

THE ROAD I GREW UP ON

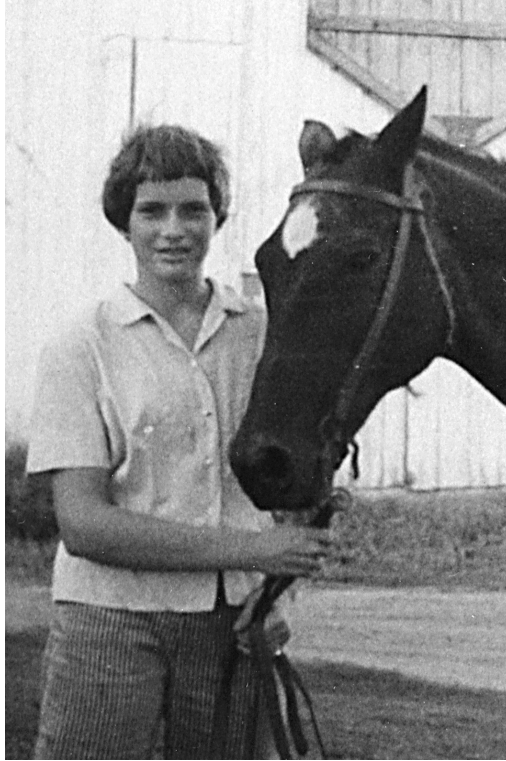
Requiem for a Vanishing Era

VOLUME 2



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

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



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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THE ROAD I GREW UP ON



Lima Cemetery near Volga River State Park, Fayette County, Iowa. 1989.

DEATH



Joe M. Reigelsberger (1989 – 2012)

As of 2019, the most tragic news I can think of for the neighborhood during the last few decades regards young Joe Reigelsberger and Debra Lundt, mother of Joe's fiancée, Anastasia Lundt. On the night of the 2012 Winter Solstice, Joe had been driving a Ford Escape station wagon near John F. Kennedy Memorial Park north of Fort Dodge (some 40 miles away from Rolfe). Also in the car were Anastasia, who was a student at the University of Iowa, and Debra, owner of Princess City Floral in Pocahontas. A 21-year-old Fort Dodge man, who was texting and on a mix of three drugs while driving, crossed the center line and crashed head on into their car, killing both Joe and Debra.

In 2014, a judge sentenced the driver to 10 years in prison and to pay restitution to the Reigelsberger and Lundt families and to the Crime Victim Assistance Division of the Iowa Attorney General's Office. According to Joe's obituary, he and Anastasia had been together since they were 16. They were each other's first love and were excited to begin their married lives together.

I was impressed when I observed his parents, Sue and Mick, slowly walking with the liturgical leaders and other family members down the center aisle of the ornate Resurrection Catholic Church with a high ceiling in Pocahontas for the funeral mass with the eyes of so many people upon them. They walked arm in arm, understandably heavy in grief, seemingly fragile, and supportive of each other. I am reminded of the song, "Lean on Me." Mick's father, Joe, followed them. Mick's mother, Norine, had died earlier that year in March after a 14-month battle with lung cancer. Although senior Joe had the first of several bouts with cancer in the 1990s and was in compromised health for decades, he outlived Norine and did not die until 2017.

At one point during the mass, Crosby Krischel (boyfriend of young Joe's twin sister, Kaitlin) stepped quietly to the lectern, while Mick took a seat behind him. Mick had written some thoughts for the occasion. Crosby read them. Most notable were Mick's thoughts in relation to how young Joe had been killed on the Solstice. In the weeks prior to the Solstice, there had been international news coverage of something Wikipedia now calls the "2012

Phenomenon.” The apocalyptic view was based on a range of beliefs, including those from Mayan culture, that the world would undergo a major transformation on the day of the 2012 Winter Solstice. Some prophets had claimed the world would end that day. Mick wrote, “No one took the prediction of the world ending on December 21 seriously. But I can tell you for our family, in our hearts, part of our world did end that day.”

Joe’s grandmother, Norine, had been correct when she told me in the 1990s that young Joe was called to be a farmer. It is as though Norine had written the obituary. Joe attended Kirkwood College then came back to the Rolfe area, living on an acreage he had bought north of town. The obituary said, “Joe was meant to be a farmer. From the time he was a young boy, he loved to work with his dad in the dirt. He could operate any piece of machinery and would do any job asked of him without complaint. He was a very important part of Reigelsberger Seed; he ran the sprayer for the family custom operation; and helped any neighbor with both manual and technical help.”

Joe’s twin sister, Kaitlin, married Crosby in 2014. They have three children, Graham Joseph born in 2016, Jack Michael born in 2017, and Evie Sue born in 2019. Kaitlin has a business degree from the University of Northern Iowa and works for Ag Partners based in Albert City. She and Crosby live south of Havelock, where he raises hogs and does other work. Joe’s mother, Sue, is the Pocahontas County assessor.

For a short time, perhaps six or seven years ago, I had a Facebook account. Kaitlin was one of the first people to friend me. I don’t know if that was intentional or by accident on her part. We did not correspond much, if at all, but I had a window into her life. Most notably, I recall the times when she talked about going through Norine’s closet and trying on some of her grandmother’s clothes and accessories. Indeed, both Norine and Kaitlin could be described as having an interest in fashion and dressing quite stunningly. What was most endearing in her Facebook posts was the time when she posted photos and thoughts about learning to make cinnamon rolls, using Norine’s award-winning recipe.

I did not have many close encounters with Joe and Kaitlin. However, when reviewing journals this winter, I saw an entry that reminded me of what perhaps had been my closest connection with the twins. They were born in August 1989, which would be thirty years ago, the same fall that I started this project. By 1994, they were in kindergarten. On a mid-November day in 1994, I had traveled the road and Rolfe area early in the morning, filling plastic gallon milk jugs full of well water at my parents’ place to take to my Des Moines Township farmstead. I felt proud and wholesome as I finished planting trees there. Still feeling invigorated, I went to Velma and Verle Howard’s farm where I saw both of their cars parked next to the house—an indication they were home. I went to the door and was surprised when young Joe greeted me at the door. The twins did not have school because Pocahontas High School, which included students from Rolfe, starting in 1990, was in a state football playoff game at Cedar Falls, and classes had been cancelled that day so teachers, students, and other fans could travel to the game. Pocahontas would finally lose to Hudson in the Division 1A championship game.

Mick and Sue had gone to Des Moines for a Pioneer Hi-Bred Seed meeting, standing in for Joe and Norine, who normally would have gone, but the older Joe was scheduled for surgery. Normally, the twins would have stayed with Joe and Norine. Instead, the youngsters were spending the day with Velma and Verle. They invited me to sit with them around the round oak table in the kitchen. Verle served me some of his hard-core coffee. We talked, and I drew pictures of rabbits, cats, and football players with Joe and Kaitlin. Later, I recorded in my journal, “This ties things together—to sit around the table and be part of this generational experience. It is more than a mere coincidence, more than special. It has a transcendent feel to it.”

When I headed for my car, Verle handed me a bag of black walnuts. I had gathered them that fall along the streets near the house where I had often stayed with Ruth and Charlie Ahlrichs in Pocahontas west of the courthouse. I had left the walnuts with Verle, who said he could hull them, a difficult and messy job without the right equipment, by running them through an heirloom crank-style ear corn sheller. Verle also gave me a piece of iron that I could use like an anvil in a setup he had demonstrated where I could safely use a hammer to crack the shells of the walnuts before picking out the meat. It was a clever system, and yet, the work was tedious with little success.

The Reigelsberger family started a scholarship in young Joe's name for graduates of the Pocahontas Area Community High School. Sue said, "To date, we have given over \$10,000 to PAC grads. With the help of Joe's friends, who hold a golf tourney every summer, the scholarship should continue for quite a while."



Left photo: Verle (1924-2009) and Velma (1925-2017) Howard. Right: Joe (1926-2017) and Norine (1930-2012) Reigelsberger. Both photos taken in 1996.

Velma and Verle Howard and Joseph and Norine Reigelsberger

The weekend of November 9, 2017, was a significant and emotional one in many ways. Velma Howard and Joe Reigelsberger, both in their early 90s and the last of the people of my parents' generation who had lived on my road when I started my project in 1989, had died within days of each other that week. Velma's husband, Verle, had died in 2009, and Velma had eventually moved to an assisted living facility in Burt. Joe's wife, Norine, had died in 2012, and he had still been living at the home they had moved to in Rolfe in 1992. Without my own car since 2009, I rented one to go to her memorial service at the Shared Ministries of Rolfe on Saturday and his funeral mass at Resurrection Catholic Church in Pocahontas on Monday.

At the luncheon following Velma's service, I took four quarts of my homemade bread and butter pickles to the women working in the kitchen. I lingered and told them that the passing of these two longtime neighbors truly was a milestone, marking the passing of an era. One woman, Diane Smith Sandvig, replied yes, however, in her mind, the demolition of the



Bread and butter pickles. 2012.

Gunderson house would be an even greater milestone. It was built alongside our old house on the farm in 1956, when I was 11. My parents continued to live there until Mother's death in 2004 and Dad's death in 2010. Sister Clara, who had inherited the farmstead, had finally decided in December 2018 to have the house razed late in the winter.



The Rolfe Methodist and Presbyterian churches merged in the 1990s to become the Shared Ministry of Rolfe and make their home in the Methodist building, 1982.

When I first arrived at Shared Ministries of Rolfe sanctuary for the memorial service, then sat in a back pew and looked around, I was disappointed, thinking that I had not seen Paul Harrold. He was six years behind me in school, still lived at his family farm a mile west of where my parents had lived, and was about the only person still living who I had interviewed for my road project. However, as I looked far to my left, I could see this "older" man in the back pew on the other side of the room. I wondered if that might be Paul. But if it was, he had changed a lot since I had seen him at his mother's funeral in 2012. Bald with no dark brown hair. His physique was not as strong, and he walked with a limp when he stood after the service ended. I would learn that in previous months, he had been helping a friend wash the windows of her house, standing on a ladder atop a deck when the deck collapsed, and fell and broke his leg.

Paul offered me a ride to the cemetery just a mile outside of town. It was a sober ride, and yet, we were able to visit quietly. I told him about how the Howard gravestones were near my parents. However, I had forgotten how near. As we got out of the car, I left Paul and walked across the mowed turf, looking at names and dates on the simple, small, flat-to-the-ground gravestones. The first names I saw were Mildred and Arlo Ives, parents of my friend Dallas Ives, whom I have known since childhood. We went to the Rolfe schools together and were at Iowa State during the same years. He spent his career doing computer programming at NASA in Houston, Texas. Mother has said that when she and Dad first moved from Waterloo, where he had worked for John Deere, back to the farm area in the early '40s (mind you that Mother was a city woman from Ogden, Utah, who had met Dad at Iowa State College), Mildred was the first one from the neighborhood to stop and visit with her. I noticed the birth and death dates on Mildred and Arlo's stones, confirming that Arlo had died at the age of 63. He had

seemed so old, and yet, he was quite young when he died. I suppose he had seemed old because of the effect that lingering emphysema had had on him.

The flock of people at the cemetery consisted mainly of Velma's extensive family—three surviving daughters, the two wives of Velma's late son, Randy, their offspring, and friends. It was a pleasant enough day—overcast with a slight glow of sunshine, but no shadows and fortunately, not bitterly cold and windy like the weather had been two days before. The funeral home had its large royal blue awning and chairs for the immediate family near the casket. I walked in the dusty grass, around the north end of the awning, and behind the group to continue my search. There, in the row of uniformly flat gravestones a few feet east of the awning were the markers for my grandparents (John and DeElda Gunderson), my parents (Deane and Marion Gunderson), and my parents' youngest son, Christian, who was born at the hospital but lived for only five minutes.

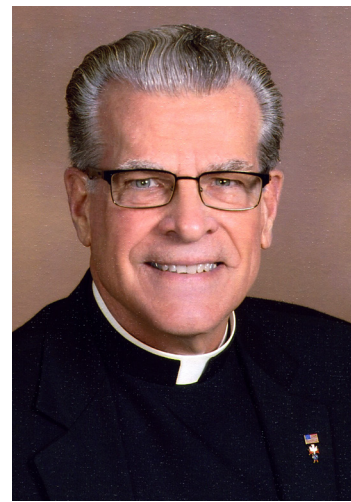
I did not feel I could linger long at the place where my favorite grandparents and my parents were buried. Nor did I want to ignore the gathering and the words of the minister or miss the chance to stand by Velma's casket and say goodbye. Even so, I stood still for about two minutes near the graves of my ancestors and felt a profound sense of wholeness and timelessness.

In attending Joe's service, I realized that two of the men there, Kenny Bennett and Denny Wagner, who happen to be brothers-in-law and close to my age, did not look well. I would later learn that Kenny Bennett had cancer and that Denny Wagner had other long-term health problems. It is hard not to wonder how much effect that chemical agriculture in the county has on the cancer rate of its residents.

Kenny could be both funny and compassionate: a gentle, understanding, and helpful soul—who, as co-op manager—supported me over the years, beginning in 1997, so that I learned to manage my land. It is hard to remember how many times I would see Kenny, even in a simple passing at the co-op or a social setting, when he would ask, "How's Helen?" in a way that made me believe that he cared—not only for me as a co-op client, but also as a person.

Kenny had grown to be a large, heavy man, but when I saw him the weekend of being in Pocahontas County for the two funerals, he was extremely thin and not as alert as I recall him being. Even so, Kenny oversaw the honor guard and its salute at the graveside rites for Joe. Kenny's voice was clear as he ordered the men to aim and fire their rifles, then he gingerly stepped forward and presented the folded flag to Joe's family, who were seated beside the casket and under a canopy. Later, I heard "Taps" and turned to see Kenny at a distance from the mourners, holding what is called a Ceremonial Bugle—not one that he played, but the kind that played on its own. The sound was clearer than I had ever heard from a high school trumpet player at a Memorial Day or graveside service. Clear, strong, cutting through the cold air, sending shivers down my spine. Yes, this was a passing of an era.

At the luncheon after Joe's service, I was able to sit across the table from Monsignor Mike Sernett, who had retired to Pocahontas. He is a year older than I, had grown up on a farm across the road from my grandparents' farm, studied in Rome where he earned a doctorate in canon law, served in many roles in the Diocese of Sioux City, and had always been an affable and handsome fellow. His family was of Bohemian descent, worked hard at farming, and loved to dance and drink beer. His mother, Monica, had been born in the same section and on the same day as my father. She was great at making kolaches (a fruit-filled pastry) and sometimes shared some with Mother and Dad. I always thought the Sernett family had more fun than our Norwegian Gunderson family. I dearly remember the time that Mike and his father, Bob, along with Jerry Zeman (also of Bohemian descent from the neighborhood and who became a priest) took Dad, Charles, and me fishing at Lost Island Lake near Ruthven. The Sernetts and the Zemans knew much more about fishing than Dad did, and we had a great time.



Top photo: Bob and Monica Sernett at their Century Farm. 1990. Lower row, left to right: Monica and Bob Sernett, 1990. Monsignor Michael Sernett. 2019. *Photo of Monsignor Sernett by Life Touch and from his collection.*

When Mike and I visited, he no longer had the tall, strong physique and wavy coal black hair like he had when I saw him at the reception for my father's 90th birthday in 2008. Instead, in April 2017, Mike had been driving back to Pocahontas from South Dakota when his car was hit head on by a Dodge Ram. He suffered a concussion, serious cuts, a broken leg, and broken ribs, and later developed a permanent problem with his balance. His hair is now salt-and-pepper gray.

I knew Mike, his parents, one brother, and three sisters had been great dancers, especially of the polka, and asked if he still danced. He said he could no longer dance but was quick to add something I have heard him and his parents, Monica and Bob Sernett, say years before—that after being ordained, Mike danced only with his mother and sisters. Mike went on to talk about how Bob and Monica had gathered his sisters, brother, and him in their house and

taught them all kinds of dances, including the waltz, schottische, polka, and even foxtrot. The last time I saw Bob and Monica was in 2004 at the Rolfe Care Center when I was leaving Mother's room and the two of them were sitting across from each other at a small square table in the dining room. They each had a glass of red wine with their dinner and offered me a glass. I declined the offer but enjoyed a short conversation with them.

It was wonderful to talk with Mike about memories of his parents and my grandparents. It was also touching to hear him talk about the suicide death of his younger brother, Chuck, who was born in 1949, had served in the military in Vietnam, and came home to marry, start a family, and farm. However, Chuck was not able to cope with the post-war stresses and took his life in 1978. Mike's youngest sister, Diane Spitzley, led an effort to have the military recognize that Chuck's death was a casualty of the war and add his name to the Vietnam War Memorial in Washington. Members of the Sernett family gathered at the wall, and Mike, as their representative, read Chuck's name at the induction ceremony.



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 whom 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 who continue to be.



Marion Abbott Gunderson (1919 – 2004)

The morning of November 29, 2003—the day after Thanksgiving—was the last time I saw Mother at her home on the farm. Her health had been failing in multiple ways for several years, and she had already stayed for a few weeks at the Rolfe Care Center earlier that fall. Mother had returned home, where she was not very mobile and for the most part sat in her recliner chair by the window at the end of the living room. Some family members moved her chair to the end of the dining table for the Thanksgiving meal. However, the next day she would move back to the Rolfe Care Center and spend the last year of her life there.

Clara, her husband, and Dad had gone to town with a TV, computer, and other furnishings to set up a room for Mother. Before they left, Clara told me Mother was freshening up in her bathroom, then would be in her bedroom where she would be okay on her own, but that I should listen if she needed help.

I lingered in the kitchen at the round oak table after finishing a late breakfast. I felt an intense, complex mixture of gratitude and resentment toward her. This was not a new mix of feelings, and one of my near life-long questions had been whether I would ever make amends with her. However, as I sat there, aware that the opportunity to have a heart-to-heart conversation with her would not last forever, I angrily admitted to myself, “I can’t just march into her room and say, ‘I am here to reconcile.’ She would not understand, and I am not prepared to do so.”

Mother called for me. I went to her room, where she was sitting on the edge of the bed and asked that I hook her brassiere. I sat beside her and reached out, not only hooking the bra, but feeling the tenderness of her back and shoulders. I could not recall being so physically intimate with Mother and was grateful to have the opportunity to serve her in such a tender way. I was also acutely aware of our great differences, especially regarding the roles of men and women, other issues related to gender, and the value of being candid. For sure, if it had been me who was about to enter a nursing home, wearing a bra would be the last thing on my mind. And yet, here she was with a new, beautiful, shiny white brassiere.

Mother dismissed me and finished dressing on her own, then Clara and the others returned home. They moved Mother to the care center that afternoon.

At the end of February, she was admitted to the Pocahontas Community Hospital, where I visited her on March 1. There had not been much conversation between the two of us for a long time. Fortunately, her mind was still somewhat sharp.

I reminded her of the book she had once given me, *The Christian Agnostic*, and asked if she had given it just to me or to all of us siblings. She said that she gave it just to me. I said I had never read the whole book, but that I appreciated knowing that it was okay to be an agnostic. She seemed to resonate but did not remember much about the book. I didn't especially want to talk with her in depth, but I didn't want her to leave this world closed off. What hidden secrets, what sorrows, what regrets does she have on her mind that she will take to the grave? My throat was tight and my eyes shed tears.

I mentioned that I had given Charles a copy of my book about the road I grew up on and that he had read it. Mother had never expressed interest in reading the book, although when I first started the road project she had wondered if I was going to write a book. I had to excuse her, partially because even if she were healthier, she would probably be defensive about what I had written, considering it would not fit into the family motif, the family way of being, the family way of keeping secrets. But now with her low energy and poor eyesight, it seemed understandable that she would not want to ask to see a copy of the book. I scolded myself, "Besides, Helen, you just gotta do it. You gotta do it. It's your book. It's your life. It's not your mother's life, it's your life. And it's what you do with your life. It's between you and your God, Helen. Where do I come to terms with God? Or is it the Goddess?"

When I drove away from the hospital and toward the homeplace farm, the hymns that came to me included "Lift High the Cross" and "Come All Ye Who Labor."

Then as I sat in my white Honda Civic next to the homeplace barn and wrote in my journal, I found myself humming, "Our God, our help in ages past, our help in years to come, and our eternal home."

Mother and I had a short but sweet visit at the care center on Monday, April 18, 2004. I held her hand, kissed her forehead, and stroked her hair. I said I loved her. She said she loved me.

On Tuesday morning, I had breakfast at the farm with Clara and Dad. Clara and I had eggs, oatmeal, prunes, and oranges. I would have been happy to cook for Dad, but he was a fussy eater and had his typical breakfast, which for decades consisted of Carnation Instant Breakfast. I was deeply touched when Clara, even though her throat was dry and voice raspy that morning, sang "Happy Birthday." Dad chimed in at the end. Soon I took off for Ames, but was angry with myself, when a few miles out of town, I realized I had forgotten to stop by to see Mother. I prayed that she did not feel hurt that I had not visited her on my birthday.

On Tuesday, April 27, I visited Mother at the care center, getting to her room at about 8:30 in the evening. She was more willing than usual to allow me to linger. We were not saying much. Then something shifted as though a spirit moved through the room. I quietly but with clear words apologized to her for the ways in which I had been a difficult daughter to raise, the ways in which I had not appreciated her role as a mother, and how I may have hurt her over the years. She replied in a reflective manner that she did not know if she truly understood what it meant to be a mother and that she had not thought of herself as a good mother. Instead of arguing the merits or deficiencies in her parenting, I simply said, "I forgive you for the ways in which you did not meet my expectations of what a Mother should be." I also told her I loved her. She gently responded, "I love you and have always loved all of who you are."

At the time, I did not want to analyze the moment but simply wanted to cherish the opening to the spirit and to each other. Looking back after nearly 15 years have lapsed, I still cherish the experience. However, I have not wanted to talk with other siblings about it as if I was comparing our end-of-life visits with Mother. Nor have I naively thought that our conversation washed away all the issues that had existed between us. Nor have I ignored that her tender and affirming disposition may never have occurred if she had not been worn down physically and her ego had not been so diminished.

I rejoice that our conversation did happen. When I have dreamt or thought of Mother, significant insights slip into my consciousness, and I more fully appreciate the challenges she faced and the contributions she offered the family and community. Certainly, I am often reminded of the ways that she went out of her way to support me even though it did not seem like she understood me. I feel sad in some respects for the ways in which I took her for granted and was a jerk toward her. In other respects, I was defensive as well as sad for her. For instance, I resent how Dad could be a real jerk in the way he treated Mother regarding food. I recall when I visited her when she first entered the Rolfe Care Center in September 2003. She was there for a month before returning home then back to the care center after Thanksgiving. I had never heard her say anything disparaging about Dad, but that day, she said she thought she could get well enough to return home and be able to cook for herself but emphatically with a tone of resentment said, "But not for him."

On November 27, two days after Thanksgiving, I visited Mother at the nursing home and was surprised she wasn't watching *Wheel of Fortune* or *Jeopardy*. The TV was on, but she wasn't paying attention to it. She wanted help getting from her chair to the bed, but I was unable to help her with the move. When I reached for her hand, it was warm. Her face was thinner than usual, and she looked frail. I told her about the family, including Dad, playing dominoes at the kitchen table the previous night. She smiled, glad that the family made the effort to visit Dad. I told her how I had looked at her baby book at the farmhouse and saw a picture of her that looked like a Gerber baby and another of her in a tap dance outfit.

I told her I loved her and gave her a kiss on the forehead. She said, "Oh, Helen, you are a good girl." And I replied, "Well, not perfect." I knew it was important to be present with her and not try to avoid conversation but not try to force it. In any case, her thought processes didn't track well. She wanted to call home, but I reminded her that Dad and the others were in Ames for a football game.

Soon she said, "Well, Helen, it is time for you to say, 'Adieu.'" I started to say goodbye, then asked if she was ready to make the transition. She asked, "From what, the chair to the bed?" I replied, "No, the big transition to the end of life." She didn't resent my bringing up the topic and told me about Charmaine from the nursing home staff reading to her from the Bible and telling about how God had sent Jesus. Mother had said to Charmaine, "Well, there is one thing you haven't talked about." It took Mother a long time to find her words and tell me more, but she had said to Charmaine, "You haven't mentioned, if God sent Jesus, where did God come from?" I replied that there is a lot of mystery to life. Our conversation lasted longer than usual.

I wanted to ask whether this was one of many goodbyes or the last goodbye, but I did not push the conversation further. Fortunately, we already had a conversation in the past several months when I told her she didn't have to hang on for me—that I would be okay.

Mother still inhabited her body and this world. She might have been greatly diminished, she might have been dying, but she was still here, even if not in the capacity that I have known her. And yet, for better or worse, she still had vestiges of control. She talked as though she had gotten the last word in the conversation with Charmaine, and she had told me it was time for me to say, "Adieu." It wasn't like she said, "Thanks for coming and visiting. I need some time for myself, so let's say good night."

Fortunately, Mother did not experience Alzheimer's disease or show signs of dementia. Yet, her mind was off-kilter that day. Certainly, her many ailments, medications, and months in the care center had taken their toll. On one hand, knowing she was so worn down and medicated made it easy for me to go with the flow and accept her style. On the other hand, I did feel an element of being dismissed. However, in years to come, I mentioned the conversation to my sister Clara, thinking that certainly, since she had spent more time with Mother and

had more ease of being with her, their conversations would have been different. I was wrong. Clara said that most of her visits with Mother had ended with Mother dismissing her, often with the word “adieu.”

All these years later, I still wonder what Mother intended when she told me to say, “Adieu.” Did she realize we would never see each other again? It seems to be a conundrum and not necessary to fully parse the conversation.

In her book *Long Quiet Highway: Waking Up in America*, author Natalie Goldberg of Santa Fe, New Mexico, tells about the death of her mentor, Katagari Dainan Roshi, head of the Minnesota Zen Center in Minneapolis, on Thursday, March 1, 1990. “Roshi” means “old teacher.” Members of the Zen community had taken turns sitting with Katagari Roshi through his last breath and beyond. They washed his body, preserved it with herbs, and placed it in a plain pine box surrounded by candles and flowers in the zendo (meditation hall). People could visit any time for the next three days with the windows open and the cold Minnesota air filling the room. There was a short ceremony, the box was closed, carried to the hearse, and taken to a funeral home for another ceremony. Then the disciples carried the casket away to the cremation oven. Other mourners moved to a waiting room and drank tea.

