized: that Don and Rosie were soul mates. Their relationship was the kind that many people yearn to have.

The service ended as the priest and family escorted the casket back up the aisle to the main entrance of the church. For the postlude, the CD player played a recording of Frank Sinatra singing, "I'll be seeing you in all the old familiar places." Time seemed suspended.

Eventually there would be lunch in the church basement served by members of the parish. There were juicy slices of hot beef in hamburger buns, baked beans, potato chips, salads, cakes, and coffee. Such a meal can be the best part of a funeral and is replicated in many churches, including the Methodist Church in Rolfe where Don's family had attended and where funerals had been conducted and lunches served when my grandfather and grandmother died. A funeral is a time for people to break bread together, whether it is shared as part of a holy sacrament or around a cafeteria table with fine reminiscing.

Don and Rosie's children told me many stories. They told about their impression that Don was the only faculty member at Iowa State with only a bachelor's degree who had achieved the rank of tenured professor; about how he had "gotten out of college by the skin of his teeth," barely earning a C average; about how he had a way of genuinely connecting with students and promoting their well-being. As Jim Grant said, "What Dad did best was the people stuff."

In his interview in 1992, Don said he was not a great engineer but that he liked talking and listening to people. He tried to have a sympathetic ear, and his advisees often came to his office, had a cup of coffee, and were able to “blow their stack.” Perhaps he developed his skill as a listener in part from being around his father. Don says he could talk to his dad, and even though Cap was deaf, Cap could hear Don. But Cap didn’t know what to say, so he didn’t say anything in return but would listen and be sympathetic. There are times I have felt Don’s presence in a similar manner, with few words but an ability to listen and be sympathetic, and other times when he spoke with just the right humor, affirmation, or advice.

The family told about how Don had often talked about wanting to be buried in a pine box in the grove at the acreage on 24th Street in north Ames where Don and Rosie lived until moving to Colo in 1994. However, Don had not initiated the arrangements, and when it became clear that he would be departing, the family members had to figure out how to fulfill his wishes. They assumed the city and current homeowner would not want Don to be buried at the 24th Street location, so they thought about the university cemetery located in Pammel Woods.

Don’s boys (Jim, Joe, and John) did the legwork and made phone calls to put the pieces of a plan together for Rosie’s approval. They contacted the Facilities Planning and Management Department at the university and found out there were less than a dozen lots left in the cemetery. They also discovered Don met the three requirements for admittance to the cemetery. First, he had retired from the university and had not simply left. Second, he had achieved tenure. Third, he had worked at the university a few days longer than the minimum requirement of 20 years of employment. As John said, the arrangements worked out “just like other things Dad did — he just kind of slid in at the last moment.”

The sons also found out the university had an egalitarian policy for who could have what plots. When a landscape architect representing the department showed the family the layout of the cemetery, there was a space in the center for presidents, but otherwise, people would get lots on a first come, first serve basis. The family could have Don’s name penciled in on an informal list, but as the representative said, the university couldn’t make a final burial plot commitment to anyone until his or her death actually occurred.

The family told about John saying he had heard about pine caskets being available through the Internet and about Jim using his portable computer to locate a site called *trappistcaskets.com*. It was for the New Melleray Monastery near Dubuque, Iowa. When the sons called and explained to the Trappist representative that Don’s death was imminent but that they did not know exactly when they would need the casket, the man allayed their concerns. He said, “Trust us, this is our business. We know what you’re going through. The casket will be there when you need it.” Eventually, two Trappist monks drove across the state and arrived in a late-1980s, dusty blue pickup truck with a topper. They unloaded the casket at Ryan’s Funeral Home in the county seat of Nevada for temporary storage until the family made a final decision about what funeral home to use.

The family described how the casket was beautifully crafted, but a screw was off kilter; therefore, one of the metal handles was not properly aligned. Yet the family says the flaw was a perfect reminder of Don and his style of home handiness. As an example, Jim told about the towel rack that Don installed in the bathroom that was askew even though Don was an engineer. Jim added that there used to be a cartoon stuck on Don and Rosie’s refrigerator, showing a towel bar with a drill still attached to one end and a caption saying, “He started seven years ago but never quite got finished.”

I also learned from Don and Rosie’s children about the week prior to Don’s death. All six of them and Don and Rosie were camped out in the same house with only one bathroom. An outsider such as myself can only speculate about the events during that week and the

connections among the family members. It was a private time that only they experienced and only they will remember. Even when they tell other people about it, none will fully understand what transpired. However, I imagine it was a difficult week but also a beautiful one that they cherish. I also imagine the Grants were close-knit and did better than most families would. Of course, no one does a statistical analysis of how families rank in handling intimate times together. Such a study would be ludicrous and could lead only to the sports mentality so prevalent in our society: the one of measuring events quantitatively and calculating who is number one rather than appreciating the experiences on a qualitative basis and focusing on being human.



