

THE ROAD I GREW UP ON

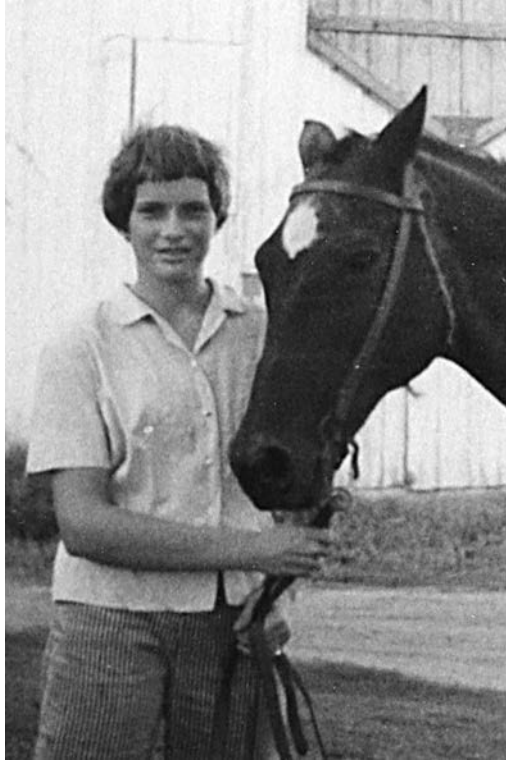
Requiem for a Vanishing Era

VOLUME 1



Helen DeElda Gunderson

THE ROAD I GREW UP ON



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

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

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Helen DeElda Gunderson

GUNDER-FRIEND PRODUCTIONS

Ames, Iowa

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www.gunderfriend.com

Printed by Heuss Printing, Ames, Iowa www.heuss.com 515-232-6710

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403 Parks Library, 701 Morrill Road, Ames, Iowa, 50011-2102.
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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data is on file:
LCCN 2003115025
ISBN 9780998312811

Printed in the United States of America.

First Edition, December 2020



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



Endorsements

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

Daniel Hartwig

Daniel Hartwig, Head ISU Special Collections and University Archives

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

Sally Worley

Practical Farmers of Iowa executive director
www.practicalfarmers.org

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

Mary Bennett

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

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

Cornelia Butler Flora

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

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

Joe McGovern

Iowa Natural Heritage Foundation President
www.inhf.org



The Book

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

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Acknowledgements

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

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



Foreword

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



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

Helen, my friend, you are a true storyteller.

Teresa Opheim

Minneapolis, Minnesota

Project Director, Climate Land Leaders

Main Street Project

www.mainstreetproject.org/

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

www.uiopress.uiowa.edu/