With family members present, disciples put the body in the oven and turned on the gas to start the flames. Natalie went with friends to a restaurant where all she could think of ordering was french fries, an uncommon food for her. She returned to the funeral home and walked down a long basement hall to a small, hot concrete room filled with intense noise from the furnace. She sat with three others next to the oven. Goldberg writes, “Fifty minutes before the cremation was finished—it takes five hours to burn the body completely—I opened the door of the oven and looked in. Through the heat and intense flames, I saw two small ribs—that was all. They were the last of my great teacher.”

I had often thought about how to be present to death in a manner similar to that of the Zen community, but I had not researched options. Mother’s death seemed imminent, although no one can predict the exact schedule of the Grim Reaper. On Monday, November 29, I dug in a drawer at my apartment in Gilbert and found a pamphlet from the Iowa Cremation Society and called the number. It turned out the place was a marketing arm of a funeral home and not an organization. However, the woman who spoke with me was wonderfully understanding and helpful, giving me ideas and suggesting I call my local funeral home.

I was apprehensive about whether Powers Funeral Home would understand and be supportive of what might be considered a wacky idea, but I decided I needed to make the call that day or never. I wanted to know the steps they took after somebody dies at the nursing home and what the options were for me doing something akin to the vigil that the Zen center community kept for Roshi. I was impressed with the funeral home director, Mike Loterbour. Not only was he understanding, but he said that when the time would come, I could follow the van carrying Mother’s body to Fort Dodge, where she would be cremated.

On Tuesday, November 30, Dad called mid-morning to say Mother had died before sunrise after a nursing home aide left her room. He had visited Mother during dinner hour of the previous night, then went home. She soon called and asked if he would come back to town and bring her an item, perhaps it was a box of Kleenex. He felt her request was not quite rational and that the trip could wait until morning.

On Wednesday, some of the family members met with Mike at the funeral home regarding plans for the memorial service. I asked him if we needed to follow the common protocol of all family members sitting in the front pews on the same side of the aisle. He was comfortable with latitude. I spoke about liking space and how I would be uncomfortable crowded with family in the customary pews, especially with all of us having to leave at the end of the service in a slow, bunched up fashion. He volunteered that anyone who wanted could sit in the pews

on the other side of the aisle, which often remained empty during funeral services. One sister said she preferred coziness. I would like to believe I held my tongue, and if I did respond, that I would have acknowledged how different folks have different needs.

After the meeting, I followed the white van that carried Mother's body from Rolfe to the Wilbert Vault Company in Fort Dodge, 40 miles away, where she would be cremated. The driver, Roger Kern, a farmer and licensed mortician from Plover, simply backed the van to the overhead door of the plain-looking, brown metal building as though he was a UPS driver making a delivery.

When Roger entered the building, he talked with Harry Summers, who was the lead vault company representative. Then Harry and his assistant, Travis Girard, pushed a transport table (somewhat like a gurney but with metal rollers instead of a mattress) to the van, rolled the large cardboard box that contained Mother's body onto the cart, and pushed the cart into a large area with a concrete floor inside the metal building. Roger gave Harry an envelope that contained official documents. I asked about the white plastic zip ties on the box, thinking they were part of an official seal that could not be disturbed. The men said the ties held the lid in place.



Photographs Helen took when she followed the funeral home van, carrying her mother's body to be cremated at the Wilbert Burial Vault Company in Fort Dodge. Lower left photo, Harry Summers. 2004.

Harry explained how the process works. The cardboard box would slide from the cart onto cardboard rollers into the furnace. A chimney would let in the fire, and holes on the bottom along the sides of the furnace would circulate the air. The optimum temperature range would be 1,400 to 1,800 degrees Fahrenheit.

The gathering was so informal that I thought, "Well, heck, I could ask if I could see Mother's body again." Roger lifted the lid of the large box and pulled back the top of the sheets so I



Garden Gate at Wellspring Renewal Center, Philo, California. Circa 1980.

could see her face. It was not a pleasant sight but something I did not fear seeing, considering that during my chaplaincy internship at the UC San Francisco Medical Center in 1984, our group had visited the anatomy lab where medical students dissected human cadavers.

The anatomy lab consisted of several tables, each with a human body that was covered with a drape except for the specific area of dissection on a given day. It was hard to feel any reaction because it was such a controlled, scientific space. And yet, what triggered my emotions and existential wonder was something that might seem insignificant. The feet of one deceased woman were exposed, and I could see her boldly painted pink toenails. Admittedly, I knew nothing about who this woman had been, but the colored toenails were at least a small clue to her human nature. Indeed, the visit to the lab was not a morbid experience. It was empowering.

When I took that one last look at Mother, there really were no signs of her humanity. What was most vivid was how she lay in a frumpy nursing home gown with the soft white skin of her upper chest exposed and that her nose was sharply pointed in a way that I had never noticed. I had neither the imagination nor courage to stay while the box and her body were placed in the oven. In some ways, even though Roger and Harry seemed comfortable with my presence and requests, I felt I had already transgressed too many boundaries of Midwestern custom or “Midwestern nice.”

The experience of looking into the box reminded me of the time I was photographing a cicada sitting on a wooden garden gate at Wellspring Renewal Center in Northern California. A crystal-like drop of water moved slowly down the back of the fresh, damp, green body of

the large insect. The dead, dry, brown old body—the exoskeleton—was just an inch away. I took several photos, then reached for a different camera lens. When I turned back, the green cicada was nowhere to be seen. It was a moment of mystery, a numinous experience to ponder the existential question, “Where did it go?” I like to think a similar mysterious transition happens when a person dies.

Clara was probably right to remember Mother as smiling at her on the Sunday morning before she died. I still strive to remember the conversations, holding Mother’s warm hand, her smile when I said I loved her, and her telling me she had always loved me.

Roger got in the van and headed back to Rolfe. I talked more with Harry, took photos of the facility, and headed to Ames for space to regroup and design the bulletin for Mother’s memorial service. I was glad for the cooperation of the funeral home staff and the opportunity to accompany Mother’s body to that final destination and be close to the reality of what was happening. I thought of the mythological firebird, the phoenix, that rises from the ashes of its old self.



Clara Gunderson Hoover and Deane Gunderson. Memorial Day 2008.

The private memorial service for Mother began at 1 pm on Friday, December 3. Parlor lights lit the front of the room where Mother’s library basket sat on a table alongside a red and blue plaid Pendleton blanket that was wrapped around a can serving as an urn for her ashes. Nearby was an easel holding an 11x14 inch, black and white photo of Mother that I had shot in 1998 of her posing next to the Rolfe library sign. Pastor Charles Miller of the Shared Ministries led the service. Mother’s P.E.O. chapter conducted a short ritual, and each member left a daisy on Mother’s basket.

I drove to the cemetery in my Honda Civic, and my sister-in-law Gloria rode with me. As we approached the area of family gravesites, it was sweet to see Clara in her long black wool coat, huddling next to Dad on folding chairs. Having been the oldest sibling in our family, Clara was an only child until Charles was born 11 months later. She would have shared her Waterloo home with two others who had been the only children in their families—Mother and Dad. I believe that dynamic gave her a bond with them that is different than what the rest of us experienced. Clara had been so loyal to both of them, and also so caring for Dad, especially during the previous week.



Helen and dog at the farm where she grew up. Circa 1951.

When all family members had arrived at the graveside, Mike asked us to form a semicircle, and I went around to the far-left end of the group. I smiled and yet felt sad as I realized that I stood beside Grandpa and Grandma's tombstones—part of me felt like a young child.

Pastor Miller finished his words. The basket that contained the blanket and can of ashes was lowered into the grave. I picked up a shovel, approached a pile of soil, and said to the others that just as with healthy gardening, it is important to loosen the soil. Then I scooped soil over the basket. The others in turn took the shovel to scatter more soil, and I was grateful we got a chance to participate physically in this final ritual rather than be mere spectators.

As the committal service ended, a train moved across the landscape near the cemetery. Charles and Dad both commented on how Mother had grown up in a railroad town in Ogden, Utah, and would have traveled to Iowa State on the Union Pacific. Although the rail line near the cemetery was initially part of the Chicago Northwestern route, it is now a Union Pacific line.

The private graveside rites for Mother finished. After the other cars had gone back to town, I sat in my car in the older part of the Clinton-Garfield Cemetery. Not knowing what to do, I decided to swing back through the old part of the cemetery. It was soothing to drive along and see some of the old names.

I hadn't fully realized what Mother and her death meant. I knew she wasn't coming back to her home at the farm. And part of me knew she would not be in the nursing home forever—that she would die. But a person doesn't really grasp in advance—and probably not until after the passage of time—what it feels like or means for the very end to come.

The next morning, the appointed time arrived for the family to gather in the church basement with Pastor Miller. It was a crowded room with him, family, and pallbearers Dan and Roger Allen. I would rather have gone directly to the sanctuary to listen to the music by pianist Marilee Kleespies of Rolfe and violinist Laura Bernhardt of Storm Lake.

When the family entered the sanctuary and proceeded down the aisle, the others headed to pews on the right. I headed to a pew to my left where I realized I would be sitting in the row behind the pallbearers. Two young men sat beside me—my nephew Tim and my niece Christina's husband, Chris. Otherwise, the pews in that section were empty. It was a fine service, but I was appalled by the theology implied in a poem the minister read about how "God takes only the best."

It was cool to be sitting not far from Marilee and Laura, getting a close view of them, and clearly hearing their music. My most poignant memory occurred at the end of the service, when the minister, family members, pallbearers, and other congregants, including Tim and Chris, had left. I remained seated. My focus was on Marilee and Laura as I listened to the most exquisite music I had ever heard, beginning with "Ave Maria." Soon, like butterflies landing on a park bench, my friends Joy Leister, herself a pianist, and Mary Sand, herself a violinist, sat beside me, and we simply savored the moment and music.

The music ended. Joy, Mary, and I were not yet ready to walk through the tables of people gathered for lunch in the social hall in the basement so we could get to the only restroom in the building. Instead, we walked out into the fresh air and across the lawn to the side door of the nearby funeral home and used the restroom there. Then we headed back to the church for lunch. After the meal, we returned to the sanctuary, which was pretty much empty. At the back of the room, Mary and I visited with Mel Duitscher, a retired public health nurse, who I felt comfortable talking with in some depth about Mother.

I told Mel about my visits with Mother, how she often dismissed me, and just days before had told me it was time for me to say, "Adieu." Mel was clear and compassionate, responding that Mother's style on those occasions most likely reflected much of who she had been throughout her life. It was as though she was both respecting Mother and affirming me by suggesting that I not take Mother's behavior personally. Mel and I agreed that even though Mother had been involved in the community, she was a private person, especially with her feelings, and was even more private during her time at the care center. I added that I felt Mother, who had voluntarily entered the care center a year earlier, had set out to have a self-imposed hermitage, and in many instances did not want to socialize with other people. Soon we heard Joy at the piano at the front of the sanctuary, playing comforting, traditional hymns. I was grateful to have my friends there and have Joy's music as a healing balm.

One of the most important lessons that I took away from a 1980s seminary class on death and dying was that a person dies pretty much in the same manner or style in which he or she lived. I cannot expect others or myself to suddenly change in personality just because we know our days to be limited. Certainly, it would have been unfair to expect Mother to change radically. Fortunately, though, there was that window—like a miracle—when she lay in the care center bed, I sat in a nearby chair, and we expressed our love and forgiveness to each other.

I am reminded of a childhood interaction with Mother that is emblematic of the emotional gulf between us. One morning when age seven and at home, getting ready for school, I felt morose as I sat on the piano bench in the living room and was putting on my shoes. At the time, our family consisted of five children ages 10 and younger. Mother, who had been an only child, would have been only 33 at the time and have had her hands full, but she took time to ask what was wrong. I was most likely brooding about the deaths of a grandmother, great grandmother, and great aunt in recent years. I asked Mother if we would see each other



Helen with her mother Marion Gunderson. Circa 1947.

in Heaven after we died. She replied simply that she would have to ask the pastor, then returned to her work but never got back to me. There are many ways over the decades that I have interpreted her reaction. One is disappointment that she felt the need to go to an external authority rather than relying on her own authority, perhaps sitting next to me for a moment or two, asking about my feelings and what I was thinking, and telling me she was sorry I was blue. Or perhaps she could have hugged me, and said she loved me and always would. Or perhaps she could have talked about how what happens after death is a mystery. It was also disappointing that she never got back to me. I still get choked up when I recall that memory even though I know that it was hard for Mother to express feelings or be truly empathetic and that she probably did better than I ever would have at age 33 with so many children.

Fortunately, I am no longer concerned about whether or not I will see Mother in Heaven. I have not known what to believe—whether there was a transition to some other end of the tunnel where Mother emerged and blended with a great healing light, or the end is the end and she doesn't exist any place at all. Fortunately, I believe that just as there is the principle of the conservation of matter and of energy, there is a conservation of spirit. I also believe in

the power of the imagination and that at any time a person can talk to any deceased person as though they are a saint. I also recognize that Mother's influence carries on in my genes, weaknesses, strengths, dispositions, and values.

In the process of joining the Lakeside Presbyterian Church in Duluth in 1967, I attended the required new member meeting. Considering that I was the only new member in the room and was already a Presbyterian, the senior minister, Reverend Roger Kunkel, said that unless I had questions to ask, I could go home and simply come back and officially join the congregation during the upcoming Sunday morning service. I admitted concerns that I had been afraid to voice when, as part of an eighth-grade confirmation class, I joined the Rolfe Presbyterian Church in the 1950s. At the time, I had complained to Mother that I did not feel I could truthfully answer "yes" to the creedal questions that the church elders would ask each class member. Mother said it would not be a good time to rock the boat and that I should simply answer "yes." I hesitantly told Roger that I was not convinced of either the Virgin Birth of Jesus or the concept of life after death. I was surprised by his candor. He said that no one knows what happens after a person dies and that the meanings of the Greek words used in the New Testament in reference to abundant and eternal life had much more to do with the quality of life here on Earth as opposed to an unending number of years. My seminary studies supported his perspective. There are two words for time in Biblical Greek. One is "chronos" for chronological, quantitative, sequential time, as is commonly referenced in Western culture. The other is "kairos," which is about the qualitative nature of time. Even now, with 25 years of being part of a Unitarian Universalist congregation and the practices of yoga and mindfulness currently being central to my spirituality, I continue to value Roger's insights and the notion of kairos time in contrast to chronos time. I have come to terms with the fact that Mother is gone and I will not see her again.

That said, I am aware of how my feelings toward Mother weave in and out of my life in a bittersweet way that will probably continue until I die no matter how much I grow and come to terms with death. Even now, the melancholic tune for the popular song "Let It Be Me" (1959) by the Everly Brothers resonates deeply and nearly daily with me even though the lyrics are simplistic. When I remember Mother, I often find myself humming the song.

The Everly Brothers harmonized gently and beautifully with a background of ethereal orchestral music. The melody is what lingers most with me. It is one of longing and sadness. The line I recall most is "Don't take this heaven from me." The lyrics, although not exceptionally articulate, address the fear that someone who loves us completely and to whom we cling for meaning and security would take up a new love and forget us. The refrain is a plea that the loved one would never leave but that we would always be that person's first and only love. My association of Mother with that song is related, most likely, to birth order issues and how a mother is more than a mother. In the eyes and heart of an infant, and at a primal level, a mother is akin to a goddess, and two of the key challenges of a person's life journey are to come to terms with her relationship with her mother and honor the power, wisdom and nurture of the goddess energy within herself.



Deane Charles Gunderson (1918 – 2010)

In the spring of 2010, Dad started to experience falls and was admitted to the Pocahontas Community Hospital. Family members then arranged to move him to an assisted living apartment at Arlington Place in Pocahontas. His intent—even if not rational—was to return to live at the farm.

Dad fell again, early in the morning on Father's Day, Sunday, June 20, at his apartment. An ambulance brought him later that same day to Mary Greeley Medical Center in Ames where the medical team said he had experienced some cranial damage. Dad stayed in a near-coma condition for 10 days.

I recall Dad as being a man of good works, such as serving on the Presbyterian board of trustees that was responsible for the church building, serving on the Rolfe School Board and as treasurer for the Iowa Association of School Boards, and organizing the annual flea-market-type auction for the Lions Club. However, I never heard Dad talk about religion or faith. Also, there was a time in the 1990s when I asked him if he would be willing to let me record an oral history interview with him, to which he gruffly responded, "Not if you are going to ask me to philosophize." Perhaps he was confused and meant "theologize" instead of "philosophize" and suspected that because I had a seminary degree and three of his other children were born again Christians, I would ask him questions about his faith. However, that topic was far from my mind in wanting to interview him about his rural heritage. I knew Dad was fully capable of reflecting on life as well as telling stories, especially if he were in control of a conversation and there was no tape recorder in the room. Fortunately, he did allow me to record an interview with him.

Dad was quite a reader, and in his last years, was on a quest to read the Bible. He also asked my older sister, Clara, who has been a high school librarian and became his key reference librarian, for books that explained Christianity. Although I have a seminary degree, he did not ask me for a reading list, even though he was probably agnostic in his beliefs, much like I am.

During my chaplaincy internship at the University of San Francisco Medical Center, religious creed was not emphasized in visiting with a patient. Rather, personal presence and being attuned to the person was.

When I visited Dad at the hospital, it was hard to know what he comprehended and nearly impossible to understand what he struggled to say. I sat close by his side and held his hands. They were large like a person would expect a 91-year-old farmer to have, but I was surprised by how soft they felt. I leaned close to his ear, knowing his hearing was not good, and said, "Your

hands are soft.” Soon he began chirping, “Soft hands,” and chuckling, almost like a mantra throughout the evening.

In the few other words I said, my emphasis was, “Dad, you are in safe space. You don’t need to hang on for me. I will be okay. You can let go. I love you.”

I was grateful that my friend Joy could accompany me to visit Dad. Although she is an evangelical Christian whose father was an evangelical pastor, I have not known her to push religion. Instead, she has been gracious and an example of the fruit of the Spirit growing from a person’s religious disciplines. She brought her Bible, and after a while, quietly asked permission to share some passages. It was beautiful to hear her voice as she read the 23rd Psalm and from John 14, “My father’s house has many rooms...”

Late in the afternoon after 10 days at Mary Greeley, Dad was transferred to the Israel Family Hospice House in Ames and died 18 hours later in mid-morning on July 1 after Clara had visited him briefly and stepped out of the room.

Clara called me with the news. I rode to the hospice house on my bike. When I entered the building, my first time ever there, I was struck by the names of donors on the wall of the entrance. Both Mother and Dad were listed for their contributions. So was Dr. Barbara Forker, the head of the Iowa State University women’s physical education department when I was an undergraduate. She was both a national and international leader, a force to reckon with whom I looked up to and kept in touch with over the years. I recalled, probably in the 1990s, when we had lunch and she had said she was on the committee to raise funds for the hospice house and was assigned to recruit my parents to be part of the campaign. She died in Arizona on June 11, 2010.

When I went to Dad’s room, he seemed relaxed and at peace in his bed as though he had just nodded off after reading a book. The hospice chaplain led a ritual for family members in his room, then I rode my bicycle toward home on a trail through a park in Ames that I had never seen before. The park and the weather were idyllic. On one hand, I wanted to linger, soak in the experience, and meditate. On the other hand, I wanted to keep moving. Then I did the mundane. I stopped at Hy-Vee and had two pieces of pizza—food I seldom indulge in, but I wanted nurturing food.

Next, I stopped at the nearby Goodwill and looked through the men’s long-sleeved cotton shirts. Ever since I began shopping at Goodwill for those kinds of shirts to wear for gardening, they have been a staple of my wardrobe. I found one I loved with a blue and white checkered print and wore it home. Later, I realized it was not much different in style than one Dad wore, along with a string tie and Ivy League hat, when I last photographed him at the farm.

The graveside rites would be on Friday, July 30, and the memorial service on Saturday, July 31. The one-month delay would work okay with me, but the hang time was not something I cherished. Over the decades, I had anticipated that Mother’s and Dad’s deaths would not be as hard for me emotionally as it would be to get along with family in dealing with their funerals. As it was, for better or worse, the responsibilities had been outlined and delegated by a core group of sisters. Again, as I did for Mother’s memorial service, I designed the bulletin. I also discerned how much to follow tradition and family expectations, and how much to step outside cultural molds in order to create healthy circumstances for the two days of family gatherings.

For sure, I was glad to work on the program for the funeral service. I could easily use the Adobe PageMaker template that I had used to create Mother’s bulletin to expand Dad’s bulletin to six pages. Throughout the process, I kept in touch with Clara about my plans. I selected several black and white photos of Dad ranging from when he was a young boy with chickens on the homeplace farm to a photo of him in his checkered print shirt. I also chose a variety of written pieces such as a poem by Iowa author James Hearst titled “When a Neighbor Dies,” a letter from environmentalist Rachel Carson to a friend about the migration

of Monarch butterflies, and paragraphs from *The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying* about life both before and after death. I also included pieces that Clara and Joy had recommended. This project seemed the best way for me to have a voice, even though silent, in the service.

I did not want to go to Rolfe by myself or be dependent on family for housing, meals, or socializing. As the preordained days came closer, my friend Joy said she would be able to go with me. We tried to figure out how we could take our bicycles, but we could not get a bicycle carrier. I called Mel Duistcher to see if she knew any place in Rolfe where we could get bikes. She checked and called back to say that her son Dan and his wife, Nancy, would loan us bikes. Betsy Dahl, who farms for me, said that Joy and I could stay at her sister Anna's house in Rolfe. In some ways, the old home is like a bed-and-breakfast place.

It dawned on Joy and me that we could ride the bikes to the cemetery. Mine is a family of walkers, runners, and bicyclists. I thought perhaps some might like to join us and told Clara, who was the hub of family communications that month, to let the others know our plan. I also let her know of another idea.

There were friends from Ames who had expressed an interest in going to Rolfe for Dad's memorial service. I wanted them to carpool if possible. I also wanted them to feel welcome. Indeed, people can be uncomfortable driving to an event in a strange town, looking for a place to get a decent cup of coffee or bite to eat, finding the right church, and being among strangers. Certainly, I did not want my Ames friends needing to wind their way to the basement of the Rolfe Shared Ministries building, then to the far end of the social hall to find the small rest rooms. Also, I wanted to have time with them and for them to meet some of my Rolfe friends.

I realized the Rolfe Community Center would be a great hospitality center. It shares a new building with city hall and the public library that had been funded partially with Mother's donation of stock. Beth Pearson, well known as a volunteer community organizer in Rolfe and local food advocate, was willing to provide food and serve as hostess for my guests. I let other family members know their out of town guests would be welcome to join us. Little did I know there was to be greeting time at the church just prior to the memorial service. Maybe the family organized that time because no wake or visitation time had been scheduled the day before.

Being single, my perception is that married couples, when traveling to family turf for funerals or other gatherings, have an advantage of being able to take their best friend with them—if indeed their spouse is their best friend. I also place a high value on friendship and have definitions of family that go beyond biology and certificates. Even with Dad's 90th birthday dinner only a year earlier, I took the initiative go counter to the norms of some family who cling to a narrow definition of what family means. I told the sisters who were planning his dinner that I would be bringing Joy. We all knew Dad liked her. Arrangements worked out well enough but not without hesitancy on the part of those sisters and tension between us.

In the week ahead of the trip to Rolfe, I also confided in Clara that I would like Joy to join me at the private services but also expressed a concern that there might be family members who would resent Joy's presence. Clara was fine with Joy being with us but said she would check with the others. When she reported back to me, she said there was resistance. Admittedly, the rituals at the funeral home chapel and the cemetery were meant to be private times, and typically, that might mean family only. But for me, Joy was family. I was bummed, but I did not want to put her in a situation where she might feel uncomfortable vibes from other family members.

Also, knowing how much photo snapping happened at Mother's graveside services, I requested through Clara that no one take photographs at Dad's private services, especially the graveside rites, until at least 10 minutes after the service was over. Clara was willing to accommodate my wish, but got back to me, saying that other family members would not honor it.

Joy and I drove to Rolfe on Thursday night, checked into Anna's house, then walked the few blocks to Dan and Nancy's house to get the bicycles. The bikes were not a perfect fit for either of



Tombstones in the older Clinton-Garfield Cemetery near Rolfe. 2008.

us but good enough to serve our needs on this milestone weekend. We settled in for the night. The next day we rose, had breakfast, and rode the five blocks to the main street. I left Joy at the library, then rode down the street two blocks to the funeral home for a brief service.

As soon as it was over, I promptly left the funeral home and got my bicycle, not wanting to get caught up in socializing and certainly wanting to get to the cemetery on time. I found Joy at the library. We rode a mile on paved streets, then traveled a gravel road, crossing where train tracks had been removed and replaced with the Three Rivers Trail, then arrived at the old Clinton-Garfield Cemetery. It was the home for the annual Memorial Day services and used to have tall, beautiful cedar trees, but they were destroyed in a 2004 tornado. The gently hilly landscape sloped downward toward the meandering Pilot Creek in the valley east of the cemetery with cattle grazing in the pastures across the creek.

We passed by old tombstones of varying shapes and designs; stopped not far from where my great grandparents, C.L. and Dena, were buried; and parked near large tombstones that could allow Joy to be out of sight from the family that would be gathering in the new cemetery across the road. Of course, it was her choice to do as she wanted with her time. Fortunately, she was resourceful and able to enjoy being by herself. She was also gracious, not taking offense at the decision I had made, with her blessing, after hearing from Clara that there might be resistance to her presence at Dad's gravesite.

The skies were blue and full of sunshine, and the temperature was comfortable, even though that time of year in Iowa is typically hot and humid. Our ride had seemed so basic—simple, exposed to nature, active, a true pleasure, no engine sounds, no exhaust fumes. I found myself humming, "This is my father's world."