Rosie and Don Grant. Circa 1967. *The Rosie and Don Grant collection*.

The Grant family has some similarities to mine. There were six siblings, our dads were childhood buddies who went to Iowa State where they met our moms, but our families are also different.

I speculate that my own family will handle our living with dying situations in a much different way than the Grants did. Also, I do not anticipate that members of my family will choose the minimal medical path that Don did, nor do I anticipate that we would do as well under one roof for an entire week, even though my parents' home has more than one bathroom.

Don lived with liver cancer and took no treatment but gradually became weaker, more frail, and moved toward death in his own home with his family close around him. He experienced remarkably little pain, and the hospice nurses were impressed at his low level of medication. There is something about the closeness of Don's family members and their love that made their week sacred. Yes, it was a difficult time, but it was extraordinary in a way beyond words.

Don's children told me about how there were long periods of time when the six of them and Rosie gathered around Don's bed. Rosie sat, rested, held Don's hand, chatted, and attended to her rosary. Sometimes she said her prayers to herself, and other times she spoke the "Hail Marys" out loud and her children joined her.

Each sibling had his or her opinion regarding what strategy would be most helpful to Don. I asked them if Don knew what was going on and whether he rolled his eyes at them or tried to swat them with the back of his hand in loving disgust. They chuckled and said he didn't have the energy to roll his eyes or swat anyone, but that if he could have, he would have.

Rosie says each evening during the last week of Don's life, the family watched a John Wayne movie with Don. Each time he moved, one of his children would ask if there was anything he or she could do to help. The same quality of care occurred during the nights when

there were at least two of Don's children sleeping on the floor beside his bed. Again, if he made the slightest movement or sound, one of the loyal sentries would ask, "Dad, do you need something? Is there anything I can do for you?"

Rosie is extremely proud of how her children helped Old Dad. She adds that she has never seen a woman more gentle than her sons were in ministering to their father's needs.

During lunch at the church, a few people were taking snapshots, which prompted me to get my camera out of the trunk of my car and put it beside me in the front seat. I wanted to be prepared to take photographs at the cemetery.

I had never been to the university cemetery, but I knew that it was in a woods between the northwest edge of campus and the Unitarian Fellowship on Hyland Avenue. Feeling somewhat confident I could find the place, I drove by myself the 20 miles from Colo to Ames via U.S. Highway 30. I wanted to be there early with my camera before other people arrived, but I also needed to have my car in Ames because I had an appointment at the Fellowship at three o'clock to have my portrait taken for the church directory.

Although the cemetery is hidden in the woods, I knew I was at the right place when I saw ushers from the funeral home at the gate giving directions. I parked on the street, walked through the gate, and waited for the funeral procession to arrive. Soon the hearse and limousines carrying the family arrived. The funeral director unlocked the back of the hearse and Don's three sons and three sons-in-law carried the pine casket and placed it on a stand at the gravesite.

There wasn't anything fancy about the committal service. The gravesite was in a shaded area. Rosie sat with her daughter Annie and pregnant daughter-in-law, Mary, on chairs under a navy blue awning. Other people stood behind the women or nearby. Matt, the grandson I had seen standing near the casket the night before grinning at Don, had recruited some of his fellow members of the university marching band to play the university anthem, "The Bells of Iowa State." After the official ceremony, people lingered and talked much like they had at the wake and luncheon.

The Bells of Iowa State

Green hills for thy throne, and for crown a golden melody
Ringing in the hearts of all who bring thee love and loyalty.
Dear Alma Mater, make our spirits great,
True and valiant like the bells of Iowa State.

Enhanced are our lives by thy wisdom and fidelity
Each inspiring moment here implants enduring loyalty.
Dear Alma Mater, keep life's pathways straight,
Hearts allegiant to the Bells of Iowa State.¹

The cemetery that particular day was as beautiful as I had ever seen any part of the Iowa State campus, and for the most part, the campus is known for its beauty. The woods was like a large bowl similar to a giant terrarium or part of a human biosphere project. The grass was a well-groomed carpet. The trees with their tall trunks formed a circular outer wall. The leaves — a mottled mixture of radiant red, brown, and gold colors — formed a canopy. And above, in the center of the canopy, was a large portal for us, the inhabitants, to see the rich blue sky and for the radiance of the sun to shine upon us.

I approached a few of the family members and suggested I would be willing to take family photographs. Then I stood aside and waited.

