



Outdated barge wagon once used for hauling grain sits idle at the Deane and Marion Gunderson farm. 2004.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.