Joy and I visited briefly, then I mounted my bicycle and followed the gravel cemetery road down the hill in the direction of Pilot Creek. In that lower section of the old cemetery, I passed by a section of tombstones I had explored years ago. I recall there was one with a bronze sundial. Another that said, "I told you I was sick." And another, "It's later than you think."

As I crossed the gravel road to enter the new cemetery, I saw the farmstead where LeRoy and Mary Nelson had lived just east of the cemetery. LeRoy had sold Dad two horses for \$50 apiece for gifts to us children on Christmas Day in 1954.

The new cemetery was relatively flat. Most of its grave markers were rectangles set close to the ground, their surfaces flush with the turf for easy mowing. I parked the bicycle a distance

from where the family members were gathering and walked over to join them. I recall little except that Dad's ashes were inside a round, green, metal John Deere seed box that had been used on an old corn planter. The motif for the weekend seemed to be that of Dad being a corn grower, especially when one considers the seed box for a corn planter was used as an urn and how my sisters had placed tall, vibrantly dark green corn stalks at the front of the church sanctuary for the memorial service.

I lingered long enough to shovel my share of soil over the area where the planter box with ashes was buried and for some pleasantries, but soon returned to the bicycle, rode across the road to the old cemetery, and met Joy. Our trip back to town was as wonderful as our trip had been from the funeral home to the cemetery, yet I was humbled when I noticed that the black banana seat of the borrowed bicycle had left a serious, large black stain at the back of my new khaki slacks.

That night, Joy and I went to my parents' home for dinner with the whole clan of siblings, spouses, nieces, and nephews who were gathered there. I had never seen the place so full of backpacks, suitcases, bedding, and people. One group gathered at the round oak table in the kitchen for dinner. Another group of us sat at a round oak table in the breezeway. I genuinely enjoyed the conversation, particularly with a nephew and his fiancée.



Rolfe's new community center with white pillars and green roof stands on the east side of Garfield Street, aka Main Street. 2006.

The next morning, Joy and I met my Ames friends and others as they arrived at the community center. Our host, Beth Pearson, had placed linen towels in the bathrooms, provided tablecloths with 1940s and 1950s floral-patterned fabric, and arranged bouquets of flowers from her garden and the local market. The menu included local apples, sweet corn and black beans for salsa, tortilla chips made just north of the Iowa border in Welcome, Minnesota, strawberry scones, coffee, and more. She also graciously greeted people and helped them feel at home.

The group of us walked the three blocks to the church. We seemed like a contented gaggle of geese and were in no hurry but savored the experience and the beauty of the bonds between people, even those who had never met before.

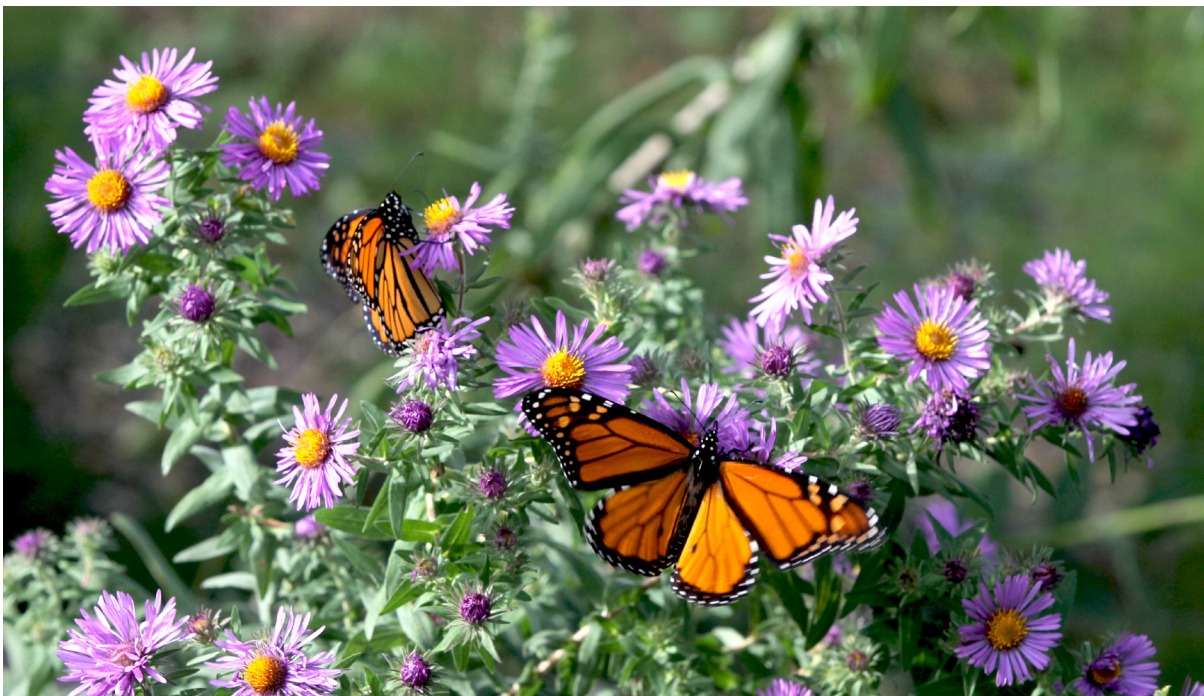
In anticipation of the day, I had called the funeral director to say I was going to sit with friends and asked him to reserve space for us. The staff did save space, but it wasn't a large

area of open pews toward the front and on the left like where I had sat for Mother's funeral in 2004. Also, our pews were not well marked. Even so, we were able to squeeze into the space allocated to us, and I was grateful for the feeling of solace sitting among friends.

I recall little about the service except how the minister spoke so glowingly and at length about how Dad had supported him. Also, brother-in-law Jeff Moore, who is a pastor, read a piece that one of Dad's tenants, Gary Beekmann, had written at the time of Dad's 90th birthday a year earlier. Like I had done at the end of Mother's service, I stayed seated in the pew while others left. Betsy's nieces, Maria and Sophia Roland, slipped in beside me, gave me hugs, and listened to the music with me.

My friends and I attended the lunch in the church basement but reconvened at the Rolfe Community Center where they expressed great interest in seeing the territory. Several of us went in a caravan of cars, starting with my land in Des Moines Township northeast of Rolfe, then coming back through town to see the school, then off to my parents' farm for a short visit, then to the homeplace where my grandparents had lived. My friends were intrigued by the homeplace and felt comfortable there, seemingly sharing some of my vibes toward the place that had meant so much to me.

To have my friend Erv Klaas, who is a retired wildlife biologist, drive one of the cars in the caravan and stop frequently to explain some feature of the environment was not much different than the days when Dad would be driving the family home from church but point out some feature he thought was intriguing. For instance, there was the time when I was a teenager and Dad drove into a field, stopped, had the family get out in their go-to-church clothes, and examine a drainage tile project—even having us look deep into the trench. Dad's was the perspective of an agricultural engineer. Erv's was the perspective of an environmentalist and ardent fan of Aldo Leopold, who had written *A Sand County Almanac* with its ground-breaking piece, "The Land Ethic." To have Erv along was about as good as it gets for having a guide for a field day, perhaps second only to what it might have been like to have Leopold himself as part of our caravan.



Monarchs and asters at Helen's urban farm. 2016.

Erv's wife, Janet, also rode with us. In a sympathy card she sent when Dad died, she handwrote the words of a letter by environmentalist Rachel Carson, author of *Silent Spring*, that I incorporated in Dad's funeral bulletin. Carson wrote the letter, entitled "Departure," shortly before her death to a friend:

Rachel Carson Letter

For me it was one of the loveliest of the summer's hours, and all the details will remain in my memory: that blue September sky, the sounds of the wind in the spruces and surf on the rocks, the gulls busy with their foraging, alighting with deliberate grace, the distant views of Griffiths Head and Todd Point, today so clearly etched, though once half seen in swirling fog. But most of all I shall remember the Monarchs, that unhurried westward drift of one small winged form after another, each drawn by some invisible force. We talked a little about their migration, their life history. Did they return? We thought not; for most, at least, this was the closing journey of their lives.

But it occurred to me this afternoon, remembering, that it had been a happy spectacle, that we had felt no sadness when we spoke of the fact that there would be no return. And rightly—for when any living thing has come to the end of its life cycle we accept that end as natural.

For the Monarch, that cycle is measured in a known span of months. For ourselves, the measure is something else, the span of which we cannot know. But the thought is the same: when that intangible cycle has run its course it is a natural and not unhappy thing that a life comes to an end.

That is what those brightly fluttering bits of life taught me this morning. I found a deep happiness in it—so I hope, may you. Thank you for this morning.

It is interesting, within a family, how the attitudes toward and memories of a patriarch (or matriarch) can vary. In ours, there is at least one sibling with unfettered adulation for my father. That is not my perspective. Instead, I have mixed feelings—both positive and negative—regarding him. I also have mixed feelings about the power dynamics among us siblings.

Just as no two people ever step into the same river, no two people ever enter the same family. A river is always changing. A family is always changing. It is natural that people within the same family would have different perceptions, not only of the family, but of the patriarch and matriarch. It is also natural that people have different ways of dealing with grief.

I recall Elizabeth Kübler-Ross and her book *On Death and Dying*, written in 1969. It outlined five stages of grief. I suspect that it was the first research and book on the topic, and her work, which became quite popular, was misinterpreted to mean there is a definite, linear process that all people go through when someone important to them dies.

Rachel Carson letter, published in the book *Lost Woods: The Discovered Writing of Rachel Carson* by Linda Lear, Beacon Press, Boston, 1998.

Although many older people in my life (grandparents and great aunts and uncles) died when I was young, I did not encounter much in terms of death of friends or family members until the last few decades. Mother's and Dad's deaths certainly put me more face-to-face with death than ever before.

During my seminary course on death and dying, I came to understand there is power in embracing death and not denying it—and wisdom that can be found in honoring grief and negative feelings rather than splitting off from them.

On the one-year anniversary (July 1, 2011) of Dad's death, I wrote a piece titled "Endings" for a website I had published since 1999 for alumni of my hometown high school. In it I wrote about my experience of grief related to Dad.

I sometimes think that I have completed my grieving related to my father's death a year ago, then I find myself choked up and lamenting the complexity of feelings I have for him and the unresolved issues between us that went to the grave with him. Some of my perspective is adulation that I had for him and my grandfather when I was a child and looked up to them and their way of farming. Some of the feelings, though, have to do with frustrations about his style of discipline when I was growing up and frustrations I had relating to him as he aged. Perhaps, just as many schools now require students to take parenting classes, there should be a movement to teach people how to be compassionate toward aging parents, especially when they regress in some of their reasoning abilities. Example number one was Dad's insistence on being able to continue driving a car and the family's inability to reason with him. Example number two had to do with his hearing and how he could easily hear what one sibling said and how he could barely understand what I would say even though I tried to talk slowly and articulately.

As I write, I have a sense of equanimity. I am pensive as I choose my words. I am not choked up. But as I said earlier, grief is mysterious in the ways it works on a person and its timing. I cannot predict what future course my feelings will take.

Perhaps someday, enough healing will have transpired that I can be more understanding and compassionate regarding Dad and the power dynamics within our family. Forgiveness is an important part of healing, but it is not something that can be forced.



Fallow fields and power poles in the last mile of Helen's road project. Circa 1992.



Helen visits prairie restoration area on her Des Moines Township land northeast of Rolfe. 2015. *Photo by Erin VanWaus of the Iowa Natural Heritage Foundation.*

LAND STEWARDSHIP

Dormant Seeds of Change

A major thread woven throughout my life's journey is the slow evolution from the era where I not only idolized my father and grandfather as farmers, but I also bought into their notion of "bigger is better" in farming.

There was room enough when I was a child to have several roles in my father's farming operation. My most poignant memory is from a time when I was around 10 on an idyllic day of blue skies and floating pillows of white clouds. A team of us were working a hay field halfway between my parents' and grandparents' farms. Grandpa was in one part of the field, driving a team of horses that was pulling a mower with a side cycle bar to cut the hay. When Grandpa completed an area, I would drive through with a low-riding gray Ford tractor, pulling a side rake to form the hay into windrows where it would lie to dry. Across the field, Dad was driving a red Model M Farmall tractor with a huge rig on its front to push and lift hay onto a haystack where his workers stood with their pitchforks to arrange the hay. At some point, I had the opportunity to be lifted to the top of a finished stack. I laid there on my back for a long time and experimented to see if I could see only the sky and clouds. The experience seemed so wholesome. Not only did I enjoy the work and feel proud of my role, I also loved working with the crew, especially Grandpa. He would die in October of my 11th year.

That day in the hayfield is emblematic of so much about my farm background that brought me joy. That day also represents a cusp in Midwestern agricultural history. Indeed, I was able to experience the end of the era of horse-drawn farming and its inclusion of livestock and several crops, including alfalfa, into a farm rotation, as well as experience the many changes that have happened since then, including the mechanization of farming, the monoculture rotation of corn and soybeans, and the introduction of genetically-modified seeds, chemicals, computers, and drones.



Farmall tractor and side hay rake on Helen's land farmed by Betsy Dahl and Ed Gross. The rake is similar to the one Helen pulled with a Ford tractor in the 1950s. 2017.

When I majored in physical education for women at Iowa State, I often wondered if I should enroll in at least one agricultural class. However, I never did. Also, I recall in the spring of my senior year, when I met with a teacher placement counselor, I confided that I wanted to get away from Iowa and not have to see fields of corn. I taught in Duluth, Minnesota, and Eagle Grove, Iowa, and earned a master's in instructional media technology. There were months during the early 1970s when I stayed with my folks at their farm home and was happy to have small chores, such as driving a Farmall tractor, pulling a wooden barge wagon, and hauling grain from the field back to the farm. Although a part of me yearned to be more fully engaged in farming, Dad had a hired helper and plenty of tenants who rented land from the family, and I realized there was no long-term role for me in farming even though I owned land.

In 1975, I began working in sports information at North Dakota State University in Fargo, and, after three years, began directing the YMCA of NDSU, which was not a gym and pool organization but more like a campus ministry organization.

At the Presbyterian Church in Fargo, I met Besa Amenuvor from Ghana. Besa was enrolled in the agricultural education program at NDSU. He also introduced soccer to the Fargo community. Besa and I had long conversations. He chose to study at NDSU in order to have a base of operations in the U.S. but said that he was not comfortable with how the department promoted large-scale, North Dakota-style farming. Even so, Besa had a strategy to take bus tours throughout the U.S. in the summer, visiting places where people were using sustainable methods to grow food. For instance, he visited one farm that had rabbit hutches that were built above trout ponds to take advantage of the way the two formed a symbiotic circle. I was happy to donate \$200 to his travel fund. After Besa received bachelor's degrees in agricultural education and economics from NDSU, he earned a master's degree in sociology from Cornell University. Besa, his wife, and their children moved back to Ghana in the late 1970s. He worked for the Peace Corp and United States Agency for International Development, then taught at Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology before forming Partners in Development, a non-profit organization dedicated to community development. Besa's obituary says he died suddenly in 2011 in Ghana, and that he was born in June 1945, which meant he was just two months younger than I.

It was from Besa that I got my first seeds of understanding that the mantra of "bigger is better" was not sustainable. I would learn from him that it would be more sustainable worldwide if the U.S. would ratchet back its agricultural production and allow other countries to use their own wisdom and systems of production to feed their people.



While serving as director of the YMCA of NDSU, I met Roger Livdahl, the area director of the Church World Service CROP program, whose mission was to deal with hunger issues. CROP has been best known, perhaps, for its CROP walks to raise money. Roger and I also had long conversations, and he encouraged me to use my position with the YMCA to organize a major symposium on hunger at the Memorial Union on the NDSU campus. He recruited some of the leading thinkers on agriculture and hunger in the Midwest to

participate in the two-day event. I wish I could recall the names of those men because I bet that some of them, whether still living or not, would now be considered legends in sustainable agriculture. What I learned from those leaders, as well as from Roger and Besa, opened my eyes to new perspectives about farming.



Helen earns a Master of Divinity degree from San Francisco Theological Seminary. 1985.

When I enrolled in San Francisco Theological Seminary in 1981, I was interested in learning more about Christianity and the spirituality component of a new concept called “wellness.”

I was surprised when Robert Coote and Marvin Chaney, my professors for Introduction to the Old Testament and a course on Prophets, respectively, taught from a sociological perspective, rather than the kinds of Biblical interpretations I had anticipated. Nor did they discuss personal well-being, but instead deeply related issues of land ownership. Fortunately, Marv had grown up on a farm in Kansas and anticipated there would come a day when he would inherit land. I already owned land inherited from my grandparents, so Marv and I had long discussions after some of the class sessions ended.

I was probably one of the worst students Bob and Marv had in terms of my near Biblical illiteracy and lack of a scholarly background in the humanities. Yet both were patient, and I appreciated Marv’s empathy for me as a landowner, considering that in those days there was a lot of cultural emphasis on absentee landowners being some of the evil culprits in our society.

It is puzzling that when I finished the initial set of chapters for this book in 2004, I overlooked a major milestone that happened in 1996. The seeds of that change probably began as far back as the 1980s. It may seem odd, but getting my first computer in 1986 with Word Perfect software would become a catalyst for me to begin managing my own land in 1997. Over the years, brother Charles, who had been managing my land, would send handwritten spreadsheets as annual farm reports. Little did I take an interest in them. However, when Word Perfect was released with the capability to create data tables, it seemed the perfect tool for transposing information from the stashed-away pile of documents into a more coherent

format. However, it was easy to swear at Word Perfect on the many occasions when fluky gremlins would corrupt a file.

The fusion of frustrations with Word Perfect; the data; how Charles communicated; and how my parents had groomed him, the only male among us six siblings, to manage farmland could set me off in a fury. So much so that the angst often was a matter of conversation with my California spiritual director, Zoila Schoenbrun, an Episcopal priest, whom I had met in my first year of seminary. On one such visit, Zoila pointed out how much I like to be in control and that there is little if anything that a person can actually control. I could not control Word Perfect software or anything else in the computer world. I could not control family dynamics or Charles. I could not control the march of modern agriculture.

By June 1996, I had turned for spiritual direction to Martha Simmons of Ames. She was a retired medical lab technician and Roman Catholic lay minister. I vividly remember a particular session when I lamented with Martha about my frustrations with Charles over farm management issues. It was not as though he was mean. It was more a matter of his having a routine that worked for him, and he was not going to tailor reports for what may have seemed like my whims. The factors that led to my frustrations may have been small ones in the larger scheme of life, but they triggered deep complexes of resentment. It was not the first time I had shared this kind of angst with Martha. She listened at length then firmly and quietly asked, "When are you going to begin managing your own land?"

I replied defensively, "I could never do that. That is not how things are done in my family, where the men are expected to make the decisions about farming." However, without admitting it to Martha at the time, I recognized at a place deep inside me the truth in her line of questioning and that I could not squirm out of the challenge. I needed to rise to the occasion and make what seemed a radical, difficult change, even though I did not know how I would proceed.



Paul Harrold. 2003.

Throughout August, I networked with several people, including Paul Harrold, who is six years younger than I and had been part of my road project. I asked Paul what he thought about me managing my land. Without hesitation, he firmly replied, "I think you ought to."

Helen's journal entry

August 12, 1996

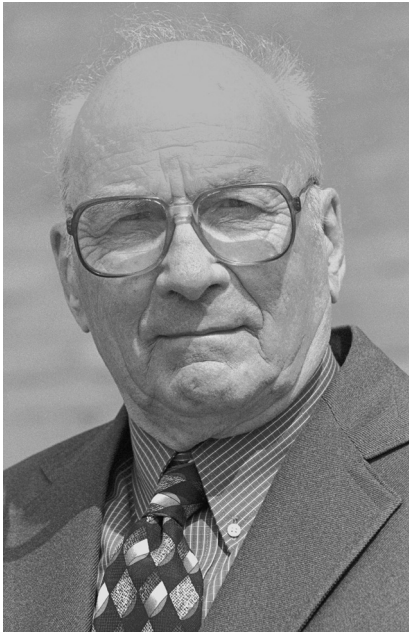
In terms of my driven quest to learn about my land and be able to manage it, will I ever make progress? What would it mean to manage my own land? Thank goodness I have met new people or gotten to know former acquaintances in new ways . . . people who know about Iowa culture and farming but who support my desire to manage my land. Oh yes, there are others who would discourage it.

I was proud of the gracious way in which I could transport Dad and his bike so he could ride one day on the bicycle ride across Iowa. But then there was last Saturday when I stopped by the house. He had seemed to regress. Saying in his stern, authoritarian voice, that although he appreciated the fact that I wanted to learn more about my own land, that he discouraged me from getting involved in making the decisions. I can't figure out what is going on. I don't know why I am responding the way I am. Am I psychologically sick? Sick with restlessness and anger? Heck, I am 51 years old. I am not a child. I am not an adolescent girl. Some people would think I was silly to bemoan this management thing so much. They wouldn't have much sympathy. After all, not everyone gets to inherit so much wealth. And isn't there some time in life, when no matter how bad one's childhood milieu was, when a person is expected to get on with it, to take responsibility?

Is part of the reason for all this angst the fact that I am again reminded of what I am up against? It is not just family. It is a lot more. Forces are at foot, they have been at foot, to change the face of agriculture and culture. I have said many times that it is not a matter of my wanting to go back to the olden days, to an era that never worked for me. But the direction that agriculture is going is not a direction that I feel at all comfortable with. Should I just forget about the farm management issue for a few more years or perhaps forever?

I also wonder how much my stewing around about farm management is a diversion from my artistic endeavors. It seems like the issues go hand in hand. I would hate to finish my road project with "nice" success but never challenge or change the real situation.

Kitchen Table Conversation with the Family Patriarch



Deane Gunderson. 1998.

On August 14, 1996, I wrote to Dad and Charles, saying that I was considering managing my own land and might evolve into the role, perhaps within a few years.

My friend Sylvia Olson of Pocahontas told me she had read in the paper that the Pocahontas County Extension office had announced a farm management workshop. I signed up immediately and went to the August 19 gathering with Kelvin Leibold, an ISU Extension farm management specialist from Hardin County. That was a Monday. On Friday, I called Kelvin, and we talked at length. I had not realized he had once taught vocational agriculture in the Rolfe schools and knew my father and other family members.

I had anticipated the workshop would emphasize how farming was becoming more sophisticated, and that it was essential that people such as myself have a professional farm manager. But no. Kelvin encouraged us to manage our own land. He did not think there needed to be a buffer between operator and owner, especially not an agent who would extract a significant percentage of the farm income

for management fees. Kelvin has continued to be a good mentor.

It was an anxious time of waiting to hear back from Charles and Dad. It was not as though either of them had the legal authority about what I could do with my land. Yes, Charles had been managing it, but Dad had no official role with it. However, Dad was still the family patriarch and he traditionally had the final say regarding land because few, if any, of us siblings have had the nerve to counter his wishes.

Little did I anticipate how supportive Charles would be of the transition. I am not sure if he was excited about it, but he was fully cooperative. Although I had been hesitant and vague in my letter, saying that I was contemplating managing my land someday, he suggested that we implement the decision sooner rather than later. However, Charles said that Dad had talked to him about my letter, saying, "How do we keep Helen from doing something stupid?" Charles also relayed that Dad wanted to talk with me before I finalized my decision. That news sucked the breath out of me. My heart sank in apprehension. However, I realized what must be done. I scheduled a meeting with Dad.

On August 29, I drove to Rolfe and sat with Dad at the round oak table in the kitchen. Mother was in her recliner chair at the opposite end of the adjacent living room. Whether or not she could hear our conversation, I do not know. Whether or not Dad had told her about my letter, I do not know. Part of me did not appreciate the ways that Dad bypassed Mother on matters, but it seemed best not to challenge the situation. Instead, I focused on the conversation with Dad.

In preparation for our meeting, I carefully thought through my rationale for approaching Dad. I did not want to come across with a victim mentality or New Age liberal attitude, something that would not be effective with him. That meant that I should not talk about male privilege or mention my lifelong resentment that Charles had been the only one of us six siblings groomed to manage the farmland. No, I needed another approach. I thought of his paternal grandmother, Dena Gunderson, who had been a teacher. I knew Dad admired Dena even though he did not appreciate her strong-willed, opinionated nature.

That day, there was little if anything on the kitchen table. It was clear. Dad sat on the west side with his back to the kitchen sink. I sat to his right with my back to the refrigerator. He seemed rigid. I was nervous yet quite clear in my mind about how I wanted to start the conversation. I asked Dad to think about strong women in his heritage such as Dena and how she would have made a good farm manager. He replied, “Well, yes.” He went on to say that my grandmother DeElda and my older sister Clara would also have made good farm managers. His rigid demeanor softened. His voice became less gruff. He talked about his feeling of becoming less effective in making farm decisions and how complex farm management had become, questioning his own competency the older that he got. That was quite an admission for a man who had always been on top of farm decisions. I sense that he truly cared about me but worried that I would not be able to manage my land. I appreciated his concern. However, I explained how I was not getting any younger, that it was time for me to learn to manage my land, and that if I did it now, he would still be around as one of my mentors. I also said that there might come a time when something might happen to Charles, and I would not have him to serve in a management role.

It was one of the best conversations I ever had with Dad. We were comfortable enough with each other at the table that I took the opportunity to tell him of my admiration for him and Grandpa, but gently and with equanimity also told him about the resentment I had held in regard to him and Mother grooming Charles to manage the land. Dad said he could understand my feelings. My mission to visit with him was complete and more wonderful than I could have imagined.

Charles and I visited again on September 3 and agreed we would make the change to me managing my own land. I retained the farm operators who had already been farming the land. Gerry Dewall, who had her own career as co-owner of the Powhatan Travel Agency in Pocahontas, told me that when I decided to manage my own land, her husband, Don, who was about my father’s age, was not sure how he would relate to a woman manager. However, she simply told him he needed to get used to the idea.