1. Words and music by Jim Wilson, Iowa State University English Department, 1928-31.

My imagination led me to memories from long ago of reading the *Tales of King Arthur's Round Table*. In my mind, the university cemetery had become a holy forest that afternoon, not because it was a cemetery but because of the people gathered, the purpose for which they gathered — saying good-bye to a heck of a fun and wise fellow sojourner — and the way they loved each other. In addition, the sun and the trees in our little biosphere were perfectly aligned and were offering blessings to the family, other mourners, and Don. Subsequently, in the midst of that woods on that day, there was no need to search for the Holy Grail. It was there and evident in the people and the place.

I picked a knoll in the middle of the cemetery. Soon the grandchildren assembled on it for a round of photos. Then Don and Rosie's six children gathered for their photos. Next Rosie joined her children for more photos, then the spouses joined the six children and Rosie for yet another round of photo taking. Finally, I finished the roll of film by photographing Rosie by herself. She was beautiful. Indeed she had a rosiness in her cheeks and a glow in her eyes even though a person would suspect there was a deep vein of sorrow in her heart.



Rosie Gulden Grant. 2001.

I occasionally talk with Rosie on the phone and visit her at her home. I'm impressed by her resiliency. I also enjoy hearing new stories that shed light on her and Don's lives. Several days after the funeral, when I spoke with her, Rosie told me about the last day the family had with Don. She prefaced the story by saying that Don had been a temperate drinker. He would go for months without having a drink, but if he did have a drink, he would opt for Scotch. Also, she said that on the occasions when the family toasted special events, they were accustomed to having a little Scotch for Old Dad.

Rosie explained that on the final day when the family was gathered around Don's bed and after he took his last breath, they put a selection of his favorite music on the CD player: big band, Dixieland, and old country western. They also notified the undertaker of Don's death. Then son Joe went to the kitchen to get a bottle of Scotch that he had brought. She was not sure if it was one Joe had brought back in recent years from Scotland or one he had a friend in England send him especially for Don. In either case, it was particularly good and the only Scotch remaining in the house, with only a couple ounces left in the bottle. Joe brought the

bottle to the room and handed it to John, who opened it, moistened his finger with the Scotch, and wiped some across Don's lips. Then the bottle was passed around, first to Rosie, then to the rest of her children. Rosie ended her account, saying, "We all figured Old Dad would go to Heaven, and in his honor, we felt we should finish the bottle for him." Eventually the three sons went out into the darkness of the night for a walk while Rosie and the three daughters stayed in the house and talked.

None of Don and Rosie's six children knew their grandparents — neither Cap and Addie Grant nor Matt and Annie Gulden. None of them had ever lived in the Rolfe area, in fact, their main developmental years were not in Iowa but in Texas where Don had worked for Collins Radio before joining the Iowa State faculty.

In the interview early in the 1990s with the Grants, Don said both he and Rosie liked the farm:

It was the anchor for us, even after we were married as long as the folks were alive. We made our home and had six kids, but the kids were born after my parents were dead and her parents were dead. But even after my parents left the farm, it was still in the family. I would say it was always an anchor and still is to the extent that I still have a foot in there somewhere.

Our children didn't want Dad to sell his half to Duncan [his brother]. It was very special to them all the time they grew up in Texas. They knew Dad had come from a farm in Iowa. And of course, we liked the farm and talked pleasantly of it. And when it came time to sell it, they all said they wished we wouldn't.

Rosie continued by saying there were too many complications not to sell the farm, but even for her children it was a "spot of security."

Don went on to say that whenever the family came back to Iowa, the first thing the kids wanted to do was go to the farm and look in the buildings, even though no one lived there and the buildings had deteriorated. He also spoke about how his daughter Annie while on her way back from her honeymoon at Lake Okoboji in 1984, made her husband stop by the farm and realized the place had been cleared. Don says, "That's when we discovered the buildings were gone."

In my encounters with Don and Rosie's children, it is clear they have a high regard for their rural heritage and carry on the values and characteristics of Cap, Addie, Matt and Annie. But the heritage they carry is not and cannot be defined by a sense of place. Instead, whatever they carry from their heritage will be through qualities of the heart and spirit. The grandchildren will know even less about Don's farm heritage. To them, it will probably be something mythical that happened once upon a time.

Learning about the Grant family — through interviewing Don and Rosie, going through their collection of family photos, meeting the clan at Don's wake and funeral, and paying an occasional visit to Rosie at her home in Colo — is a way for me to reflect on life. Sometimes it's easier to learn life's lessons by reading a biography or, in my case, getting to know people through this project than by looking head on into our own situations.

An important lesson I am learning is that life is not static but is fluid. Another lesson is that life has its mysteries. There are questions we need to ask and reflect on, but we also must recognize there are no concrete answers and need to learn to live with mystery.

