



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.



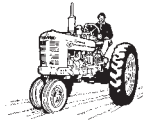
The Gundersons have been large landholders, mainly southwest of Rolfe but with one farm northeast of town. We have thought of the property as our land and that we will always be there, either ourselves or someone in the family lineage. But there may be a day when the Gunderson name will be as obscure 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.