Farm Management 101

I have now managed my land successfully, by my standards, for 22 years. The transition went smoothly. In the early 1990s, I had become competent enough with QuickBooks software to do bookkeeping for my fledgling photography business, Gunder-friend Productions. Charles had been slow to adopt computer technology, but when he did, he promptly used QuickBooks, too. Fortunately, he had established a QuickBooks file for managing my land and simply gave me the file and coached me on the work-around methods he used for such things as producing reports for both a farm year and a calendar year and entering income for crops harvested in the fall but not sold until spring or vice versa. He is easily approachable when I call and ask questions. He also continues to do legal work for me, such as writing leases and preparing my income tax returns. Actually, that was a lesson for me—to learn that just because I would be making decisions about my land did not mean I had to have the kind of expertise that he had as an attorney and for preparing taxes.

My engagement with Practical Farmers of Iowa has also been an integral part of my growth in managing my own land. My initial contact with PFI was in the mid-1990s. The organization was founded in 1985 with a mission of “Equipping farmers to build resilient farms and communities.” At the time, one of PFI’s three paid staff members, Rick Exner, had seen an article in the *Ames Tribune* about an exhibit I had mounted for my road project and the changes in that neighborhood. He called and asked me if I could do a mini



version of the exhibit at PFI's annual conference that January at the Starlight Village Motel. I was glad to show my work, but even at the time of the conference, I did not understand how I might benefit from the organization. It always seemed to me that the PFI people were doing much more to walk the talk of sustainable agriculture than I ever had considered.

I am not sure what year I actually joined, but my records show I paid my first dues in 1998. I have probably gone to every conference since then, but for a long time felt like an interloper. Even so, people welcomed and mentored me. It indeed is a caring community in which its members are unabashedly willing to share information and help each other. I have seldom sensed any member or staff having big egos or feeling their knowledge was proprietary in the same way that agri-business companies keep their information to themselves.

There were three key staff members when I first joined PFI, and it was not until 2001 that the organization hired an executive director. Now there are 21 full-time staff, two part-time staff, and four AmeriCorps volunteers. As of 2019, there are 3,556 members, and the organization's revenue totaled \$2.2 million in 2018. PFI has grown so rapidly in recent years that it keeps requiring additional office space—already it is outgrowing the 5,500 square feet of space in Ames' Golden Aspen Business Park that it moved into just two years ago. Executive Director Sally Worley says the current issues that PFI addresses and its programming are similar to those in the past but “with greater breadth and an increased focus on beginning farmers and specialty crop farmers.” And she proudly contends that PFI is “still true to its roots of on-farm research, resiliency, and farmer-leadership.”



Mark Huberty of the Pocahontas County Conservation Board sows prairie seed on three acres of Helen's land in Des Moines Township northeast of Rolfe. 1998.

One of my first major actions was in 1998, when I took about 25 acres of low land next to Beaver Creek out of crop production and put it into the U.S. government's Conservation Reserve Program (CRP). Since that time, I have put four more parcels into CRP—all with a mix of native-ecotype prairie seed to restore the land as close as possible to what it would have been like before European immigrants tilled it.

About that same year, Don DeWall called to say he was on his way to the seed dealership to place his order for the upcoming year and was considering using the first of GMO corn seed—BT corn. He asked what I thought about it. I called PFI and spoke at length with Rick

Exner about the pros and cons, then called Don back and told him to use only half the amount of BT corn that he had envisioned using. In hindsight, I wish I had told him not to use any GMO seed, considering that it is now so ubiquitous and controversial. I suspect though, that because of the precedent I set that day, even though Don has died, his son Jeff and farming partner Denny are more considerate of the environment when they make choices for my land than they are for other owners.

By 2006, I still had the same renters but shifted to straight cash rent leases rather than the 50-50 crop share arrangement that had been customary for our family. The most difficult challenge that I face nearly annually is that of deciding what the cash rent rate should be. I do not want to be either a jerk or a sucker. Fortunately, much has gone well with my operators in deciding on a rate, and yet in February 2009, I broke another family precedent.

For the first 12 years of managing my land, I had appreciated many long conversations with one of my tenants, whom for the sake of this book, I will call "Pat." He was an honorable person but also a smooth and tough negotiator, paying me much less per acre in rent than my other tenants. Finally, in the fall of 2008, I negotiated a rental rate of \$192 per acre with Pat, making his rate equal to what my other tenants had already agreed to pay for the upcoming year. However, Charles delayed in preparing the lease for Pat, and Pat called to ask if I would lower our agreed upon rate, considering that soybean prices had dropped significantly that fall. I checked with the other two tenants, Denny and Jeff, who had signed their leases in September, and asked if they thought there was merit to lowering the rate. Denny replied that they were men of their word and would stick with the rate they had negotiated with me. I called Pat back to say that there was no way to know if the drop in bean prices was a short-term blip or part of a long-term slide. When Charles prepared Pat's lease in November, and Pat stopped to get forms, he said he might not return them. Months went by, with March 1, the day that the new leases were to begin, soon on the horizon. I felt Pat was playing chicken with me—trying to see which of us would cave to pressure the soonest. Pat did call in February to see if I had changed my mind. I said, "No." Pat did not say anything about intending to sign the lease.

I was extremely nervous in the months of this impasse. Certainly, it was more complex than what I am reporting here. Let me simply say that was the end of Pat farming for me and the beginning of a new era.

Helen's letter to Pat (abridged)

February 10, 2009

For many years, the heart of my thinking about the stewardship of my land has been a deep desire to have it farmed more sustainably. Status quo agriculture is unhealthy in many regards, including but not limited to its effect on the environment. Also, it is increasingly expensive and dependent on corporately promoted technologies.

I have high respect for you and have appreciated our long conversations and friendship. I am also thankful for your insights and dependability in these 20 to 30 years of farming for me. That said, though, I have been frustrated with some of your responses in our communications about rental rates.

Your lack of signing the lease in a timely manner and not clearly saying that you agreed to its terms after telling Charles that you might not sign it has given me lots of time to think about options. Although a couple of people suggested in late November or early December that I rent my DMT land to Betsy Dahl, I did not give the suggestion serious thought until a couple of weeks ago.

I have known the Dahl family to have a strong interest in sustainable agriculture and have seen several of them at Practical Farmer of Iowa conferences over the past several years. I was impressed this year to see almost every member of the family, brothers-in-law included, at this year's annual conference. I am sure that they know, as I know, that there are no easy answers with alternative agriculture, but we also know that conventional agriculture is not the way we want to go—at least not with 100 percent conventional practices.

At my age of 63, and pondering when in the course of my lifetime would be good to make a significant change in how my land is farmed, it seemed that now is the time to act rather than merely wishing that a desirable change would happen.

You raised a question of whether all was for naught after these 20 to 30 years of farming my land. If a person looked at changes in generalities and in terms of only a black or white conclusion, you could look at it that way. You could also see that you have had my land be part of your career and livelihood all those years. Also, you have helped me learn more about farming issues. You have been a good steward of the land by the standards of conventional agriculture. You have allowed me to stand on a foundation where I can now make a significant change and transition the land to organic or other niche farming practices. And you will not be required to set that kind of alternative farming into motion.

Of course, I would understand if those words rolled off as platitudes and that you would see little or no silver lining in this change. But I am reminded that you calculated you would be losing a significant amount of money by growing beans on my land this year. So at least, in that regard, you will no longer be faced with the threat of losing money on beans—at least on my land in 2009.

This decision has not been an easy one. It has been like a bur under my saddle for several months. I seldom get headaches, but last night I had one in which it felt like my head was going to explode from the tension. And the headache was still there when I woke up this morning. But after pondering the issues, talking to some support people, and going on a bike ride today—I have concluded that my decision that Charles conveyed to you yesterday in an email attachment stands.

Renting to a New Tenant and Going Organic

In the spring of 2009, Betsy Dahl began farming my land northeast of Rolfe. She is one of eight siblings who was raised in the home-schooled family of Gary and Kathy Dahl. She, like myself, is a descendant of early European settlers in the area. Betsy is a fifth-generation Iowa farmer and descendant of both the Ives and Brinkman pioneer families. Her mother and I rode the school bus together.



Betsy Dahl farmed Helen's Des Moines Township land with organic practices from 2009 to 2018. 2010.

I was excited about the prospects of having Betsy farm my Des Moines Township land organically. Already, she and her family had started organic practices on some of their land. To be absolutely clear for the record, it was not as though I had been on a quest to seek a “woman farmer.” My biggest concern was to have my land farmed either with non-GMO seed or organically. There are not many operators in Pocahontas County available for that kind of farming. For more than a decade I had observed the evolution of Betsy and her siblings as farmers under Gary's tutelage. When I asked if she would farm some of my land, she checked with Gary and Kathy, who were traveling in Florida, and got back to me the same night to say that she would be delighted to farm for me.

From early on, Margaret Smith, who worked for ISU Extension in a field called value-added agriculture, befriended me. When I decided to rent land to Betsy, I turned to Margaret, who helped me think about what kind of lease we should have and continued to mentor me when I needed advice.

In her decade of farming for me, Betsy was also a full-time nurse with the county health department. She loves both being a nurse and being a farmer. There have been times, though, when she has said all she really wanted to do is farm but that she stayed with nursing because of the health insurance benefits. Fortunately, her father, sisters, brothers, nieces, and nephews have helped her with farming.

In June 2016, when in her late 30s, Betsy married Ed Gross, whom she had met in 2014 at the Pocahontas Community Hospital, where he uses his versatile skills in the maintenance department. Ed was a farmer at heart and willing to use his skills to help Betsy and her dad farm. Soon Ed was a regular part of the family, often joining others for dinner at Kathy and Gary's home.

On October 30, 2015, Betsy had taken a beautiful afternoon off from her nursing job to harvest corn on some of the family land. Ed and Betsy's sister, Carolyn, came to the field. Ed said he had made reservations at Minerva's Restaurant at Okoboji, 70 miles away from Rolfe. Betsy said it wasn't a good idea with rain forecasted for that night. But Carolyn, who Betsy later realized was in on the plot with Ed, encouraged Betsy to go. He and Betsy made it to Okoboji in time for a fine dinner, then on the way back, he suggested they stop at my farm. There was a misty rain and it was dark, but he drove them in his Suburban to the most scenic place on the farm where there is a permanent pasture with a ravine and trees and where Betsy has seen swarms of Monarch butterflies.

They drove in a strip of field between rows of large hay bales, where for the first time, Betsy saw a four-wheeler all-terrain vehicle (ATV) sitting on a flatbed trailer. Ed drove it off the trailer and presented it to Betsy as a gift. Betsy had often wanted an ATV, but Gary had always told her and her siblings that they did not need one—that they could ride their horses and bicycles instead. Betsy was excited and said, "Oh, that's so fun!" Ed suggested they take it for a ride. He reached into a locked compartment and put a small box in his pocket. Betsy was suspicious, considering he had locked the box. But she went along for the ride. Soon they stopped, and Ed suggested she drive, but as he got off the seat of the ATV and she moved forward, he proposed to her and presented the ring. Betsy said she was excited and shocked. She and Ed had talked about marrying but thought it would be in another year. She even knew that Ed had talked to Gary about marrying her.

Their wedding was at Betsy's home on a four-and-a-half-acre farmstead she had bought in 2014. It is on the highway south of Rolfe with both her parents' and grandparents' farmsteads within the mile south of her place. The day was beautiful for the outdoor ceremony with a dinner and dance in the machine shed for the many members of Betsy's clan, Ed's family, and friends. Two shiny red Farmall tractors were parked ceremoniously near the rows of folding chairs, and horses stood behind a white wooden fence, eating hay. Betsy and Ed now have two young children, Kathleen and George. Betsy is focused on them, her nursing job, and farming family land in the section (i.e., square mile) where she lives. Not only is she to be admired for being a fifth-generation farmer, but her children are sixth-generation farm children. Only the future will tell if they become farmers. Betsy and Carolyn are the only ones among their siblings who remain in the Rolfe area.



A pair of Farmall tractors, chairs, and bouquets of wild flowers await guests and the wedding ceremony of Betsy Dahl and Ed Gross at her farm southwest of Rolfe. 2016.



Left: Quilt block and PFI award sign on Helen's rental house at her urban farm in Ames. 2019. Right: Betsy Dahl and Helen celebrate harvesting the first ever organically-certified crop (soybeans) on Helen's land. 2017.

A lot of attention came my direction because of renting to Betsy. In March 2011, NPR carried a four-minute piece, "U.S. Sees More Female Farmers Cropping Up," that featured the two of us. To be featured on NPR was a novel experience. I realized though that such stories usually are the result of a reporter looking for local, colorful stories as an example of a larger trend. I also realize that in many cases, the reporter has a vision of what the story will be like even before interviewing the participants. Also, I have learned that hardly any media story is 100 percent accurate. All these factors make me wonder about the legitimacy of so much of what is aired that listeners assume to be 100 percent true without knowing the challenges of the deeper story.

At its annual conference in 2013, PFI also presented me with its first ever Landowner Appreciation Award. It is now called the Farmland Owner Legacy Award and was "created to call attention to the need for improved landowner partnerships with farmers, and of the vital—but often unacknowledged—role non-operator landowners play in shaping the agricultural landscape, rural communities, and opportunities for beginning farmers." I believe it is fair to say that what goes around, comes around. In many ways, it was the PFI community—or rather, the PFI family—that helped me grow in ways that resulted in the board choosing to present me with the award.

In November 2017, I was elated to videotape Betsy harvest our first certified organic crop of soybeans. I was proud of her and still am. However, there have been challenges. No matter how much organic farming is seen by some as a panacea for agriculture, the environment, and human health, it is neither a 100 percent sustainable practice nor a sure bet to be successful, even with the lure of higher prices than those for conventionally grown crops. There is the potential for more soil compaction with all the passes of tractors and equipment for cultivating the ground as compared to status quo agriculture. Many organic farmers I know, Betsy included, struggle with tremendous weed pressure. Foxtail surely was a nemesis for her. Farmers, Betsy included, are buffeted by extremes in weather, especially with the advance of climate change—even within one crop season. Conditions can be too wet in the spring to plant at an ideal time, too dry during the summer for a good yield, then perhaps too wet in the fall to harvest in a timely fashion. Then fluky circumstances arise, such as in a recent year when there was a shortage of factory farm chicken manure for fertilizer due to

the avian flu epidemic that forced those farms to kill their flocks. In 2016, when Betsy and I were anticipating our first-ever certified organic crop, we received news soon after harvest that our corn was contaminated with genetically modified organisms, and we were not able to sell the crop for the kinds of high prices that organic grain can bring. For example, with organic corn, we could have received \$10 per bushel compared to the local elevator price of \$3 or less for conventionally grown corn. In Iowa, organic farms are extremely vulnerable to GMO contamination, as well as the drift of chemicals applied by farmers on other fields, even those that can be miles away. Then there are wet spots in the fields where the soil is thick and it is hard to maneuver equipment. A landowner needs to consider whether to simply fix those spots, invest tens of thousands of dollars in completely revamping the system of underground drainage tiles, or to find a way to work with nature.



Iowa Natural Heritage Foundation

In 2011, I gave 60 acres of my Des Moines Township land to the Iowa Natural Heritage Foundation as an outright gift. Then in 2016, I gave the INHF the remaining 180 acres in a reserved life estate, meaning that although I still was responsible for the land, the title would go directly to the Foundation at my death. I was glad that one of the Foundation's staff members, Erin Van Waus, was willing to assist me in managing the land. She and I collaborated and applied successfully for a contract through the USDA's Conservation Reserve Program to put 77 acres into what is called a pollinator habitat. It is shaped like a wide picture frame around 90 acres of crop ground that Betsy continued to farm. Erin and I felt that this would be healthy for the environment, enhance the farming operation, and give me a high rental rate for the conservation land that would allow me to continue renting to Betsy at a low rental rate until she could become financially successful farming the land organically. Even though there was much merit in the change, it also meant that Betsy had to reconfigure her crop rotation plans.

In fall 2018, after a decade of renting land to Betsy, I wondered about the merit of continuing to have her farm my Des Moines Township land. Erin Van Waus and Lisa Hein of the INHF traveled to Rolfe to walk the land. We talked all the way there and back about the challenges of farming that land and whether to continue Betsy's lease. Erin and Lisa emphasized that it was my responsibility to make the decision and suggested I write my goals for the land.

In the meantime, Dave Andrews, a friend who used to be the director of the Michael Fields Agricultural Institute in Wisconsin before retiring in Ames, volunteered to visit my home county with me. We met first with Mark Fehr, part of an extended organic farming family in the West Bend area north of my hometown. Mark introduced me to his son-in-law, Abram Frank, a 26-year-old man from Illinois, who had come to Iowa for a degree in agricultural business at Iowa Lakes Community College.

The reason for talking with Mark and Abram was to see how well I liked them and whether Abram would be a good operator for 64 acres of my land west of Rolfe adjacent to the railroad tracks. Abram and I hit it off right away. I love how he calls that land "the railroad farm" and my DMT land "the butterfly farm." Mark and Abram both knew of the tentative

situation with the DMT land and that I was pondering whether I would renew my lease with Betsy. However, we focused on what it would be like for Abram to operate the railroad farm organically. Dave and I also walked the DMT land, saw my other parcels, and met with Jeff DeWall and his mother, Gerry, as well as two smaller-scale farmers. Dave and I also spent most of our time on the road talking about the condition of the DMT land and whether it was wise to let Betsy continue to farm it.

I had a stiff bout of procrastination for a few weeks before overcoming inertia and responding to Erin and Lisa's suggestion that I write my goals for the farm. But I finally rose to the challenge and wrote a 12-page essay, telling the history of renting to Betsy and listing the pros and cons of continuing to rent it to her. The process of writing has often helped me in making difficult decisions, and this time was no different. I was able to share the document with Erin, Lisa, and Dave to get their feedback before condensing it to two pages. Certainly, the combination of writing and the support of these friends was a blessing that helped me be clear about what I needed to do.

Dissolution of a Land Dynasty

I had already given Betsy the notice that is legally required by the end of August (when a landowner is thinking of changing or ending a lease) to say our current lease, ending on March 1, 2019, would be terminated. Often, that kind of letter is a formality that simply means that a landlord intends to renegotiate the terms of the lease. However, on September 17, I wrote to Betsy, saying that there was much we could be proud of and many ways in which I admired her. I acknowledged we had both learned more about organic agriculture and had gotten to know each other better. I added that in my estimation, we had a mutual deep respect for each other and wrote about my gratitude for her and her family for farming for me and making me feel welcome on the land and in their homes. However, I also informed her, "As it is, I have decided not to renew your lease for the DMT land."

I was nervous about how Betsy would respond, and even more anxious when there was a long delay before she replied. I had not realized she had already gone to the hospital to deliver her second child, George, and that due to complications, both Betsy and George were kept at the hospital for three weeks. When she finally wrote, Betsy said she was taken aback when she read my letter. Fortunately, our relationship continues to be a close one. Betsy is now focused on her job as a full-time county health nurse, farming family land in the section where she lives, and raising her two children, Kathleen and George.

In February 2019, Abram and his wife, Jessica Frank, who is an accountant, signed leases to farm my 64 acres at the railroad farm and my 90 acres at the butterfly farm organically. I pray this is a successful arrangement for all three of us. I enjoy my visits with Abram and feel that the two of them fit well with the goals that I wrote for Erin and Lisa of the INHF, along with Ryan Schmidt, who will be our new contact at the Foundation.

Unfortunately, most of the other people who farm for my siblings and me fit the demographic of how America's farmers are aging. The average age of Iowa's farmers is climbing and near 60. As it is, Denny Flaherty, who farms for me, turned 65 this year and is planning to at least semi-retire. Gary Beekmann, who farms for my brother, is in his mid-70s, and Dan and Roger Allen, who farm for my sisters, are approaching 70 years old. Jeff DeWall is in his 50s. The question for my siblings and other landowners should be on the front burner, "Who will farm our land 10 years from now, and what arrangements should we be making?"

To my surprise, no one has ever asked me if I regret the decision to manage my own land or how I have fared compared to if Charles continued to manage it. However, I have often thought how I would answer such a question. First, I have done fine financially. Second, I



Abram Frank and three sons take a lunch break during harvest on Helen's land. 2019. *Photo from the Abram and Jessica Frank collection.*

have never even wanted to go down the rabbit hole of wondering if Charles would have generated more income for me had he continued to farm the land. Third, he and I have a good collegial relationship. Fourth and most importantly, I don't care whether or not he would have generated more money. The value of my farming my own land is not something measurable, least of all in dollar amounts. The value lies in becoming more familiar with the land and growing more into my own as a fourth-generation Iowa farm woman and making progress in farming my land with sustainable practices.

And frankly, I have been able to make decisions that are pretty much consistent with my values and beliefs that the land needs to be farmed as sustainably as possible. In that regard, I have no regrets, and I have neither lost the farm nor met whatever other fate my father may have feared.

I often think about the NPR story, the PFI landowner award, an article about me as a woman landowner in the Iowa Natural Heritage Foundation magazine, and other publicity. It seems as though Betsy and I were "poster women" for women in agriculture. It was a fun and novel experience, but like a masquerade without a three-dimensional depth that considered the challenges of what we were actually doing.

I have also wondered about gender issues and whether I treated Betsy differently than I did the men who farmed for me. Was I easier or tougher on her because she was a woman? As it was, I was quite tolerant of my tenant Pat; then he crossed a line that miffed me in relation to a lease that he needed to sign, and I said, "No, I am no longer renting my land to you."

Other factors, including Betsy's age and her status as a small-scale farmer taking on the challenge of farming organically and working for the first time for a landowner outside her family, may have been just as significant as gender in how I related to her. However, gender is such a prevalent and deep-seated matter in our culture, and especially was a big factor when I was young. There is no way, no matter how much I evolve, that gender would not affect how

I relate to my tenants or even the people who work at my urban farm. I am not gender-blind, even though it would be great, in my humble opinion, if I could be, and society could move to a point where gender was not a big deal.

I summarize Betsy's decade of farming my DMT land as a grand experiment that did not end up aligning with the stars. Even so, just because it did not work out for us as a woman manager and woman operator, our experience should not be seen as an excuse to exclude women from these kinds of roles in agriculture.

It is not a stretch of the definition of "hero" to recognize that all people are part of the hero's journey in one way or another or to understand that all people can possess a unique calling. To put one person or a group on a pedestal as being extra special can have its folly, and yet, I believe that those of us women who are trying to make a difference in agriculture are good examples of modern day heroes who are acting now, and not later, to follow an inner calling.



I don't believe in farm dynasties, but perhaps there are instances where people of wealth own land and enable farmers, who use sustainable practices and don't have as much wealth, to stay on the land. And certainly, in a country that honors freedom and capitalism, anyone who has the money and desire can buy land. However, what has bugged me has been the way that land ownership by the same family for many decades has been put on a pedestal, even when the heirs have had little or no contact with the land and those who farm it. Iowa's Century Farm program, which recognizes individuals who have owned farmland for 100 years or more, does just that. Our culture does, too. It seems many people continue to own farmland because they have some feeling of virtue just because their names are on deeds or that their heirs' names will eventually be on the deeds.

With my farmland, I don't want to continue the family land dynasty that started with Great Grandma, Great Grandpa, and his brother, Gunder. For the most part, it is fair to say that the next generation of my family has no connection to the land, they are all doing quite well by their relative standards, and they are likely to inherit land or other wealth from their parents and from my older sister Clara and her husband—who, like me, have no children.

In a perfect world, owning land should have something to do with being connected to that land, like knowing about the soils, the people who farm it, and the ethics involved in managing it. Unfortunately, there seems to be great risk with the ownership of Iowa land migrating to out-of-state heirs or other people. It is like sucking up one of the most important resources of our state and taking its value somewhere else. The good news, though, is that so far large-scale corporations are not allowed to own farmland in Iowa.

Decluttering is one of my hobbies. I like to divest of things that no longer serve or interest me, finding good homes for them. I am not ready to divest of land now, but I cannot take it with me when I die. Before my demise, I want to have good plans in place for my land and my two houses here in Ames and not be on my deathbed with unresolved details about my

estate. With the land I have already given to the INHF, I have the satisfaction of seeing and appreciating the Foundation's management now.

These days, there is talk of the great income inequality in our country. Trends in land ownership and how land is used would seem to fall under that umbrella of issues. We should de-emphasize programs like Century Farm, or at least establish an additional 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.



Top photo: Jon Judson of Diversity Farms near Dedham sows a 77-acre pollinator habitat project at Helen's land in Des Moines Township northeast of Rolfe. 2016. Lower photo: Helen with Iowa Natural Heritage Foundation staff at the Foundation's 40th anniversary celebration. Left to right: Erin VanWaus, Helen, Lisa Hein, and Ryan Schmidt. 2019.

I am grateful that Erin Van Waus and Lisa Hein encouraged me to write my goals for my land. Not only did the process help me make a critical decision about my Des Moines Township farm, it also gave me more clarity about how I want to live out my life and be a good steward of my resources.

My long-term stewardship goals are to:

1. Grow in gratitude, generosity, compassion, patience, and hospitality while trusting creation and the process of life.
2. Be a responsible steward of my resources (time, talents, values, health, energy, land, residential lots, documentary collection, finances, and other) balanced with maintaining healthy relationships, enjoying life, dealing holistically with suffering, and dying in peace.
3. Receive sufficient, consistent income throughout the remainder of my life to support the lifestyle and projects (personal, service, and philanthropic) to which I have become accustomed.
4. Rent my land to a progressive operator knowledgeable to a certain extent of the ethical issues (local, regional, and global) of farming and able to implement and maintain sustainable practices (preferably organic) to foster healthy soil, water, air, and food, as well as provide healthy incomes for the owner and operator, and/or return some or all of the land to prairie.

My general land goals are to:

1. Be aware of my connection to the land I own even though I live far from it.
2. Appreciate how all of Earth, including human beings, is made of the dust of the falling stars.
3. Live by the wisdom of this paragraph from *The Seven Spiritual Laws of Yoga* by Deepak Chopra and David Simon:

As a yogi, you are an environmentalist because you recognize that the rivers flowing through the valleys and those flowing through your veins are intimately related. The breath of an old-growth forest and your most recent breath are inextricably intertwined. The quality of the soil in which your food is raised is directly connected to the health of your tissues and organs. Your environment is your extended body. You are inseparably interwoven with your ecosystem.



Above photo and opposite page: Wide and close up views of 77-acre pollinator habitat project at Helen's land. 2019. Photos by Ryan Schmidt of the Iowa Natural Heritage Foundation.