Where is Don now? Where is my grandfather now? Where will other loved ones go when they leave this earth? Those are questions about the afterlife. Rosie says that the day Don died was also the day of the Feast of the Guardian Angels on her liturgical calendar. She suspects, and I would agree, that the Guardian Angels escorted Don directly to a festive banquet hall, and a fine time was had by all.

Rosie also says we can turn to people who have gone before us in the same manner we can turn to the saints. Every once in a while, I sense Don grinning at me or giving me sound advice much like he used to give the many students he advised and who held him in high esteem. And occasionally, I can sense my grandfather walking with me or tousling my hair.

There are also questions about life here on earth, different ones for different folks. Mine boil down to questions about what gives us meaning and a sense of connection when people and places that have been significant in our lives vanish or are in the process of vanishing. How can I be as eager to know new places and people as I have been with those I have known in the past? Perhaps I could give myself credit for maturing into a few of the answers. For instance, who would have known when I was living in California, that in the future I would meet Don and Rosie, that I would feel close to them, and that they would be significant in helping me feel at home in my home state.

I've been told, and I get a glimpse of it, that the answers to many of life's difficult questions lie in living fully in the present moment and knowing the value of our individual selves while recognizing that something greater guides and sustains us. Don and Rosie have been models of doing just that. Thank you, my friends.



Young Cap Grant. 2001. *The John and Mary Grant collection.*

Postscript: Don and Rosie Grant's youngest son, John, and his wife Mary gave birth to their first son, John Casper Grant, on December 28, 2001. The boy's name will be written officially as J. Casper Grant for legal purposes, but he will be known as Cap Grant, the same name as his dirt farmer grandfather who lived along the road where I grew up.

Birth and Rebirthing

Wherever the sacred feminine is honored, the central imagery is of birthing, but also of rebirthing. In cultures where individual achievement and aggrandizement are crucial to one's experience of self, the very notion of death evokes immense anxiety because mortality limits one's opportunity to make a mark in life. Where identity is experienced in terms of connection and relationship, one might assume the idea of death would be just as terrifying insofar as it disconnects us from those we love. But, in fact, another dynamic comes often into play. The little boy's smile is so like his father's, and his eyes are those of his grandmother. He laughs like his mother's sister, and so, probably, will his grandchildren. The continuities are so evident we can rest in them, feeling ourselves held securely in a web of intricate design. Life is not snuffed out when one individual dies; it gathers itself in and reconfigures from one instant to the next.

Written by Carol Lee Flinders in her book, *At the Root of This Longing: Reconciling a Spiritual Hunger and a Feminist Thirst*, published by HarperCollins, 1998, page 149.

THE ROAD I GREW UP ON

Requiem for a Vanishing Era

VOLUME 1

Helen DeElda Gunderson

From the Foreword

I love reading books about rural life, books such as Mildred Armstrong Kalish's *Little Heathens* and Ronald Jager's *Eighty Acres*, but most of those accounts are not honest about the disadvantages of rural life. Helen's willingness to admit the "nostalgic and disenchantment, the love and disdain" is the reason *The Road I Grew Up On* is so fascinating.

Helen's examination of the limited agricultural opportunities for women farmers is especially fascinating. As she now manages her Pocahontas County farmland and has transformed her Ames properties to a delightfully diverse urban farm, she certainly is a triumphant example of what women can accomplish.

Helen's book is not only a gift for today but for future generations, for those who may come to it to learn about an ancestor, old farming techniques, land ownership patterns, changing gender identities and much more.

From the foreword by **Teresa Opheim**

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Helen at prairie restoration project she gave to the Iowa Natural Heritage Foundation in 2011. Photo by Erin VanWaus, INHF. 2015.

Helen DeElda Gunderson is a fourth-generation, septuagenarian Iowan who grew up on a farm in Pocahontas County, Iowa, where she currently owns inherited farmland. After earning an undergraduate degree in physical education from Iowa State University, a master's degree in instructional technology and a Master of Divinity, and following a diverse career that took her to other states, Helen returned to Iowa in 1993. She now lives in Ames on what she calls her urban farm. Her book, *The Road I Grew Up On*, is a two-volume anthology written from a liberal perspective and consists of regional and neighborhood history, personal memoir, spiritual insights, other opinions, and photographs. The seeds for the project were sown in fall 1989 followed by years of Helen's taking photographs, shooting video footage, recording interviews, conducting other research, and writing about the neighborhood and culture where she grew up. The first volume consists primarily of material completed in 2004, while the second volume consists of chapters written in 2019 and one completed on July 31, 2020, about living in the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic.

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