A farmer and his (or could it be her) possessions. This mural was on a side wall of a Main Street building in Pocahontas, Iowa. 1989.

GENDER: AN UPDATED PERSPECTIVE

Introduction

In the section “Gender Mactters” in my chapter titled “Wrestling with a Heritage,” written over 20 years ago, I addressed gender issues somewhat candidly but more timidly than I would now. Even so, I continue to weigh what I say about gender. There are many who might feel that talking about gender diminishes their appreciation of this book. Or there may be members of the LGBTQ+ community or its advocates who say that I do not truly understand the issues.

I share these thoughts not as a thorough and fixed exploration of gender issues but presenting my perspective that is ever evolving. I also have questions. What I write is meant to be part of the greater conversation in society—not leaving the conversation totally in the purview of those people in the media and on the cutting edge of gender.

Before moving ahead, I want to share some narratives from the past that are emblematic of my journey with gender issues. In some respects, in my early years, Mother and Dad were progressive in accommodating my countercultural interests. For instance, Mother gave into my request as a preschooler to have Buster Brown leather shoes just like the ones Charles had. Unfortunately, when I wore them to Sunday school, I felt out of place among the other girls who were dressed more femininely with the likes of Mary Jane patent leather shoes. I never wore the brown shoes to church again.

When I was five, Dad gave Charles and me a football as payment for cleaning up a pile of wooden shingles and other debris after our new corn crib was built. Dad would also take the two of us pheasant hunting with him and his fellow hunters. Also, for Christmas, Mother and Dad would give Charles and me identical gifts—Hopalong Cassidy costumes, American Bricks, or erector sets.

To their credit, Mother and Dad believed in quality education for all of us, and we all have college degrees. Also, for the most part, they treated us siblings equally in their estate planning. The imbalance that existed was not due to gender or marital status.

However, there were many ways that they were conventional. As an example, I liked to wear my hair short and straight, but when I was a teenager and a new school year would begin, Mother would talk about how all the nice girls were getting permanents and wondered if I didn’t think I should get one, too. I would acquiesce and go through the rigmarole, not only of the toxic chemical smell of getting a permanent either at the beauty parlor or at home, but also of putting my hair in curlers at night, having a hard time sleeping on them, hating how I looked the next day, and brushing my hair as much as possible, but unsuccessfully, to smooth out the awkward curls.

When Charles and I would come back to the house after a long day of working in the fields, his work was done for the day, but Mother still required me to help in the kitchen. Charles was allowed to castrate hogs with Dad and his helpers. I was not allowed even nearby the pen. Ironically, vice presidential candidate Sarah Palin and Iowa senator Joni Ernst have both bragged about castrating pigs.

At the end of family meals around Mother’s oak kitchen table, even when we siblings were older and some had spouses, she would say, “I want you girls to do the dishes and you men to carry out the garbage.” Why refer to the women as girls and the men as men or to assign chores based on gender? She could instead have simply trusted us to do our share of the work, or that she expected us to help with the dishes and carrying out the garbage. A bigger example is how my brother was the only one of us siblings groomed to make farm decisions.



Helen, high school freshman. 1959.



HELEN GUNDERSON

**The more I see of men, the
better I like my horse.**

Helen's senior photo and caption in
high school annual. 1963. *Photo by Don
Peterson Photography, Fort Dodge, Iowa.*

Gender discrimination at school included how teachers would commonly address students with a binary greeting, "Good morning, boys and girls." And at graduation ceremonies, the seniors processed to and from the stage in boy-girl pairs.

Rolfe did not offer sports programs for girls until I was a freshman in 1959. That was only because the district merged with the Des Moines Township district, which had a girls basketball team. Also, girls were either not allowed or at least were discouraged from taking vocational agriculture and industrial arts. In recent years, I was stunned when I learned from Charles that Mother and Dad did not allow him to take the ag and shop courses because they would have been beneath him and meant he had less time to take college preparatory courses. In contrast, my parents did not fret about my choice, when I was a senior, to drop out of chemistry class after the first day of feeling overwhelmed and instead took a second year of home economics. It was not a choice I would have anticipated, but I needed another class to fill my schedule, and by joining the class, there would be enough students enrolled in it to qualify for state funding.

Some stories may be funny on the surface but represent important underlying issues. For decades, I have been able to chuckle about my senior photograph and the caption under it in the high school yearbook. Some of my classmates were on the yearbook staff but were not transparent about their work, meaning the rest of us students had to wait to see what would be in the book for the first time when it was completed.

Customarily, there was a section of head and shoulder portraits of the graduating seniors. I had not remembered the other custom of printing captions under the photos. The caption the staff had chosen for me read, "The more I see of men, the more I like my horse." When I first saw it, I was perplexed and did not know how to react, and I have never been able to figure out who selected it and whether they had meant to be mean or show they understood me. They would have been correct if they understood I was terribly frustrated with male privilege and how some boys and men were jerks and got by with their behavior. Indeed, I did like being with my two horses, Pet and Beauty, which I received as Christmas gifts in 1954.

In my freshman and sophomore years at Iowa State, I belonged to a social sorority, Sigma Kappa, then deactivated from it. One evening, our guest speaker was a Mrs. Margaret Lange, social director from the

ISU Memorial Union. With her age, elegance in dress and grooming, svelte physique, and gracious demeanor, she reminded me of my maternal grandmother, Nanna, from Utah. Mrs. Lange spoke of being a lady as an ideal for our lives. I will always remember one of her suggestions—that whenever we walk through a door, we should look to see if anyone is behind us and hold the door for them. I continue that practice.

As part of the process of majoring in physical education, there came a time to write my application for the teacher accreditation program. Although I enjoyed physical education, I had no large vision or mission in mind for what I wanted to achieve except to get a teaching job. The questionnaire asked why I had chosen the field of physical education. I could not fathom a career where I would have to wear a dress, nylon hose, and dress shoes, and wrote that physical education was one field that I could enter where I could dress casually. Such small thinking. When the form asked about my life goals, I wrote about the desire to become a lady. Whew, it's hard now to believe I wrote that. But I regret both that there was such an emphasis on a certain ideal of what a female college student should grow up to be—a lady—and that I had so little confidence in myself or vision for my career. Maybe the lack of a vision was not a mere matter of gender; perhaps it could have happened to anyone.

I took a job teaching girls physical education in Duluth and later in Eagle Grove, Iowa, before going to North Dakota State University in Fargo in the fall of 1975 to work in sports information. Title IX had been passed a few years earlier, but my supervisor was giving little support to women's athletics. I would eventually file a discrimination complaint within the university. As part of that process, I visited the personnel office where a clerk handed me a folder and I waited to talk to the director. It was surprising to see that my undergraduate references from a decade earlier were in that folder. My advisor, Betty Toman, who had been head of the modern dance program and was cosmopolitan and flamboyant in style, had written something to the effect, "Helen Gunderson says in her application to the teacher education program that her goal is to become a lady. It will either be impossible or take a long time for her to ever be a lady." I had mixed feelings. On one hand, I wanted to chuckle, and on the other hand, I wanted to punch back. The recommendation from Dr. Barbara Forker, who had been head of the women's physical education department at Iowa State, commended me for having much more well-rounded interests than a narrow focus on physical education.

Gender Identity

In the "Genders Matters" piece written in the 1990s, I referred briefly to University of Iowa economics professor Donald McCloskey, who disclosed in a 1995 front page article in *The Des Moines Register* that he was changing from "he" to "she" and would be known as Deirdre McCloskey. On October 13, 2016, the *Register* revisited Diedre's story and posted an interview with her.

In contrast, there is Olympic decathlon champion Bruce Jenner, who announced in 2015 that he intended to change from "he" to "she" and is now known as Caitlyn Jenner. While Diedre has a rather conventional style and low-profile manner, Caitlyn comes across more like a fashion model or Barbie doll. Frankly, I am not that impressed with television personalities and fashion models and do not resonate at all with Caitlyn, especially the ways that she has seemed to want to be a spokesperson for transgender people.



Juniper Moore, self portrait. Circa 2019.

A member of my extended family has made the transition from their gender of birth to a new gender. In 2011, my nephew Jonathan Moore became my niece Juniper Moore. She seems comfortable with her journey and has experimented with her appearance. She has often dressed in styles that look like they came from the 1940s or 1950s and has taken selfie photos to document her progress. When I first read her Facebook post, announcing the news, I was happy to correspond in depth in a private email.

Excerpts from Helen's letter to Juniper November 21, 2011

I am aware from a source within the family and then seeing your Facebook page that you are dealing with some deep questions in your life. I don't want to presume to know what the details of your challenges are. But it sounds and looks like you are dealing with gender identity issues. How courageous of you. I don't fully understand gender identity issues. I do know that a mid-twenties woman from the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Ames went to seminary a few years ago in Berkeley, California, and while there, became a man. He has been the minister at the UU congregation in Salt Lake City. And I know that this fall, at the UU Fellowship, we had a guest speaker—a woman from Lincoln, Nebraska (or was it Omaha?), who has a young son who from a very early age—perhaps two—has insisted he is a girl. And the family has been very supportive.

I suppose that of us siblings in the Gunderson family, I am the one who has had to deal the most with gender issues. A lot of who I am has been a struggle with the favoritism given to boys and men in the family and community I grew up in. I loved farming, but there was no place in farming for girls except to grow up to be farmers' wives. I never did like girl's clothing. I did not like what I saw as the roles of women. There were times when I wanted to be a boy. But I never knew much about what the changes would involve, and I never was really serious about making changes. The neat thing is that I have been able to learn to be myself, follow interests that I like, dress pretty much like I want, be part of a faith community that accepts a wide range of people, and have a good circle of friends. I think of myself as being a person more than I think of myself in terms of gender. Of course, when I look in the mirror, I have to acknowledge that my body is that of a woman. I simply wish that gender was not such a big deal. I wish we could go through life genderless or without such great expectations about what gender means.

When Juniper was a teenager, she wrote an email to a massive list of people, including me. In it, she was somewhat hysterically sophomoric and insisted that people boycott a movie that portrayed Jesus as a homosexual. I wrote back and suggested that the key teachings of Jesus have to do with compassion and fidelity. To me, those are two of the most important elements in a relationship, regardless of the genders of two people. I do not have a copy of that letter and find it hard to articulate what else I said, for instance, about Jesus being interpreted many

ways in books and film, and that this movie would be one interpretation. I pointed out what I sensed was a homophobic attitude in the email and wanted to call Juniper on that attitude but in a gentle way. I had suspected that she was putting on a face of bravado that masked some underlying uncertainty about her own sexuality. As it was, a member of Juniper's family emailed to chastise me for what I had written, saying my remarks were totally unfair. Yet, one of Juniper's friends, a young man, wrote and expressed deep appreciation that I spoke up.

As it turned out, Juniper had known since a young age that her gender of birth did not fit her perception of who she was meant to be, and on each birthday, when blowing out candles, she wished she could change her gender. Although I do not know the details of what that has meant, her wish has come true. Once, Juniper visited me in Ames. I found it awkward to hide my curiosity and be fully accepting, but as we settled into our visit, we had some of the best conversations I have ever had with another family member.

My own attitudes related to gender have also evolved and are continuing to evolve. When I lived in Fargo, I had a crush on a man who was the senior minister at the Presbyterian Church, and my feelings toward him were part of what prompted me to enroll in seminary. I suspect there are many other people who have based their decision to attend seminary at least in part due to a crush on a minister. Even so, it seems folly to let a crush play such a significant role in a person's life.



First Presbyterian Church of Saint Helena, California. 2018.
Used with permission of Jonathan Eastman, Pastor.

From September 1983 to May 1984, I was a seminary intern at the First Presbyterian Church in St. Helena, California. While there, I had just as strong a crush on a woman who was a lay leader in congregation. One of my assignments was to attend meetings of the local United Presbyterian Women's Group. Harriet Nelson of Napa (just down the road from St. Helena) was successfully running that year to be moderator of the General Assembly of the United Presbyterian Church U.S.A. and visiting one of the meetings. The discussion moved to issues that were at the front of church politics, including acceptance of gays and lesbians. The women in the group seemed decades older than I and to be having reservations as though we were talking about a taboo topic. I chimed in to sooth their worries and my own nervousness and said something that I did not totally believe. "Well, I would think most women, if they

had the choice, would prefer to be in a relationship with a man.” I probably already knew, but would grow to understand even more, that there are women who prefer relationships with other women and that what I had said was a lie.

How often do ordinary people and leaders of all sorts, including politicians, say something they don’t truly believe in order to remain comfortable and popular?

Those crushes while in Fargo and St. Helena would not be my first or last. However, mine has been a life of celibacy that has become more comfortable over the years. I appreciate being single with a focus on friendship and an expanded definition of family with a reluctance to use binary labels to express who I am.

Even though I am comfortable now with who I am, in the early 1980s it was difficult to find any avenue, except eventually with a spiritual director and therapist, to talk about my strong feelings toward those two people. Considering the homophobia at the time, including my own internal fear of being considered lesbian, it was hard to admit I had deep feelings for another woman. Additionally, in that era, the Presbyterian denomination would not allow “avowed, practicing homosexuals” to be ordained—not even to lay leadership positions in the church. I have often incredulously wondered just what the word “practicing” meant in the collective mind of the denomination. Who people are in terms of gender and sexuality is tied to who they intrinsically are and pervades their whole being, not just what they do physically in bed or at a bar. How is it possible to not practice who we are—our true sense of being?

Juniper and others who have had the courage to break out of cultural molds in relation to gender and relationships have opened the standards of what is permissible in talking about these topics in the media, some churches, schools, and private social circles. This means more flexibility, less restriction of what topics are taboo, and the ability for more people to discuss matters comfortably in ways they never before envisioned.

Juniper has taught me some new terms. For instance, many people know about the term “transgender” but do not know the word “cisgender.” One means people who are uncomfortable with the gender designation they received at birth. The other means people who are comfortable with their assignment. I imagine there is a wide spectrum between the two designations.

I certainly have never been fully happy in my birth gender. That would mean I am not fully cisgender. However, although there were times when I was much younger and thought about what it would be like to become a boy, I realized that I do not want to be a man. Also, I am a naturalist, wanting as little dependency as possible on Western medicine, including the kind of surgical procedures and hormone treatments that some people undergo to change their gender.

It is puzzling to know how to define what it means to be a man or a woman. Consider the transgender woman who says, “From the time I was three years old, I understood I was a girl in a male body.” What was her childhood vision of what it meant to be a woman? Or what did a transgender man, who always wanted to be a man, imagine as a child what it meant to be a man?

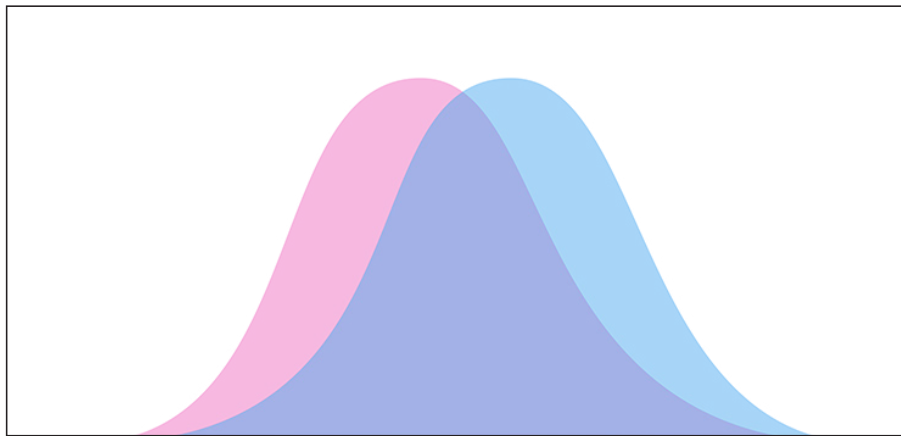
I doubt either Deirdre, Caitlyn, or Juniper could be tempted to define what womanhood is in universal terms—nor should they be tempted—but I would bet their definitions would vary greatly. And how is it that any one person can define what it means to be a woman—or for that matter a man or a human?

Non-Binary Perspectives

In the piece I wrote about gender in the 1990s, I wrote about the term “androgynous,” which refers to a person who has a balance of masculine and feminine characteristics. But what do the terms masculine and feminine even mean?

Consider these adjectives: tender, tough, tolerant, rigid, kind, mean, stoic, expressive, exploitive, nurturing, supportive, resourceful, resilient, strong, weak, creative, collaborative, independent, intelligent, mathematical, literary, wise, compassionate, inventive, cynical, grateful, and resentful. It would seem unfair and inaccurate to consider some of them to be masculine and others to be feminine.

Decades ago, I saw an illustration consisting of two bell curves placed side by side yet overlapping on a chart. One represented the strength of women and the other the strength of men, showing there was more difference in strength within each gender than there was between the two genders. An excerpt from an August 2011 article in *Psychology Today*, “Male and Female: The Overlapping Curves: What’s with the differences between men and women?” by Noam Sphancer, explains this concept:



Two bell curves illustrate overlapping range of strength of men and women. 2019. Illustration by Harrison W. Inefuku.

... the fact that average differences exist between men and women cannot determine how we perceive and relate to any individual man or woman. This is because our traits and abilities tend to be distributed normally, in a bell-shaped curve. The male and female distribution curves for the whole gamut of socially meaningful traits, behaviors, and attitudes, are overlapping. Therefore, even if we find that, for example, women are on average more nurturing than men, still those men who are above average on the male distribution curve may be more nurturing than those women who are below average on the female curve.

Understanding this point about the overlapping curves allows for a more nuanced, and more accurate, insight on the male-female debate to arise: average differences exist, but they should not be used to predict the ability, character, or behavior of individuals.

I like a word that is showing up in the lexicon of the English language. It is “agender,” as in people identifying neither as male nor female, but simply thinking of themselves as whole persons. Agender is also consistent with the notion of non-binary perspectives on gender. Gender is a spectrum. It would be so cool, in my estimation, if gender were neither so binary nor such a big deal in the shaping of people.

In 1984, when I completed a chaplaincy internship at the University of California San Francisco Medical Center the summer before my senior year of seminary, the interns visited the medical school anatomy lab, and I had little in terms of a mission. Then it occurred to me that I should ask to see what ovaries actually looked like. I was escorted to a cadaver where the students were examining the reproductive system of the female body. The body was completely draped except for the pelvic area, and there I was able to see the ovaries. With all the emphasis that society puts on a person being male or female, I was surprised to find that the ovaries were so small and receded in the pelvic cavity. I shook my head in disbelief that something so small could make such a big difference in how culture treats a woman. Of course, in general, there are also other ways that a female body is different than a male body, including hormones and the structure of the female pelvis and hip sockets to accommodate birthing a baby.

I do not have a Facebook account, but sometimes when having dinner with friends, I will use one of their smartphones and Facebook accounts to see what family members have posted publicly. Earlier this year, I saw that one sibling had posted an Internet meme that said women should not compete with men and try to do men's jobs but should do those things that only women are qualified to do. Obviously, a good meme is not that verbose, but that is the gist of what it said. In my mind, no work is in the domain of just one gender. And frankly, there are few things that only women can do that men cannot, and those are connected to a women's reproductive biology and organs such as ovaries.

Would fewer people feel the need to change away from their biological gender of origin if society did not have such rigid expectations of what it means to be male or female? Or what lessons should society be learning from people such as those who are overweight, for a person to be accepting of his or her body?

Gender Generalizations

At least two opportunities I experienced in my first two decades of life offered me significant exposure to women role models in environments that consisted mainly of other girls and women. One was at Camp Foster YMCA on East Okoboji Lake in northwest Iowa.

Each summer the camp offered something like seven weeks of camp for boys and another three weeks for girls. Men were in some of the key positions, such as Harl Holt, the camp director; Ron Ewing, the waterfront director; and Eric Wilkening, the caretaker. However, all the counselors, unit directors, and leaders for such activities as archery, riflery, boating, canoeing, sailing, horseback riding, and crafts were women. Imagine a dining room filled with round white tables each circled by the girls and their counselor from a specific cabin, talking and at the end of eating, singing camp songs—some tender, some rowdy. I had the good fortune of being at camp for 13 years, beginning as a camper in 1954 when I was nine, and eventually becoming a counselor, rifle instructor, then riding instructor during girls' camp and a dishwasher during boys' camp.

The second opportunity was at Iowa State, where I was enrolled in the department of physical education for women headquartered in the women's gym on the east side of campus. I was a freshman the second year that the university offered a major in physical education for women. Previously, a woman who wanted to teach physical education had only the option to major in another area and take enough courses to get a certificate, but not a major, in the program. We did take a few courses with men in the men's physical education program that was housed in the new Beyer Hall with a gym, racquetball court, Olympic-sized pool, sauna, and other features that had been built mainly for use by men on the west side of campus. Our women's program seemed in some ways like a women's college within the university, with its



Helen at YMCA Camp Foster on East Okoboji Lake near Spirit Lake, Iowa. Circa 1955.

small number of students who were all women and instructors who were all women. There was a distinct difference in philosophy between the two programs. The men's department was focused on athletics and competition, whereas the women's department was focused on education in which the classroom experience came first with intramurals and sports built atop the foundation of education.

I have a serious problem, however, with people who generalize about gender. In the past year, I heard a man say that if we truly want to get something done, put women in charge. Or in the agricultural realm, there are those people who claim that women are more nurturing of the land than men. Such a gross generalization grates on my nerves. Would anyone like to go back to the days when women were not encouraged in fields of math, science, and engineering because of generalizations about men having better aptitudes in those fields? I think not and that it would be wise to strike the claim about women being more nurturing of the land.

This past week, I received a business-sized envelope in the mail from Prairie Rivers of Iowa, a nonprofit organization located in Ames but serving central Iowa. The "About Us" page of its website says:

Prairie Rivers of Iowa plays a unique role in Iowa. As one of the only nonprofit organizations focusing on both conserving our natural and cultural resources and building stronger businesses and communities, we bring unique expertise to creatively address some of Iowa's most challenging needs. From assisting small communities in marketing themselves to travelers, to supporting students in becoming environmentally-literate citizens, to training the next generation of responsible farmers and producers, Prairie Rivers of Iowa helps Iowans create a stronger and healthier state.

I have high regard for the leadership of Prairie Rivers and the work it is doing but was curious why the organization was sending me a letter. When I opened the envelope, I was taken aback that the salutation said, "Dear Woman Landowner." The letter went on to say that Prairie Rivers was collaborating with the Women, Food, and Agriculture Network to promote a workshop called Women Caring for the Land that was focused on soil health and designed for female registrants. According to the letter, "nearly half the farmland in Iowa is currently owned or co-owned by women."

I get it that there may be women who own land who may want to learn more about farming and conservation to become more empowered to take a greater role in decision-making. And I get it that some women may feel more comfortable in an all-female environment, such as what I had at Camp Foster or in the ISU Women's Physical Education department. But it rankles me to get a letter addressed to me just because I am a woman. Why not promote the workshop to all landowners with the goal of educating all people who feel they are novices at understanding soil?

Not many weeks later, the PFI listserv forwarded a similar announcement, this time about a workshop offered by ISU and other sponsors designed for women to learn about marketing grain. I responded, asking other listserv readers about the rationale behind ISU offering a course just for women.

Margaret Smith, a former ISU Extension employee whom I have known through PFI since the 1990s and who mentored me when I began leasing land to Betsy Dahl, replied:

This is a great comment and question! I know from my previous work with ISU why this is being done. ISU offers grain marketing programs ALL the TIME and each year, mostly men come. They [the ISU Extension staff] found that by marketing a program specifically to women, they are more likely to get women to attend and ask questions without feeling judged by others who may have been marketing for a long time. Men can attend these sessions, but because of the marketing promo, they rarely ask to.

I also heard from two other PFI friends. They are married, farm together, and have been active in PFI almost since the beginning of the organization. The man was the first to reply, "Well, Helen, I'll dip my toe into the quicksand of your post. Maybe you are overthinking the issue. I'm guessing that the organizers of the sessions were thinking that women in a room full of men would feel intimidated and are offering more of a stress-free environment for them. Believe it or not, but a room full of women intimidates me. You are right, in a perfect world the women-only meeting would not be necessary, but we live in a world that is full of imperfection."

I responded to say I appreciated his willingness to enter the quicksand and added, "PFI is neat in how its people and programming are so comfortable, and I have never known PFI to feel a need to have an event for just one gender."

Two days later, the woman wrote, "In an area like ours, there are lots of big 'dog eat dog' farmers who think they know it all and want things done their way and right now. In their view, women are meant to cook, clean, and have babies. The result is that women rarely go to farm marketing meetings where there would be men. If they did, they would never say a word, even if they have a hundred questions. Women would be invisible and not considered equals in farming. Maybe younger brave women farmers would go, but not the average farm wife around here. PFI is different and truly a unique group of wonderful people."

On August 28, 2018, the Iowa Natural Heritage Foundation magazine carried the feature article "A Woman's Place" about two other women, one of their husbands, and me. On one

hand, I like the attention of being interviewed and having an article published about me. On the other hand, I am eager for the day to come when there is no further need to feature women in conservation and agriculture, but instead feature people because of who they are as individuals and their contribution to the organization or to society. True, much of the story of who I am has to do with growing up in a farm family with restricted options for being involved in farming and how I have grown in relation to agriculture since that time. However, that is not my whole story. The decisions I have made about farming are based on my values and the ethical issues I see in owning land. It is my unique perspective as a human—not as a woman. If it were a woman's perspective, why wouldn't my sisters all be joining in with a similar impact on the land they own?

Women Leaders and Role Models

In the political arena, I would never vote for candidates simply based on their gender. However, I admit that I love seeing the increase in the number of women elected to political offices. Here in Iowa, there has been a major shift in the highest elected officials of the state. In January 2015, Joni Ernst became the first woman from the state to serve in the U.S. Senate. Then in 2019, Abby Finkenauer and Cindy Axne became the first women from the state to serve in Congress. Also in 2019, Kim Reynolds became the first woman elected to be the state's governor. She had been the state's lieutenant governor and stepped into the governor's role in May 2017 after Governor Terry Branstad was appointed as U.S. ambassador to China.

There is much I admire about all these Iowa women in positions of political leadership, even though the perspectives of the Republicans, Ernst and Reynolds, are radically different from mine on many issues. The good news is that they have broken barriers that leave openings for other women in the future. Unfortunately, the state under Reynolds as governor with a Republican legislature is regressing in many ways, including reproductive rights, gender, and environmental issues.

I do like her, though. I met both Reynolds and Branstad at the state house at a ceremony for landowners when they shook my hand and presented me with a certificate in honor of my first gift of land to the Iowa Natural Heritage Association. I again met Reynolds when she was governor and shook my hand and presented me with a certificate for my second gift of land. Both Reynolds and Branstad are affable, but I prefer seeing her in the governor's role. Branstad had been in the position for far too long—from 1983 to 1999 and again from 2015 until he was appointed as ambassador to China in December 2016. In fact, he had become the longest tenured governor in U.S. history.

I also admit I like watching biographical documentaries, especially those of women. One major project that informs viewers of a variety of women's lives is a PBS series called *Makers: Women Who Make America*. Some of the people I have watched episodes about include: Sandra Day O'Connor, supreme court justice; Billie Jean King, professional tennis player; Carol Burnett, comedian; Linda Alvarez, owner of Alvarado Construction that built the Mile High Stadium in Colorado; Barbara Burns, coal miner; and Hillary Clinton, politician.

This past year, I was also impressed and motivated by watching the documentary about current Supreme Court Associate Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg, titled simply *RBG*, and another about U.S. Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and three other women who ran for Congress. It is hard to explain the deep-seated feelings that I experience when seeing such strong women and understanding their stories. The feelings are beyond rational and sometimes bring me to tears. That does not mean I agree with all of them or find them superior to men.

My intent for beginning my project about the road I grew up on was a simple one of wanting to photograph the farms that remained there in the 1990s and learn more about the



Helen receives certificate of appreciation for her first gift of land to the Iowa Natural Heritage Foundation at the Iowa Department of Natural Resources Gift to Iowa's Future recognition day at the state capitol. Left to right: DNR Director Roger Lande, Governor Terry Branstad, Helen, and Lieutenant Governor Kim Reynolds, who succeeded Branstad as governor. 2012.

people who lived and had lived there. It was not my goal to focus on gender issues, but how could an exploration of rural Iowa life, or for any area of history, not deal with gender?

Gender was not a factor when I asked people related to the neighborhood if I could interview them. Both men and women spoke to me about many topics, including gender roles. It was fun just a few years ago to edit some of their comments about gender into a tight, seven-minute section of a video that I produced about women in agriculture. Yes, although I have said I look forward to the day when there is no further need to feature just women in a field that has traditionally been that of men, I attempted to show what women's roles had been in farming when I was young in contrast to the many versatile roles that women have in agriculture today.

Father Dennis Sefcik told me perhaps the most important story from the project related to gender. He claimed that his mother, Agnes Sefcik, born in 1909, did not learn to drive a car nor have any role in managing the family land until after her husband, Adolph, died in 2007. She was 57 at the time, got her driver's license, and became a strong, independent-minded farm manager for most of the rest of her life. Agnes died in 2007. As it would turn out, I was 51 when I began managing my land in 1997, and hearing about Agnes was a major inspiration for that milestone.

To be sure, my oral history project was limited. I interviewed the participants only once and did not conduct an in-depth anthropological analysis of their thoughts and stories. Also, no outsider truly knows what goes on within a family or the relative power that individuals have as a result of their gender. I did have direct knowledge of my family, but we were far different from many of the other families in the neighborhood. Mother had grown up in a city and had a college education. She and Dad had an understanding—spoken or unspoken, which I believe she wanted—that he would be the farmer and she would be the homemaker,

along with pursuing her other interests. That said, it is not as though the success of our farm can be attributed solely to my father. Certainly, Mother brought financial assets from her family to it. She also provided emotional support and intimacy, bore us siblings, fed the family, maintained the household, and was the one to arrange for her and Dad's social activities. Certainly, knowing who my father was, he would not have had the status in the community that he did or fared well as a farmer if he had been single.

Although I did not view any women in that neighborhood as being real farmers, there were indeed strong women. Norine Reigelsberger is the neighbor I knew the best. She was 15 years older than I, lived with her husband on a farm a quarter mile from our family, retired to town, and died in March of 2012. Norine was extremely competent in many areas and certainly would have been an asset to both their farming operation and Pioneer Seed business. Now her son Mick and his wife, Sue, live on the family farm. Sue is involved not only with the farm and seed business but is the county assessor. She and Mick had twin children. Young Joe was killed in a car accident in December of 2012. His sister, Kaitlin, who will be 30 this year, is also a strong woman. She has her business degree from the University of Northern Iowa and is highly respected as the controller for Ag Partners in Albert City.

I also know many highly successful women through Practical Farmers of Iowa and the ISU Graduate Program in Sustainable Agriculture. I am impressed by their knowledge, expertise, and variety of roles they hold in agriculture. It is easy to be in awe of them and be mind-boggled about how the opportunities for women in farming have come such a long way since I was a child.

It would be hard to have a strict definition of what it means to be a woman—or for that matter, a man—in agriculture. There are many roles for many people—not just those who own, manage, or operate land. There are soil scientists, managers, consultants, mechanical and agricultural engineers, crop adjusters, policy specialists, conservationists, entomologists, plant pathologists, repair technicians, truck drivers, veterinarians, local foods advocates, organic certifiers, cricket growers, cattle breeders, hog lot workers, field workers, USDA employees, business managers, retail clerks, accountants, sociologists, and historians.

Farming, although it might naively be viewed as an idyllic endeavor, is not apolitical. It is buffeted by politics. Always has been. Always will be. The patriarchal system of power does shape government policies and determines whose voices get to be heard and valued when making decisions. It is important, though, to recognize that individual men, per se, are not necessarily the culprits. Women can also perpetuate patriarchy and industrial agriculture. In the end, however, it is important to remember that we all eat and many of us cook. We can affect the state of agriculture and make a difference by investing our food dollars in purposeful ways, voting at the ballot box, speaking at city council and board of supervisor meetings, writing letters to the state house, and participating in protest rallies, regardless of our gender.



Agnes Sefcik. 1993.



Grandmother and granddaughter wear the same pearl necklace for their weddings. Left: Norine Arnold Reigelsberger. 1953. Right: Kaitlin Reigelsberger Krischel. 2014. *Photos from Kaitlin Reigelsberger Krischel collection.*



Concentrated Animal Feeding Operation (CAFO) for raising hogs. Owned by Flaherty Family Farms LLC west side of Section 27, Roosevelt Township, northeast of Pocahontas on Highway N57. 2013.

IT IS WHAT IT IS: A MANTRA

Issues in Modern Agriculture

On Saturday afternoon, November 11, 2017, after the memorial service and luncheon for Velma Howard at the Shared Ministry church in Rolfe, I hurried to the house that I had arranged to stay at for the weekend and changed clothes. I then headed to the land northeast of town in Des Moines Township that I have given to the Iowa Natural Heritage Foundation—60 acres outright in 2011 and 180 in a reserved life estate in 2016.

I arrived at the farm in time to videotape tenant Betsy Dahl harvesting the last rounds of our first-ever certified organic crop of soybeans. There had been neither genetically modified crops nor herbicides on that land since she started farming it in 2009. We both were proud. She took a selfie of us, beaming, and texted it to Erin, our management contact person at the Iowa Natural Heritage Foundation, who texted back that she was proud, too.

Betsy drove a 1988 or so vintage green John Deere combine to harvest the beans. I thought of all the times I have stood in fields watching the harvest. For instance, as a child, watching but knowing that in our family harvesting was men's work—demanding some kind of supposedly male-only skills that a woman would not have. Of course, a woman—or even I as a teenager—could drive a tractor such as our old Farmall Model M and pull a barge wagon of corn from the fields to the farmstead to unload. And Velma Howard had a key role in farm decisions, as well as driving a Farmall to haul and unload corn at the crib while Verle drove the tractor with mounted corn picker to harvest the corn. Even so, harvest has often seemed like an exclusive “male farmer club.”

I am aware that this territory—these lands and the institutions such as the churches, school, cemetery, the town, the rituals of planting and harvest, are a major part of who I am. I have been immersed in this culture, this life. There is no way I can cut myself off from it. And yet, I have such a disdain—partially for many things I have written about before. Partially for how this area is devolving even more than I had ever anticipated. In many ways, I would like to be able to move beyond the past—to not return to my home county because there is so little there that interests me except my land. I am a liberal, and the county is so conservative. However, the turf and culture of the area are a part of who I am that I cannot escape. The small amount of joy that continues to exist in going there is in experiences such as briefly connecting with Kenny Bennett at the visitation for Joe Reigelsberger, having longer conversations with Monsignor Mike Sernett and Paul Harrold, and watching Betsy harvest our first organic crop on that special day.

I felt such a wholesome sense of well-being as I stood in the field that afternoon, watching Betsy harvest. I also found myself asking just what it was that I was searching for as I stood there for minutes on end in the cool air as she drove the combine to the far end of the field and back. Definitely, I was aware of the difference of watching a woman in the farmer role—a woman there because of decisions I had made. Yet, I still pondered what it was that mesmerized me. Was I looking for something from my childhood? Perhaps my grandfather coming over the slope in the land with his team of horses or my father in his combine? Or something greater? Perhaps the spirit of Mother Earth? A connection to the universe? A connection with the numinous? I recall when I first went to the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship and the speaker talked about how all of creation, including human beings, are made of the dust of the falling stars. I am aware also of how my yoga classes end with the teacher and students, bowing to the ground, acknowledging our divinity and connection to all creation.

After many decades of my wanting my land farmed more sustainably, but feeling like I was not walking the talk, accomplishing this goal of having a certified organic crop was a major milestone. And yet, ironically and disturbingly, it was the same day that I had learned that Dicamba, a new combination of older herbicides that most farmers had discontinued using, had been applied to at least one field in the neighborhood where I had grown up.

On the ride to and from the cemetery for Velma's graveside rites, Paul Harrold and I got to talking about Dicamba. The new mix has been marketed for use with newly developed GMO (genetically modified organisms) beans designed to be resistant to the herbicide. The EPA has approved Dicamba, but many people are skeptical about its safety. Already earlier in the week, I had talked on the phone with Denny Flaherty, asking if he knew of any area farmers using Dicamba. Denny did not think any farmers were yet using it, but on this weekend, I would learn from Paul that it had been used.

Paul said that during the past spring, two weeks after an operator had applied Dicamba to a rented field across the road from his land, the chemical volatilized and drifted with the wind across the road into one of his fields, damaging an area of his beans. Paul said the farmer was aware of and concerned about the damage to the beans, and called Paul, asking him to keep track of the damage. Actually, Paul did not think the damage to be that extensive. I also learned that it was most likely inevitable that Dicamba had either been used or soon would be used by the operators who grow seed beans for Pioneer Hybrid International Seed on the land surrounding the farmstead where I grew up and that my older sister Clara now owns.

Such a contrast within a family. Although I am fearful and resentful of conventional agriculture with its dependence on chemicals and other high cost corporate inputs and still have something like 60 percent of my land in those practices, I am putting an increasing number of my acres into conservation programs and organic practices. Meanwhile, all my siblings continue with their same tenants and the march of conventional agriculture.

There are often times when I need to challenge my attitudes, gross generalizations, and the ease with which I can vilify other people or practices. How often have I overtly or covertly judged other people such as the farmers who farm huge numbers of acres with the latest in agricultural technology as promoted by corporations? How often do I truly appreciate the humanity of those people whose values are different from mine? I think of all the years that I drove up and down the road I grew up on to observe, photograph, videotape, visit with people, interview some of them, and record my thoughts. I recently listened to some of my audio micro-cassette journals from the 1990s when I drove along my road and heard the many times that I talked about new corn emerging in the spring, the weather, ponds of water in the fields in wet years, or about the harvest. I experienced only the surface of the culture in that rural neighborhood. I was critical of much of what was happening in agriculture and had catty thoughts about some of the people, especially the large-scale farming operators, especially the more aggressive ones who would bid us the cash rent rate, taking rental ground from other farmers who could not pay as much.

However, I realized while listening to the cassettes that I did not know much about who some of the people really were. What was it like for them to get up each morning during the past 30 years, decide what clothes to wear, have breakfast, see the children (if they had children) off to school, worry about sickness in the family, work through issues with their spouses (if they had spouses), decide what equipment, seed, fertilizer or herbicide to use, where to get financing, how to pay back the loans or pay the bills, figure out whom they could trust to talk to about their inner thoughts, figure out what faith community could meet their needs, how to deal with long hours to plant or harvest a crop even during challenging weather conditions, and how to support aging parents? How do they feel about farmers being the scapegoat for nitrates in the Des Moines drinking water, the dead zone at the lower end of the Mississippi,

and other problems created by big ag? How do they feel about being a cog, even if they were big-time farmers, in the system?

Fortunately, Denny and Jeff DeWall, who farm my Roosevelt township land with conventional practices, do so much less aggressively than some of the other farmers in the area and will not use Dicamba. They did not need me to tell them it was a bad idea. Denny even said that years ago they had used Banville, a precursor to Dicamba and had decided it was not a good chemical to use.

The problem that both Paul and Denny see, and that is consistent with articles I have read via the Practical Farmers of Iowa listserv, is that, in the future, even farmers who do not believe in using the herbicide will feel forced to plant the Dicamba-resistant seed. Their reasoning is that the newly genetically engineered soybean plants will dominate the landscape and that other farmers will believe they have to pay the high prices for the GMO seed simply as a precaution against damage due to the potential drifting of Dicamba, which is applied to the GMO plants.

I still feel the conundrum of love-hate for much of my past and present rural heritage, but the edges have softened over the decades. And yet, there are major issues that broil my spirit in addition to the ubiquitous use of GMO seed and toxic herbicides on the crop fields.

My father seemed brilliant and technologically advanced when he created an 8-row corn planter from a pair of 4-row planters in the early 1950s. Now most farmers in the area, according to Denny, have 16-row planters, with some farmers using 24-row planters. He added that some of the “aggressive, big outfits” that come into the area to operate land use 36-row planters.

Today, there is the prevalent use of semi-tractors and trailers that has evolved in the last decade to haul grain from the field back to grain bins at a farm, the elevators in nearby towns, or more distant markets. Denny says it is easier to hire a retired farmer or other person from town with a commercial driver’s license to drive a semi than to get someone to drive a tractor to pull grain wagons. He also talks about efficiency—that a farmer can load 1,000 bushels of grain in a semi-trailer, and it can travel at 55 miles per hour, getting to town and back to the farm faster than a tractor pulling a wagon could travel. He said it is a far cry from the past—a



The VeraSun ethanol production plant between Fort Dodge and Manson on Highway 7 is now the Valero Fort Dodge Ethanol Plant. 2011.

person seldom sees the co-op loading a train with grain, but instead the co-op uses semi-tractors and trailers to haul corn to ethanol plants and beans to processing plants. Also, the local cooperative and other buyers will send semis to pick up grain at farms. Oh, so much different from the days when I drove a Model M Farmall tractor, pulling a wooden barge wagon to haul grain from the field to the farm. Barge wagons were ubiquitous in agriculture then but now have mostly disappeared.

Another change that I have seen is the prevalence of large stacks of bales of corn stover, some as big as old brick high school buildings. Denny says the bales are sold to the ethanol production plants in Emmetsberg, Albert City, and Fort Dodge. However, he adds that those facilities are not operating at full force. Nor does he know how they can make money, especially when the price for gasoline, which uses ethanol, is under three dollars.



Bales of corn stover on land owned by Douglas and Joy Cornwell Palmer and farmed by Mick Reigelsberger in section 14 Roosevelt Township just west of the farm where Helen grew up. 2015.

Farmers harvest the corn stalks into bales of stover rather than leave the plant residue on the ground. They sell the bales to ethanol and biofuel processing plants. Advocates say these plants are great for the state, but many people feel they are bad for the state. The fuels they produce are not truly renewable and are dependent on government subsidies. The plants use substantial amounts of water in a way that could potentially deplete aquifers that Iowans depend on for domestic water use. Also, using the corn stalks for fuel means there is hardly any ground cover in crop fields during winter months.

I asked Denny about the use of drones. He said that although he has not seen much use of them in the area, he is aware that some farmers use drone technology to scout what kind of drought or flooding has happened in their fields or where there might be weed pressure or damage from insects. Other new developments include GPS-driven tractors and combines with sensors and computer programs that record yield data for specific areas of the field and map the fields to determine how much and where to apply fertilizer.

There is a seven to one ratio of hog population to human population. In 2015, Iowa had over 22 million hogs to just over three million people. The second-leading pork-producing state, North Carolina, had only nine million hogs that year. Most of Iowa's hogs are housed in confinement buildings with odors that make areas of the state nearly uninhabitable for human beings.

The keynote speaker at the 2016 Practical Farmers of Iowa Annual Conference was John Kempf, an Amish farmer from Ohio and founder of Advancing Eco-Agriculture (AEA). Much of what he said was too technical and scientific for me to fully comprehend, but the gist of his message sank in for me and impressed many of the people who heard him and were eager to learn more.



Concentrated Animal Feeding Operation (CAFO) for raising hogs. Owned by Flaherty Family Farms LLC west side of Section 27, Roosevelt Township, east of Pocahontas on Highway N57. 2013.

In his PowerPoint presentation, Kempf showed an image of an iron nail and listed the factors that would cause the nail to oxidize, rust, and not be useful. He used the idea of the rusted nail as an analogy for the ways in which many of the status quo, commercial inputs that farmers use, thinking they will enhance yields, actually diminish the health of soil. I wanted to make sure I was interpreting Kempf correctly and called AEA. The staff person who spoke with me said that, indeed, Kempf's message is that many agricultural inputs are killing life in the soil with the result that minerals are no longer available.

Water coming from farm wells is not safe to drink. In going through my journals, I found an entry telling about a conversation I had with Velma and Verle Howard in May 1994 about how the county health department was asking farmers to inspect the water in the wells at their farms. Verle said that although there had not been livestock on their farm for the past 15 years, there were livestock toxins in their water, making it unsafe to drink. Denny Flaherty estimates that currently probably 20 percent or less of farm families drink water from their wells due to what he calls the "enormous amount of nitrates" in the water.

A large percentage of the waterways in Iowa are toxic. The contamination is partially a result of the way farmers fertilize their fields and how the millions of the hogs in the state are raised. In March 2015, the board of trustees of the Des Moines Water Works sued three counties near Pocahontas County for the way the counties allow farmers to let nitrates enter the waterways and end up in Des Moines where Water Works pays millions of dollars to remove the nitrates. In March 2017, a federal judge dismissed the case.

Concern is growing about how the lack of ground cover on farm fields during the fallow months exacerbates climate change. Conversely, climate change creates volatile swings in weather with events such as droughts and floods even in one season, making farming more unpredictable and challenging than ever. There are, to be sure, many other ways in which climate change has already affected agriculture, and it appears inevitable that future challenges will be more varied and alarming than scientists, farmers, and common folk can currently imagine.

Retired Iowa State University extension agriculture specialist, Don Hofstrand, reported in a July 2018 newsletter article that "future five-day heat waves in the Midwest are projected to be 13 degrees higher than present by mid-century." Also, the 2018 Fourth National Climate Assessment mandated by Congress with its Global Change Research Act of 1990 predicts that there will likely be a 25% drop in Iowa corn yields by the middle of the century as a result of climate change.

On July 19, 2019, the Iowa Public Television program *Iowa Press* focused on climate change and its relationship to agriculture in Iowa. Gene Takle, Professor Emeritus of Climatology affiliated with the Department of Agronomy at Iowa State University, and David Courard-Hauri, Professor and Director of the Environmental Science and Policy Program at Drake University, were the featured guests.

Takle said, “The rise in rainfall, particularly April, May, June, has been probably the most notable change in climate that is affecting Iowa right now. It has delayed the planting substantially this year and so then the crop is behind and it’s not going to be able to complete the pollination and grain-filling periods that are necessary before harvest.”

Host David Yepsen asked Takle about his thoughts on the Green New Deal. Takle replied that farmers could play an important role by “storing more carbon in our Iowa soils. By our tillage processes we have removed about half of the carbon from our Iowa soils over the last 100 years.”

My understanding of this issue is that because of the heavy spring rains and short window of time for farmers to plant their crops, perhaps with only two days of optimal weather, many believe they need to buy larger equipment and utilize the latest in seed, chemicals, herbicides, and other products that industrial agriculture has to offer. History shows, however, that aggressive, industrialized agriculture has been a culprit in depleting the carbon content in our soils. It would seem wiser to explore other models of agriculture—perhaps organic that leaves more organic matter in the ground—but for sure, adaptations of the regenerative agriculture practices that North Dakota farmer Gabe Brown practices and presents in his 2018 book, *Dirt to Soil: One Family’s Journey into Regenerative Agriculture*. David Montgomery, a University of Washington geologist, also presents promising alternative practices in his 2017 book, *Growing a Revolution: Bringing Our Soil Back to Health*.

When asked about long-term climate perspectives for Iowa, Takle said the excessive rains of recent years have also generated increased moisture levels in the air that, fortunately, so far have suppressed the intensity of summer heat in the state. He cautioned, however, “But as we move toward the middle of the current century we’re going to see a substantial rise in heat. The Midwest has been projected to be more, have higher changes in extreme temperatures than any other region of the country. So we’re not looking forward to that but this is the time to plan, to, as you say, maybe examine our crops. If corn isn’t going to pollinate under these kind of conditions, then we need to be thinking about different ways or looking at planting schedules differently or different hybrids so you can spread out that pollination period.”

Katarina Sostaric, a reporter for Iowa Public Radio, asked what individuals could be doing to counter climate change. Courard-Hauri replied, “We get that question a lot and I always wrestle with how to answer because I think the best answer is one can get involved in making political change. You can have a lot more of an effect finding ways to get society to move away from fossil fuels than you can changing your vehicle or those kind of things. So I worry a little bit when we personalize it and everybody tries to figure out what is the thing that they can do. That said, obviously there are a lot of, there’s a lot of work suggesting what are some effective things you can do.”

Yepsen asked Takle about cattle and the methane they produce in Iowa. Takle confirmed, “It is a big problem.” When asked what could be done about it, he responded, “Well, the dairy industry has actually taken a lead in this and there are a lot of methane digesters now that have been set up around large dairy operations where they capture the methane and use it to repower the farm or to power the farm with renewable energy.”

This year, 2019, Iowa is again an early state in vetting presidential candidates as it prepares for its 2020 caucus meetings. An example of how agriculture and climate change have been elevated in the national campaign discourse is found in a YouTube video dated August 8,

2019. In it, candidate Elizabeth Warren and long-time Practical Farmer of Iowa member Ron Rosmann are standing in a large pasture that includes eight grazing paddocks for cattle at the Rosmann Family Farms near Harlan, Iowa. They are talking about the issue of cattle-generated methane in relation to climate change, especially in light of the Green New Deal, legislation introduced by progressive Democrats in Congress earlier in the year.¹

Rosmann refers to the serious problems of large-scale cattle production and claims, “Ruminants are not designed to eat corn. But yet, I wouldn’t say we should get rid of them. You know, the Green New Deal says we need to get rid of cows. I don’t agree with that because well-managed grassland where you rotationally graze with all these paddocks ... you are actually going to use more CO₂ and sequester more carbon because of the regrowth all the time, and yet, that’s a permanent pasture. So anyway, my point is we have become so ignorant of the basic principles of biology in food production that we have answered them all through technology instead of letting Mother Earth and having respect [for her]”



Ron Rosmann at Practical Farmers of Iowa field day. Circa 1999.

Ron graduated from Iowa State University in 1973 and returned to farm with his parents near Harlan. His wife, Maria Vakulskas Rosmann, is a Sioux City native and graduate of Creighton University where she was editor of the school’s news bureau prior to their marriage. I first met Ron when I was on a photo assignment at a PFI field day the Rosmann family hosted in about 1997. In 2010, Ron and Maria received PFI’s annual Sustainable Agriculture Achievement Award.

Ron, Maria, and their sons David and Daniel along with Daniel’s wife, Ellen Walsh-Rosmann, farm 700 acres organically and conduct on-farm research analogous to the kind of creative exploring Gabe Brown and David Montgomery have done. In addition, the Rosmann family owns both an on-farm store, Farm Sweet Farm, and in-town restaurant, Milk and Honey, featuring locally-grown produce. Ron and Maria have also lobbied at the Iowa legislature and nation’s capital. And now in August 2019, there was Ron in his pasture, patiently teaching and having a mature, civil conversation with a candidate who has the potential to be the next president of the United States.

1. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DFSuI7rFCFE>



The Ron and Maria Rosmann family are dedicated Practical Farmers of Iowa members and the epitome of leaders in sustainable agriculture. Their farm and local food operations are near Harlan, Iowa. Top row, from left to right: Daniel Rosmann, Geneva Rosmann, Mark Rosmann, Maggie Rosmann and David Rosmann. Bottom row, from left to right: Ellen Walsh-Rosmann, Ron Rosmann, Xavier Rosmann, Maria Vakulskas Rosmann and Becky Tompkins-Rosmann (holding newborn Ellie Rosmann). 2018. *Photo courtesy of Deb Hastert Photography.*

PFI's mission is that of "Equipping farmers to build resilient farms and communities," and as an organization, it does not engage in politics. Yet some of its members are model citizens doing ground-breaking work and effectively engaging in politics. I am grateful to Ron and Maria, their family, and other PFI members for their farming practices, research, and willingness to share their knowledge with peers, newcomers to sustainable agriculture, and political leaders who are in a position to shape policy.

The USDA estimated in November 2015 that the net farm income for that year was down 39 percent from the previous year. Rental rates and land values were also down significantly. It seems clear that paying more money for agricultural inputs, having access to advanced technologies, and harvesting high yields do not ensure that farming will be profitable for farmers and landowners. The system may be profitable, though, for the corporations that produce agricultural inputs and corporations that can buy corn and beans cheaply, convert them to (often unhealthy) food or other products, and sell their products for a huge profit.

Many Iowans were upset when a Texas oil company was allowed to build the underground Bakken pipeline in 2016 and 2017, even after much protest by environmental and farm activists. The 1,172-mile-long pipe, 30 inches in diameter, begins in northwest North Dakota, goes from northwest to southeast Iowa, and hooks up with a pipeline in Illinois that takes oil to a Texas refinery. None of the oil is intended for domestic use in the Midwest. The line cuts through land, including prime farmland, has a construction right-of-way of 150 feet, is at least 48 inches underground and is intended to transport 570,000 barrels per day. The crude oil that the pipeline carries is the result of fracking in western North Dakota. Due to the way the glaciers were formed there, the chemical composition of the oil makes it more volatile than oil extracted and produced by other means. In several cases, the company gained access to privately-owned property through the use of eminent domain; however, the pipeline provides little direct benefit to Iowa, except that it created jobs for members of labor unions. Neither Iowa's governor, the Department

of Natural Resources, nor the Iowa Utilities Board did anything to stop the construction, even after extensive hearings with plenty of people speaking in opposition to the pipeline.

Retired ISU journalism professor Dick Haws wrote a December 3, 2015, opinion piece in the *Ames Tribune* stating that there should be a pot of gold in the Natural Resources and Outdoor Recreation Trust Fund. The fund had been created by a constitutional amendment in 2010 with 63 percent of Iowa voters voting in its favor. The fate of the fund has not been good. Instead of being a pot of gold, Haws claims it has a zero balance and blames both the legislature and governor for its lack of results.

In 2019, the Iowa Farm Bureau Federation, as the main force, but with peripheral support from the Iowa Cattlemen's Association, pushed a multi-faceted bill in the legislature to seriously cramp the work of non-profits, with the greatest impact on the Iowa Natural Heritage Foundation. INHF is a non-partisan organization that was founded in 1979 in response to the leadership of the late Republican Governor Robert Ray. In its 40 years, INHF has been a highly regarded steward of land in a state where less than three percent of land is owned publicly for recreation and conservation. Iowa is one of the worst states in the nation in regard to this statistic, ranking above only Kansas and Rhode Island.

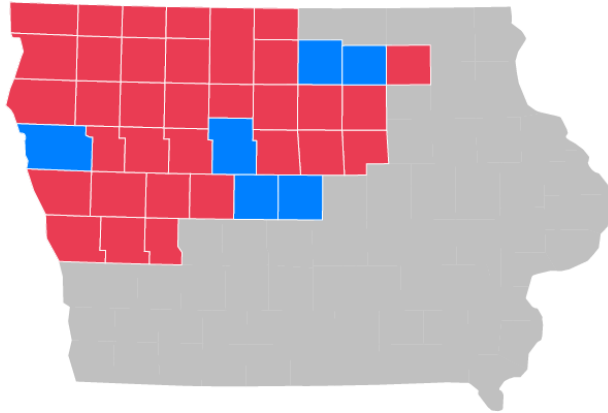
One item in the bill would have ended tax credits for those people who donate land to the Foundation, similar to my gift of 60 acres to the organization in 2011. Another item would have prevented non-profit groups such as INHF from obtaining federal funds in the form of low interest loans administered by the State Revolving Loan Fund for projects that have a direct impact on water quality. As a private organization, INHF has been able to risk investing in parcels along rivers and on hillsides in a timelier fashion than the bureaucracy of, for instance, a county conservation board for such projects. INHF has also been able to apply for loans through the revolving fund to hold the parcels until a city or county is in a position to buy the land. In the end, the INHF's use of federal dollars benefits the public.

The good news is that the tax credit survived. The bad news is that the INHF and groups such as The Nature Conservancy and Pheasants Forever can no longer apply for the loans. One has to wonder if the Iowa Farm Bureau wants Iowa to be nothing but parcels of border-to-border farmland. The IFB representatives at the legislature claimed their organization wanted to protect the land to make it available to young farmers; however, it seems to me that there are better ways to ensure farmers have access to land.

Iowa's Conservative Ideological Icon in Congress

Many of my friends and I are upset that our U.S. Congressional district representative is a man who is a major embarrassment in the eyes of liberals, even on the national scene, for his bigoted rhetoric. Representative King does not think he is a bad guy. He doesn't recognize that his rhetoric about immigrants is crude, that white supremacy lacks virtue, or that there is value in diversity. In fact, he has been quoted in recent months as asking what is so wrong with the white nationalist teachings that he learned as a student. I am not sure what is worse—his style of conservatism or the fact that he does not know why it is unacceptable to so many people.

He has either gotten so bad or his own party has finally woken up. Governor Kim Reynolds, who ascended from being Lieutenant Governor to full-fledged Governor when her predecessor, Terry Branstad, became U.S. ambassador to China in May 2017, had King as chairperson of her first gubernatorial campaign. King, who first went to Congress in 2003, was easily reelected on November 6, 2018. However, by the next Tuesday, House Republican leaders had stripped him of his committee assignments, and Reynolds had lost her patience



Steve King, born in 1949, was a northwest Iowa business person and Republican state senator when first elected to Congress in 2002. He won 62 percent of the vote and all but one county in the state's 5th District. King continued to dominate the district and the one it morphed into for the 2012 election after Iowa lost a seat in Congress. The new 4th District included some historically liberal counties, but from 2012 through 2016, King continued to win with 53, 62, and 61 percent of the vote. His closest contest was in 2018 when he defeated the Democratic nominee, J.D. Scholten, a paralegal and former professional baseball player born in 1980. King received 50.4 percent of the vote to Scholten's 47 percent and lost in six counties. The two are again running for Congress in 2020. The map shows King's counties in red and Scholten's in blue. *Illustration created by Harrison W. Inefuku.*

with King. A *Des Moines Register* article quoted her as saying, "I think that Steve King needs to make a decision if he wants to represent the people and the values of the 4th District or do something else, and I think he needs to take a look at that."

Not many years ago, Iowa had five congressional districts, and Steve King represented the 4th District that served Pocahontas County, where I was raised and now own land. Then with the state's declining population, Iowa lost a district. Now both Story County (including Ames, where I live) and Pocahontas County are together in District 4.

It's been said by political analysts that King is so perfectly matched to the conservatism of the district and its huge percentage of conservative Christians, especially in the northwest Iowa counties, that he could serve in Congress as long as he wanted. In Pocahontas County in the 2018 election, King got 59 percent of the vote, and a young Democrat new to politics, J.D. Scholten, got 40 percent. In Story County, the numbers were reversed. Scholton got 65 percent to King's 32 percent.

During the 2016 congressional election cycle, I noticed, as I often have, that an evangelical farmer in my home county had a Steve King sign posted near his home. I got up what gumption and good intentions I could muster to ask the simple question of what my friend saw in Representative King, considering some of King's coarse language and rigid views. My friend replied that King was a friend of a friend of his and that King was a "true conservative." I did not have the wherewithal to carry the conversation further. Had I been more adept at dealing with difficult topics, I would have said, "Tell me more. For instance, how do you define a real conservative?" If I had voiced my thoughts, I would have said something to the effect that compassion, especially toward strangers and the downtrodden, is a key component of Christian teachings. I would have added that Jesus was raised at the intersection of many cultures and was a multi-culturalist and that Jesus was not Caucasian. I would also have said to my farmer friend that I knew him to be a compassionate Christian person and that it seemed incongruent that he would support King either by posting a sign or voting for him.

After the Republican party stripped him of his committee assignments, King held town hall meetings around the state. The first was in Primghar in far northwest Iowa. A *Des Moines Register* article report and video clip showed how King's followers at the rally still held him in high regard. One woman, Pamela Harmon, who was a retired nurse and resident of the district,

said, “As I came up today, I thought it must be difficult to come with the difficulties you’ve been through, to come back and face your constituency. And I was wrong. You’re proud and talented and we’re proud of you, and thanks for coming to see us.” Then the crowd applauded. In February, without apology, he announced he will run for Congress again in 2020.

I am learning to use a phrase that one of my tenants, Denny Flaherty from rural Palmer, often uses. Now 65 and transitioning into retirement, he has farmed for me for at least 25 years since he teamed up with Don and Jeff DeWall. Don died in 2002 when he went to Omaha for a heart operation, but Denny and Jeff continue to farm together. Denny is wise, fun, pragmatic, and able to fathom some of my esoteric thoughts, critiques, and questions about what is happening in agriculture. He has seen a lot come and go in the countryside, including his years of small-scale diversified farming, shearing sheep, and recovering from the 1980s Farm Crisis that found many farmers committing suicide and farm families having to move off the land.

The crisis hit Denny’s family hard, but he persevered and paid back the money that he had borrowed. He often says about a troublesome situation, “It is what it is.” I am never going to be able to change the culture of this state—not the congressional district nor my home county, which seems about as conservative as any. As a mantra, I need to chant, “It is what it is.” Thanks, Denny, for all the many long conversations we have had, negotiating rental rates and talking about the latest scoop on what is happening in the Rolfe area.

Toward a More Fluid and Compassionate Understanding of Heritage

I feel remiss for the times I have used the terms “tradition” and “heritage” in glib ways, as though life in the Midwest began in the 1880s when my farming ancestors moved to Wisconsin then Iowa. I am also concerned about how members of my family, people in general, the media, Steve King, and other persons of influence make great and distorted statements about tradition and heritage. Just what does Steve King mean when he insists that Western civilization is superior to other cultures? Just what do commonly used phrases such as “family values,” “our rural heritage,” “our great Iowa work ethic,” “Make America Great Again,” and other campaign slogans mean?

There was tension during one of the early years of the new millennium when my siblings and I emailed back and forth about plans for the Christmas dinner that would be held at my parents’ home. I had suggested that in addition to our reading the nativity story at the beginning of the meal, various family members might want to share other reading material, for instance a poem, essay, or short story, between the main course and dessert. Mother had long held to a tradition of reading the nativity story in a somberly fashion while the family sat at the kitchen table, waiting to start our Christmas morning breakfast. The ritual then shifted from breakfast to the early afternoon dinner. I anticipated that my family, which consists of many readers and librarians, would readily accept my suggestion to add interest to the mealtime conversation. However, one sister, who has an inordinate amount of influence, did not like the idea.

At my apartment in Gilbert, the night before Christmas day that year, my close friend Joy, who knew of my suggestion to add more readings to the meal, gave me a small hardback book published in the 1940s or 1950s of Christmas short stories by Iowa authors. I skimmed the book before going to bed and chose a wonderful story about going to the family homeplace farm for Christmas day. I took the book with me to my parents’ home. As the meal began, I told the others about it and how, if there was an opportunity, I would like to read the story. Then I placed the book on a side table. Later, when the main course was coming to an end, sister Clara asked if I would like to read the story. I am grateful for the opening she gave me and for the response of her husband, Hal, who told a story about Christmas from his past.

The sister, who had not liked my suggestion of reading to each other, met me in the kitchen while I was rinsing the dishes from the main course. She was angry and chided me, insisting that I should have warned people in advance that I was going to read the story so that she could have left the room. Months later in emails, it became clear that she felt reading any other story than the nativity story was a violation of family tradition and sacrilegious.

During those communications, I tried to retain my equanimity and explain something I had learned in seminary. “Tradition” is fluid and has elements of both conservation and change. For instance, many of the hymns that churchgoers consider to be “traditional” have not always been part of the Christian tradition. As an example, “A Mighty Fortress is Our God” is sung to the tune of what had been a popular German beer-drinking song that originally was at a much faster tempo than what conventional organists now play the song. I am not advocating that traditions be ripped up but am concerned about a balance of the conservation and change elements for our family and society at large.

In what decade, by whose initiative, and by what rationale, for instance, did highly processed foods such as cheesy potato casserole and green bean casserole morph into our family’s definition of a traditional Christmas meal? Or when did Grandma’s mincemeat and pecan pies fade out to be replaced by pies from Bakers Square?



Archived green bean casserole advertisement. Circa 1960s. Courtesy of Campbell Soup Company.

Nowadays, I stay in Ames for Christmas and do not remember how long ago I last joined my family for a Christmas meal. Not only is “tradition” a fluid concept, but much of how it is defined has to do with who is in control of the definition and what they perceive to be important. That is not much different for the concept of “heritage.” It seems that insisting on one definition of either “tradition” or “heritage” is not helpful; in fact, to do so can be detrimental. It’s a matter not only of exclusivity but also of distortion.

In 2018, in preparing to produce a short experimental video about “heritage,” I played with words, attempting to develop some helpful sentences about “heritage.” Here is what I wrote:

Considering that heritage is fluid and amorphous, no two individuals—not even siblings—share identical heritages.

Heritage is a matter of facts, perspectives, and interpretations that shape the lives of the living and of persons not yet born.

Heritage is the cumulative spinning of individual and collective narratives about the life journeys of our ancestors.

Although one can be nostalgic about the past, a heritage is neither intrinsically virtuous nor not virtuous.

One needs to take care not to think his or her heritage more nor less virtuous than the heritage of another tribe.

The stories of our ancestors are neither more nor less important than who we are and what we do today in our own migrations.

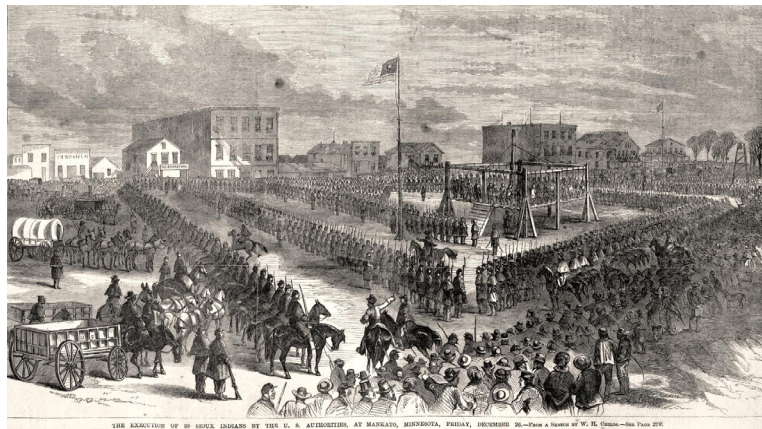
My ancestors were part of the Northern European settling and creation of the Midwestern farm culture.

I am participant or at least witness to the unsettling and destruction of that same culture.

I grieve the losses yet welcome some opportunities, even though fear can reign louder than hope.

I should remember that the people in photos of my stoic ancestors were probably not much unlike me. They were born into this world, were once children, 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. And they were immigrants.

Early in January of this year, I listened to *This American Life*, a documentary program on National Public Radio. The episode, "Little War on the Prairie," was about an event in Mankato, Minnesota, in 1862. Mankato is only 140 miles north of Pocahontas (and its statue of Princess Pocahontas) and 100 miles north of Spirit Lake, Iowa, where other staff members and I acted out a pow wow one night during each one-week or two-week session for our campers at Camp Foster YMCA.



Public execution of 38 Dakota. Illustration by W.H. Childs, 12/26/1862.
Courtesy to Pioneer Press: Minnesota Historical Society

The program synopsis for "Little War on The Prairie" introduces producer John Biewen and says, "Nobody ever talked about the most important historical event ever to happen there: in 1862, it was the site of the largest mass execution in U.S. history. Thirty-eight Dakota Indians were hanged after a war with white settlers. John went back to Minnesota to figure out what really happened 150 years ago, and why Minnesotans didn't talk about it much after."

The mass hanging is a horrific part of Minnesota history, but so are the ways, explored in the documentary, in which the U.S. government deceived the Dakota and other Indian tribes. These kinds of policies, corruption, and other sinister acts may very well be part of what established conditions for my ancestors to settle in the Rolfe area. The final words of the hour-long program, spoken by Duke University history professor Tim Tyson, seem the most relevant as I attempt to define what the word “heritage” might or could mean:

So we invent a fake history for ourselves that doesn’t deal with the complexities. And I think that, in some ways, that’s what the South and the upper Midwest have in common, is that there’s a delusion at work about who we were. And that’s why we have a hard time about who we are. So that the kind of self-congratulatory history that passes for heritage, it keeps us from seeing ourselves and doing better.

Leopold Center for Sustainable Agriculture

Andrea Basche, a friend who earned her doctorate in sustainable agriculture at Iowa State University, sent an email in 2015 via the ISU sustainable agriculture listserv, announcing a new video that her organization, The Union of Concerned Scientists (UCS), had posted on YouTube. The video features former ISU professor Ricardo Salvador, director of the Union’s Food and Environment Program. According to the UCS and Salvador, “An astonishing one in three kids today will develop diabetes in their lifetimes, while the country’s dominant agricultural practices pollute our water and degrade our soil. These symptoms of our broken food system are largely the result of federal policies that line the pockets of agribusiness at the expense of our health, the environment, and the economy. But it’s in your power to change all this.”



I knew that a search committee for a new director of the Leopold Center for Sustainable Agriculture had named Salvador as its number one choice to fill the position in 2010 but that Iowa State University President Gregory Geoffrey had rejected the recommendation. I asked on the PFI listserv if anyone could explain the history of how that had happened. Gabrielle Roesch, another graduate of the sustainable agriculture program, and Betty Wells of the Leopold Center pointed me to a 2010 blog post by Brian DeVore of the Land Stewardship Project based in Minnesota:

In 1987, the Iowa Groundwater Protection Act imposed a tax on pesticides and fertilizers, providing the financial seed for the launching of the Leopold Center for Sustainable Agriculture. And it was planted smack-dab in the middle of conventional ag academia: the campus of Iowa State University.

Perhaps it’s a sign of how desperate the conventional ag community was after the “Farm Crisis” of the 80s that a center named after the

father of the land ethic was allowed to be located at the state's land grant university.

And this was no mere "think tank" that produces innocuous white papers in some ivory silo. The law states clearly that the mission of the Center is to "identify and reduce negative environmental and socioeconomic impacts of agricultural practices."

ISU began the search for a new Leopold Center director in 2009, and Salvador, who was then working in plant pathology at North Carolina State University, was its favorite candidate. ISU President Gregory Geoffrey did not want Salvador, who was never called to be director of the Leopold Center.

DeVore explained, "Three members of the [Leopold] advisory board wrote President Geoffrey a letter of protest, but he stuck with his choice. As *The Chronicle of Higher Education* reports, the Iowa Farm Bureau had made it clear to Geoffrey that they did not want Salvador as the director of the Center. The dean of ISU's ag school, Wendy Wintersteen, also told Geoffrey that 'agriculture groups' in the state weren't pleased with Salvador's background in sustainable ag. Geoffrey told *The Chronicle [of Higher Education]* that it was important to have a Leopold Center director who could 'walk the middle ground.'"

In September 2010, I was invited to attend a luncheon that Olivia Madison, who was dean of the ISU library, and the ISU Foundation were hosting at the Special Collections Department on the fourth floor of the library. The Foundation was toward the end of a major multi-year fundraising drive called "Campaign Iowa State: With Pride and Purpose." It would wrap up in 2011 with more than \$867 million received in gifts and commitments. I had enough disenchantment with the Foundation that I never gave to that campaign, but I had given my collection of documentary materials to the Special Collections Department, had included the department as an heir in my will in order to support rural archives, and counted Olivia as a friend.

I was comfortable being in the familiar setting of the Special Collections Department, especially with Olivia as the host. Yet, I also felt uncomfortable as if I was some kind of country bumpkin. I have little in terms of dress-up clothing and was probably wearing clothes not much different than everyday gardening clothes, except with newer, better shirt, sweater, and slacks.

Olivia introduced President Geoffrey. He told about how the Foundation was exceeding its original "Campaign Iowa State" goal. He then explained how the Foundation had raised enough funds to endow a couple of deanships and that the next goal was to have enough money to endow all deanships.

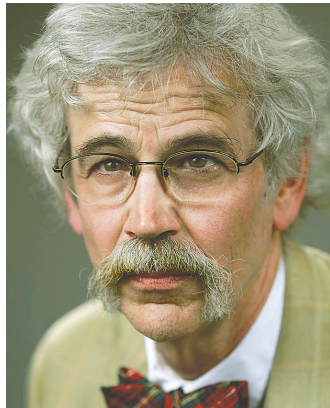
I raised my hand and asked Geoffrey if a donor endowing a dean's position would have any privileged influence on the dean. I referenced the Leopold Center, acknowledging that it was like an apple-orange comparison to a university college, but used the story of the search for a new Leopold director as an analogy. I reminded the president of how the search committee had favored one candidate but that pressure from the Farm Bureau and other influential people in Iowa had caused the president to block the candidate from becoming the new director.

Sitting next to me was a woman who was influential in ISU Foundation circles. I thought she would have known better, but she asked, "What's the Leopold Center?"



LEOPOLD CENTER
FOR SUSTAINABLE AGRICULTURE

Geoffrey is a mild-mannered, civil person, whom I generally liked. He did not miss a beat, but replied calmly, explaining what the center was, then saying that “production agriculture” is important to the state’s economy and that it would have been unwise to hire someone who would raise a flag. He was smooth, and although I have been known to be an obstreperous person—something my high school classmates and other folks would remember about me—I did not want to create a larger scene than I already had by asking the question. Indeed, I was nervous enough that I probably could not have thought straight and had the right words to say if there had been a longer discussion. However, I was glad I had raised the issue so that he would know that someone important enough to be invited to the luncheon (me) knew about what he had done and cared for the well-being of the Leopold Center. I also was glad that he so clearly showed his true colors—that he had succumbed to the influence of Big Ag.



Art Cullen.

In 2017, the Iowa legislature with the signature of Governor Branstad axed state funding for the Leopold Center. Pulitzer prize-winning journalist Art Cullen, editor of *The Storm Lake Times*, located 46 miles west of Rolfe, wrote on February 6, 2019, about the founding director of the Leopold Center, Dennis Keeney, who had claimed and presented emails that Iowa State University did not lobby the legislature to preserve the center. Cullen reported,

Wendy Wintersteen, then dean of the College of Agriculture, said that she had done everything she could to protect the center. Shortly after the center was defunded, Wintersteen was named president of the university. Steve Leath was president when the center’s demise was conceived and was gone by the time the ax fell, leaving Wintersteen as the chief official speaking on behalf of the ag college.

“We pulled out every stop we had in the college,” Wintersteen told *The Des Moines Register* at that time. “We were very visible” at the state capitol.

That’s not what the emails from legislators say. Wintersteen did author a memo alerting Iowa State alumni about the proposed elimination of funding. The Iowa Farmers Union, by contrast, issued several alerts to members to urge legislators to protect the center funding. Democrats said they were taken by surprise.

Theological and Other Perspectives on the Movement of People off the Land

Bob Coote and Marv Chaney, who taught the Old Testament courses I took in seminary, used a big term called “latifundialization” about the movement of people off the land. I Googled the word and found a definition: the “process whereby land increasingly accrues into the hands of just a few.” I recall that the “fundi” part of the word referred to the earth, and the “lati” referred to something like “lateral” and “moving off.” A big focus was on the story of Naboth’s vineyard, 1 Kings 21:

King Ahab wanted the vineyard for a garden. Naboth replied, “The Lord forbid that I should give you the inheritance of my ancestors.” Ahab sulked, and Queen Jezebel sent dogs to kill Naboth, took the land, and gave it to Ahab for a birthday present.

Bob and Marv had our class work a lot with that story, pointing out how it contains a literary device—irony—to drive home a point. In actuality, Naboth would have been a peasant and, as such, would never have had a vineyard. Instead, he would have had a subsistence plot—a garden. Ahab would not have been interested in having a garden and would have torn up the garden and put in an olive orchard or grape vineyard with the idea of exporting the olives and wine to trade for items—for instance, iron.

A person could wonder if much has changed over the centuries since then, considering the influence that powerful interests such as governments and corporations have on how land is farmed and how they promote industrial farming.

How much of church teaching deals with land use issues? How much of human history is about people being displaced from the land? There are many great textbooks, novels, and movies with inspirational theme music about people in various cultures being displaced from the land by powerful forces. Look at the purchase of the Louisiana Territory and how our government displaced the people who were already here with a huge advertising campaign to get other people to emigrate from places such as Europe, settle, and tap the rich resources of the territory.

I have thought of the concept of “what comes around goes around.” Some people with farm backgrounds probably have never thought of their family lineages or Midwestern agriculture being as vulnerable as some of the obviously marginalized people of the world. I recall my parents’ attitudes that if the government was doing something, it must be right. However, it would be hard in this era not to notice the military/governmental/corporate/industrial/university complex (or complexes) with the seeds of that dominance sown centuries ago.

I am reminded of a phrase from Osha Gray Davidson’s book *Broken Heartland: The Rise of America’s Rural Ghetto*. He refers to the “Latinization of the Midwest.” I am also reminded of a keynote speaker years ago at a PFI conference, who suggested there are people in the federal government who think Midwestern farming methods are too costly and who would like to outsource crop production to Third World countries where labor is much cheaper. (Do those bureaucrats even give a thought to the food security issues related to such a vision?).

Kamyar Enshayan teaches at University of Northern Iowa and is director of the Center for Energy and Environmental Education at UNI. I know Kamyar through Practical Farmers of Iowa and



Photo from Kamyar Enshayan collection.

Kamyar Enshayan.

admire his integrity, prophetic candor, and commitment to environmental health. In the January 11, 2014, edition of *The Des Moines Register*, he published an opinion piece in which he compared the enterprise of modern agriculture to the enterprise of crystallized methamphetamine portrayed in the popular TV crime show “Breaking Bad” that aired from 2008 to 2013. Kamyar wrote:

During a conversation over coffee, I asked several friends what enterprise in Iowa would parallel the tragedy portrayed in “Breaking Bad”? To my surprise, without missing a beat, several people independently nominated commodity agriculture and the vast network of global corporations behind it.

Industrial commodity agriculture is entirely based on acres. It does not need stable communities. All that is needed are land, machinery, energy and chemical inputs to produce one or two products for distant markets. Civic organizations, schools, churches, libraries, rural businesses are all unnecessary to “feed the world” or to fuel ethanol plants. Long-term anthropological studies in many rural communities in the U.S. have confirmed these realities. As we have seen all over Iowa, in once-thriving towns, a gas station and, if you are lucky, a bar are all that’s left.

Think of coffee or banana plantations. The markets are not local, the benefits go elsewhere, farmers receive very little, which means rural poverty. It’s the same in Iowa.

Sociologists and economists report that markets in nearly every agricultural sector (corn, beans, beef, hogs, corn processing, etc.) are all controlled by a handful of global corporations, leaving farmers as price takers while production expenses rise. Add soil erosion, water pollution and below-poverty wages for food sector workers, and the result is rural decline and desperate situations that are the habitat for the meth enterprise.

Kamyar goes on to list other ills of modern agriculture, then concludes:

We must chart a different path. Many Iowans are striving to change all this. They include farmers who are practicing good agronomy based on ecological understanding of the land, integrating crops and livestock, grass-based production, long-term crop rotations, organic practices.

Groups across Iowa are expanding local markets for local agricultural products to create new opportunities for beginning farmers and create markets that are fair. They include food service directors and restaurant owners who support these farms. They include ordinary Iowans who value the way these farmers are growing their food and are making a point of supporting them and the land stewardship they practice.

They include Practical Farmers of Iowa, a network of farmers and others who are proving that a sane, productive, profitable, system of food and agriculture is possible and practical.

We need state and federal policies that support these forms of being in Iowa rather than breaking bad.

On April 8, 2019, *The Des Moines Register* carried an opinion piece by J.D. Scholten, the Democratic candidate for Congress who had run against the controversial and unabashedly conservative incumbent Steve King in Iowa's fourth district in 2018. In his piece, Scholten responded to a recent assertion by President Donald Trump that the United States is full and does not need more immigrants.

In contrast, Scholten claimed the nation is not full and that in the fourth district, which includes my hometown of Rolfe and Ames where I currently live, only three of the 39 counties are growing. He adds a scary observation about Pocahontas County: "It has been declining in population so fast that at this rate, the county will be depopulated by 2050."

Scholten's suggestion that the county could be depopulated by 2050 sounds like an extreme generalization even though I have often noted that census statistics show Pocahontas County is losing population as fast, or faster, than any other county in the nation. Wouldn't there still be people in the county to plant and harvest the crops or to tend to hogs at a factory farm? But who would want to hire on for those jobs if they had to live in an area with little or no sense of community and culture? And what would agriculture in the county look like if it, indeed, were still viable? Would the land, which has been prized for its deep, black, fertile soil, be 100 percent dominated by a style of agriculture that is dangerous to human health, has hazardous effects on soil health, and otherwise ruins the environment? Will depopulation mean not only that there are no more people who reside in the county, but that critters and wildlife can no longer live there? It is hard to imagine that such scenarios would actually happen within only 31 years, and yet it is easy for me to recognize that the trajectory is a real one and that what Scholten says should be taken seriously.

Decades ago, probably while in seminary, I learned that Christianity in the Western world has been filtered through and distorted by the dualism of Greek philosophy in contrast to the Christianity that evolved through the Eastern Orthodox Church. In the Greek dualistic system of thought, there are pairs of seemingly opposite concepts (dualisms). Examples would include: God/man, male/female, human/animal, light/dark, rational/irrational, civilized/uncivilized, and white/black.

The first concept in a dualism is viewed as positive or superior, while the second concept is viewed as negative or inferior. This line of thinking evolves into a hierarchy with God (as in Father God) being highest on the ladder followed by men, then women, children, animals, and nature. It also perpetuates the dominance of men over women and white people over people of color and the belief that humans are entitled to control and abuse nature.

The late Aldo Leopold, a renowned Midwestern conservationist, wrote his groundbreaking book *A Sand County Almanac* and its chapter "The Land Ethic" in 1949, four years after I was born. Leopold says in the introduction, "Conservation is getting nowhere because it is incompatible with our Abrahamic concept of land. We abuse land because we regard it as a commodity belonging to us. When we see land as a community to which we belong, we may begin to use it with love and respect."

In 1996, farmer and author of many books on agriculture, Wendell Berry, wrote *The Unsettling of America: Culture and Agriculture*. It influenced my thinking in the decade when I was beginning this project and deciding to manage my own land. Berry's book exposed me to the notion that there have been and continue to be both exploiters and nurturers in how land is viewed. Berry writes in his opening chapter:



J.D. Scholten, congressional nominee. 2019.

Photo from J.D. Scholten campaign committee.

The exploiter's goal is money, profit; the nurturer's goal is health—his land's health, his own, his family's, his community's, his country's. Whereas the exploiter asks of a piece of land only how much and how quickly it can be made to produce, the nurturer asks a question that is much more complex and difficult: What is its carrying capacity? (That is: How much can be taken from it without diminishing it? What can it produce dependably for an indefinite time?) The exploiter wishes to earn as much as possible by as little work as possible; the nurturer expects, certainly, to have a decent living from his work, but his characteristic wish is to work as well as possible. The competence of the exploiter is in organization; that of the nurturer is in order—a human order, that is, that accommodates itself both to other order and to mystery. The exploiter typically serves an institution or organization; the nurturer serves land, household, community, place. The exploiter thinks in terms of numbers, quantities, “hard facts”; the nurturer in terms of character, condition, quality, kind.

Vandana Shiva is a philosopher, environmental activist, and founder and director of the Navdanya Research Foundation for Science, Technology, and Ecology. Shiva spoke at ISU in 2015 about the dominance and perils of industrial agriculture and claimed, “The Midwest is not feeding anyone.” She added that 90 percent of the corn and soybean crop is used for animal feed and biofuels and that “diverting grain from humans to cars and factory farms is not a food system.” Shiva explained further in her 2016 book, *Who Really Feeds the World: The Failures of Agribusiness and the Promise of Agroecology*:

If “food” is the web of life—the currency of life, our nourishment, our cells, our blood, our mind, our culture, and our identity—and the “world” is Gaia—our rich and living planet, our Mother Earth, vibrant with diverse beings and ecosystems, multitudes of peoples and cultures—then it is the contributions of biodiversity, compassion, and the knowledge and intelligence of small-scale farmers that feed the world. My own research and lived experience over the last three decades has taught me that the answer to the food question does not lie in industrial agriculture but in agroecology and ecological farming.

When I asked on the PFI listserv about Shiva's lecture, one friend who is a soils instructor at Iowa State and teaches a course on world hunger responded, “Also, while she [Shiva] has some great thoughts, please do note her lack of support for her arguments with data/research/specifics. She doesn't meet the standard for my world food issues course on many items.”

On one hand, my friend's response reminded me of the ways in which scientists at land-grant universities, leaders of extension programs, and others tried to discount Rachel Carson, environmentalist author, after she published her book *Silent Spring* in 1962. On the other hand, I need to respect my friend's perspective and find out more, considering how easy it is to buy completely into the words of a renowned expert in any field.

Also, I have dear friends in Ames who are like my soul mates in terms of urban farming. With their careers immersed in working with plant genetics, my friends can react defensively to generalized criticisms of GMOs. They believe there is potential for good with the use of GMOs and that GMOs are not intrinsically bad. Of course, it is easy to understand that the

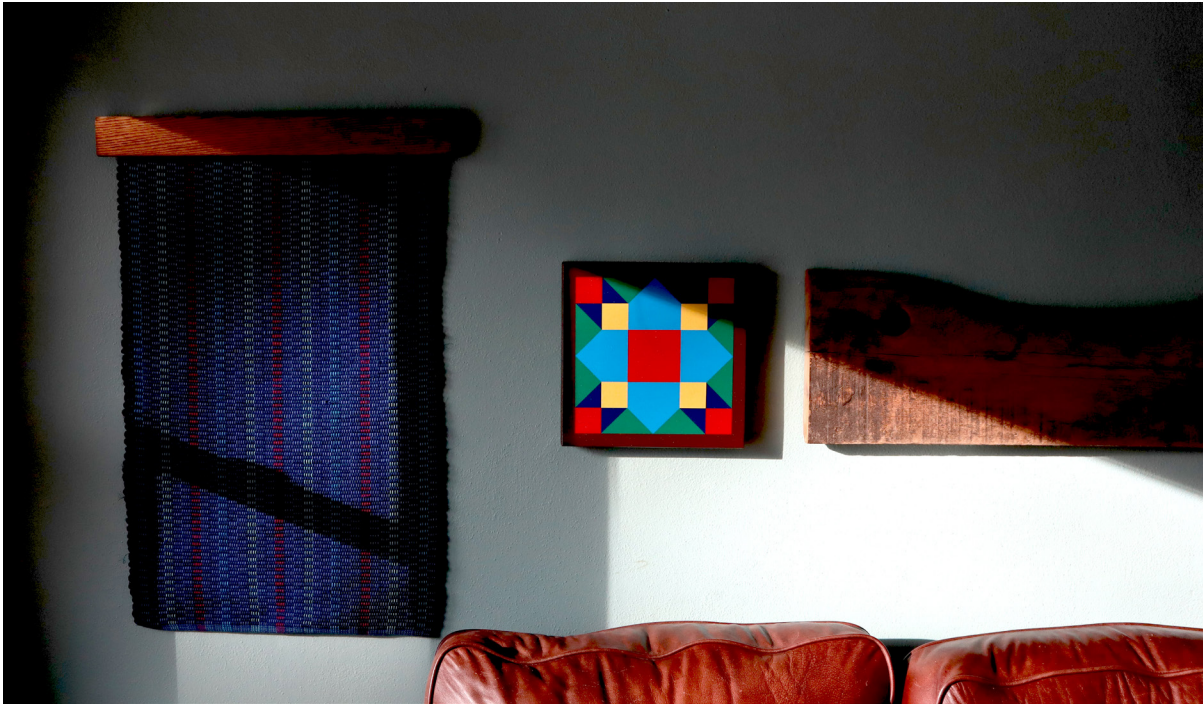


Idyllic corn field in Section 12, Roosevelt Township, just north across the road from the farm where Helen grew up. Owned by Reigelsberger-Wolford Farms LLC and operated by Mick Reigelsberger. 2015.

companies who promote GMOs and their required herbicides would say that in the end their products are necessary to feed the world.

Another lesson I learned in seminary was from Christian education professor Harold Hunt, who said, “Dialogue does not happen when one party holds a gun.” What he meant was that for true dialogue to happen, there needs to be a way to ensure equal influence for the people engaged in the conversation. I believe it is fair to say that those corporate, government, and other parties who promote industrialized production agriculture are the ones armed with guns in decisions about modern day agriculture. Those who insist the system is hazardous and instead promote ecoagriculture, regenerative agriculture, and organic farming do not hold guns in the conversations.

As it is, I am grateful for the opportunities ISU does provide in bringing speakers such as Vandana Shiva to campus. In ways, she delivered her message in the belly of the beast, although there is probably no way to end patriarchy and the dualistic thinking that man is superior both to women and nature. Indeed, U.S. culture seems like an occupied territory that is becoming even more dominated by those who want to exploit people and the land. People throughout history have learned how to survive, and in some cases thrive, in occupied systems territory. The challenge today is for people to be wise, committed, collaborative, resilient, and resourceful to find ways to work around or within the system.



Helen's living room with quilt block design she created for her urban farm. 2019.

A SPIRIT OF HOMECOMING IN A NEW PLACE AND NEW MILLENNIUM

We are all longing to go home to someplace we have never been, a place half-remembered and half-envisioned we can only catch glimpses of from time to time. Community. Somewhere there are people to whom we can speak with passion without having the words catch in our throats. Somewhere a circle of hands will open to receive us. Eyes will light up as we enter. Voices will celebrate with us whenever we come into our own power. Community means strength that joins our strength to do the work that needs to be done. Arms to hold us when we falter. A circle of healing. A circle of friends. Someplace where we can be free.

Used by permission from *Dreaming the Dark* by Starhawk,
Beacon Press, Boston. 1982.

The Razing of the Homeplace House and Barn

My great-grandfather and great-grandmother (C.L. and Dena Gunderson), my grandparents (John and DeElda), and my parents (Deane and Marion) all lived on farms in the Rolfe area. Generally speaking, members of my family who talk about our history would say that the men were the farmers, not considering that the women also made significant contributions to the success of the operations, even if not active in the fields. Regardless of the interpretation of gender roles, our farming heritage has ended. None of C.L. and Dena's descendants live on a farm or are farmers. That includes my five siblings and me. We have inherited land and receive substantial farm income, but that is not the same as being true farmers, even though I am a little smug and call myself an urban farmer.

I had long anticipated that the story about the road where I grew up in Pocahontas County would come to an end when my parents died, or at the latest, when their house was no longer there. Their deaths and the razing of their house are part of a continuum of milestones in the final phases of an era of rural life.

Since I began this project in 1989, several buildings that have been pillars of my heritage have been razed. They include the Rolfe Presbyterian Church, the town's three-story brick school building, most of the older main street buildings, the Victorian house and barn on the Gunderson homeplace, the barn and corncrib at my parents' farm, and finally their house.

My great-grandparents built the white two-story wooden Victorian house at the homeplace in 1907. After Great-Grandpa and Great-Grandma moved to town, my grandparents made their home there, raised my father, and were generous in their hospitality to me when I was a child and visited their farm. I was able to be at the homeplace in March of 1990 to observe, videotape, and photograph Allan Brandhoij and his assistant, Doug Lanning, raze the house. They were able to recycle most of the materials. After the demolition was complete and the site



Top photo: Barn at the Gunderson homeplace farm where Helen visited her grandparents, John and DeElda Gunderson, Section 23 Roosevelt Township, Pocahontas County. Now owned by Helen's brother, Charles Gunderson. 2005. Bottom photo: Haymow of the Gunderson homeplace barn. Circa 1990s.



Helen's shy cat, Shimmer, at Helen's home in Ames, sitting on an oak dining table from the Gunderson homeplace house and under a piece of wood from a horse feed trough at the homeplace barn. 2012.

had been bulldozed smooth, I anticipated that it would be a matter of only a few years before my brother, Charles, who owns the farm, would arrange to tear down the barn. However, years went by, and it continued to stand. At one point, I asked Charles about his plans for the barn. He replied he was waiting to raze it because he believed I had an emotional attachment to it. Well, yes, the homeplace barn was an icon that held a lot of meaning and memories for me. On the other hand, I had been ready for it to come down and was prepared to document the process.

Finally, in the spring of 2011, the day came for Allan to raze the homeplace barn. The weather was beautiful with perfect lighting and little wind—perfect conditions for getting good video footage. What were my feelings? Mainly ones of joy. It was time for the building to go, and I was glad I could be there with my camera. Some people wince when they hear that a barn is to be torn down. In some circles, that is not a politically correct thing to do. But this barn had seen its day. No one lived on that farm. Seldom was a soul there except perhaps to park a tractor and corn planter or pay homage to our heritage by climbing about the barn. It was not being used for anything except as a messy repository for seed corn bags that my brother's tenant piled there. Family members and other people had already picked over the exterior and interior wood. The rafters were rotting. The haymow floor was slumping. Fortunately, I had been able to visit the barn several weeks earlier with friends Gary, Betsy, and Luke Dahl, who helped me remove two large pieces of wood from the side of the feed bunks in the horse stalls. The wood was thick and old, as the barn was built in 1904. The wood was also well-worn and curved on top from generations of horses, including many Percherons, rubbing their chests against and chewing on the wood. And there were holes—two inches in diameter and one on each side of the board—where halter ropes had been tied to the feed bunks. I brought the wood back to Ames. One section is mounted in my living room over my couch, and a second is on the far wall of the living room above a credenza where I keep mittens, hats, and other items. The third is high on a wall in the garage with hooks for pitch forks, rakes, and shovels.

Not only did Allan and his son knock over the barn with their large backhoe, but they dug a long trench. It was 18 feet deep, 12 feet wide, and the length of the barn. First, they dumped

large trees into it, then piled on wood and rubble from the barn, poured on diesel fuel, and lit a match. It was a beautiful, raging fire with sparks blown by a strong wind. It lasted into the night and next day. Charles, his wife, and I had an impromptu picnic that evening, hanging out and watching the flames, neither in a hurry, nor exchanging a lot of words, but simply taking the experience in. I had brought a cooler of deli food from Wheatsfield Co-op in Ames that I had intended for my own use while visiting the Rolfe area. Instead, I parceled out the food. We had neither picnic chairs, table, plates, silverware, nor even napkins—not even a blanket to sit on. But we were content and well fed. Charles and Gloria didn't even seem to mind the sweet and spicy grilled tofu. However, Gloria and I were the only ones who tried the pickled beets. Neither tofu nor beets have ever been common menu items for the rest of my family, even though they are common for me, and I pride myself in making pickled beets. I fondly recall taking a jar of them to a meal at the homeless shelter in Ames and having one of the men say that the beets were “to die for,” and another of the men whole-heartedly agreeing. Fun and affirming memories.



Flames from firepit where the remains of the Gunderson homeplace barn were buried. 2011.

That night as we watched the rubble of the barn burn, it would have been neat if we had brought graham crackers, marshmallows, and Hershey's chocolate bars. I suppose Allan could have scooped up a small portion of the huge fire and put it in a bowl or other container for us to roast the marshmallows and make s'mores, but that was not the case. In many ways, that night and that fire were better than any last-night-at-camp bonfire than I ever participated in, and just as great, if not greater, than any solstice parties I have attended. It would have been neat, also, to have camped overnight at the homeplace and kept the fire company. But we did not. I stayed at my parents' farmhouse by myself for the first time in years—a strange feeling with many furnishings that had already been removed and many accessories that were still in place, as if nothing had changed.

I returned to the homeplace late the next morning. Allan and his son were there but soon left for a lunch break. I walked around the ruins, took a seat in their Bobcat skid-loader, meditated on the scene before me, and watched a huge skunk scamper across the rubble. I suppose she had been living in the rock, concrete, and dirt floor. Later, Allan told me that a baby skunk had been crushed by a falling rock during the morning's demolition work. Presumably, the mother skunk was looking for her young and mourning her loss.

I got out of the Bobcat, walked back and stood by the trench, watching the dwindling flames. The image of the mythological phoenix came to me. I also thought about all the solar and other energy bound up in a prairie and how a good prairie fire releases tremendous

energy. It was time for the barn to burn and for its energy to be released. As much as I loved that place and was drawn to it, I was ready for it to be razed. I had not wanted it to deteriorate further but felt that in some ways razing it would be analogous to shooting a horse that had broken a leg. I was able to capture some dramatic footage of the barn coming to its end, release the hold the barn had held on me, and had a peace of mind even though I would never again be tempted to spend long hours walking around the ground floor of the barn and crawling into the haymow. Such visits had been important times that had allowed me to explore and reflect privately about what the homeplace had meant to me, but with my age, it had become increasingly difficult and dangerous to climb the ladder to the haymow.

The Razing of Helen's Parents' House

Sister Clara inherited my parents' house and farmstead after Dad died on July 1, 2010. In some respects, she and the rest of the family probably knew all along that she would have the house razed, considering memories of conversations with Mother and Dad. However, Clara had been in no hurry to decide its final fate and wanted to allow plenty of time for family members to be ready emotionally for its demise and deal with items in the house. It also seemed that the decision was a harder one for Clara to make than she had anticipated. The house sat abandoned except for occasional visits until December 2017 when she began making arrangements to have it razed. The actual demolition did not occur until April 2018.



The house where Helen grew up sat abandoned from 2010 until 2018 with only occasional use after Helen's father died on July 1, 2010. 2010.

I did not have the intense nostalgia for my parents' house that I held for my grandparents' house at the homeplace and struggled with whether or not to be there. It's probably accurate to say I never felt truly comfortable in the house that Mother and Dad began building in 1955 and we moved into in 1956, making the main period of time I lived there from sixth grade until graduating from high school in 1963.



Left photo: The new house that Helen and her family built and moved into on their farm in 1956. Left to right: Helen's parents, Marion and Deane Gunderson; Charles, Martha, Peggy in front of Helen, Clara, and Helen's grandparents, DeElda and John Gunderson. 1956. Right photo: Gunderson farmstead shortly after the new house was built. Circa 1957. Both photos from the Deane and Marion Gunderson collection.

Our family meals usually seemed like crowded and controlled times with so many of us around the oak table in the kitchen. I cannot recall a time when there was a truly participatory conversation of all of us family members around the table. All it took was a stern grimace or guttural "ahem" from Dad for us children to keep our thoughts to ourselves.

In the early 1990s, my California therapist recommended I read two books by Swiss psychologist and philosopher Alice Miller to help understand my family dynamics. They were *The Drama of the Gifted Child: The Search for the True Self* (1979) and *For Your Own Good: Hidden Cruelty in Child-Rearing and the Roots of Violence* (1980). Miller critiques the German pedagogy of raising children that she claims has pervaded much of Western culture. A cornerstone principle that I recall is, "There shall be one will in the family, and it shall be the father's." Also, corporal punishment is just fine for a child who shows a will of his or her own.

Even though Mother and Dad were progressive in some respects, the pedagogy that Miller describes slipped into our family dynamics. I have chosen not to go into further detail but will simply say that much rotated around my father, his will, and his style of discipline. Also, it does seem fair and accurate to say not only that my teenage years were difficult, but that I was not able to be my authentic self. Perhaps when looking at a larger context, it is appropriate to wonder just who could be their authentic self in high school.

I have often wondered, though, how different people from similar situations can view life so differently. Why do some people speak of their fathers endearingly and yet other siblings in the same family do not? Why is it that some people have not been bothered by male privilege in their schools and yet others from the same environment wrestle with the impact of that culture?

Perhaps it is because memory can play tricks on a person. There have been times when I vividly remembered a situation, but in doing research decades later, realized the facts were different than what I remembered. It was not a mere matter of differing interpretations but a matter of remembering the wrong facts. However, perceptions of an event can be just as significant as the facts of an event.

I participated in a chaplaincy internship at the University of California San Francisco Medical Center one summer while in seminary. We interns had to do reports—what were called verbatims. We would select a conversation with a patient and write from memory—usually as soon as we could get to a pen and paper—as close of a recollection as possible of everything that was said. We learned that what was most important was how we recalled the



Photo from Pocahontas County Assessor's web site of the farmstead where Deane and Marion Gunderson raised their family and lived out their lives. Now owned by Clara Gunderson Hoover. *Copyright 2012 Pictometry International Corporation. Used with permission.*

event and interpreted it. I have found the same to be true of working with dreams. Actually, there are no facts in a dream to contest. But the key is how a person enters and interprets a dream in her journal or with a friend, therapist, or spiritual director.

I say this because much of what I have reported in this book has to do with the memory of past events and dynamics in my family. First, there will be varying and conflicting perceptions in response to what I have written. Secondly, I may have remembered some of the facts incorrectly. However, they remain vivid memories, even if, for instance, I have placed one in the wrong year. Third, I have tried my best to be accurate and fair to provide a window into what life was like for me as a teenager. On one hand, I want to be thoughtful and compassionate. And on the other hand, these descriptions are a way of voicing who I was then and sharing some factors that affected me, despite the fact that there has been a strong motif in my family for generations about not giving voice to our experiences.

In weighing whether or not to be present for the razing of my parents' house, I also thought about the ways in which I had already grieved its potential demise in past decades. It's called "anticipatory grief." Many times, I had dreams about the house and shared them with my California therapist or wrote about them in my journal. The most vivid was an apocalyptic dream in the 1990s about watching a prairie fire from miles away swoop across the farmstead and wipe out any evidence that a family had ever lived there. I experienced sheer horror and grief in comprehending the erasure of that culture.

Also, I already had plenty of good photos of the house. I was curious, though, about how the demolition would go, and wouldn't have minded being there if I could've been there on my own, with just my older sister, Clara, or perhaps with Charles. However, when I knew that all of my siblings might be there, I could not fathom going. I even wrote to Clara that I would not be there. However, as the scheduled event grew nearer, I gently lectured myself



Images from the abandoned house where Helen grew up. Kitchen. 2018. Bathroom and upstairs hallway. 2015.

about how this road project was indeed my project, that I had dedicated nearly 30 years to it, and that the razing would be, at least for me, the last major milestone for the project. I decided not to let the presence of siblings or my attitude toward them ruin the experience for me. As it turned out, the project was delayed three weeks because the one-and-a-half mile gravel road from the highway to my parents' farm was icy and slippery, making it dangerous, if not impossible, for the semi-truck pulling a three-axle trailer loaded with a 22-ton hydraulic excavating machine to travel to the farm.

The house-razing day finally arrived. The sky was gray and the weather cold and windy. I arrived at the farmstead and greeted Clara and some of the others who were able to be there.



Allan Brandhoij and his excavator begin to knock down the house where Helen grew up and her parents lived out their lives. 2018.

Those present included Peggy, Clara and her husband, Hal; Charles and his wife, Gloria; Louise, her husband, Bill, and Mia, their four-year-old granddaughter; and me. Marti, who lives in Florida, had originally planned to be at the farm but could not accommodate the project delay. I wore nearly the same layers of outdoor clothing as I had worn the previous fall when I watched Betsy harvest beans, except this time, I had a new hooded Carhartt jacket that I had gotten for \$40 on sale at Theisen's store where the normal price had been \$99. It was my first ever Carhartt clothing.

It was like a time warp to walk through the rooms and see how a house that had once been the pride of my parents had changed. I recalled Mother and Dad hiring an up-and-coming architect, John Wiegman, who had grown up in Rolfe, to design the house and the months that the carpenter brothers Lovell and Rodell Long, along with Earl Spiker, built it. There are also entries from Mother's mid-1950s diary about the extensive research that she and Dad did on carpet, electric heating, and many other elements of their new home.

I, too, took pride in the house, especially when we moved into it from the old house just next to it. For about a year, I had my own room. There was a built-in bookshelf where I could showcase my horse collection, and I had a dark brown horse hide from Grandpa and Grandma that I used for a rug atop the green and black squares of tile flooring. Mother and Dad let me pick a royal green color for painting the walls and bookshelf, and Bompas sent me a matching green wool blanket with satin binding from Utah. For years, our family would reference "the green room, the pink room, the gold room, and the lavender room." I also knew that the hardware accessories such as the rollers and glides for the sliding closet doors had come from Bompas's wholesale hardware business. However, that house never seemed to have the character of a farmhouse, especially not the character of the homeplace house.

The south wall of the two-story house had been attached to a breezeway, and its south wall was attached to the garage. Clara had workers convert the breezeway and garage into

one unit and cover the areas where there had been windows, making the building into a storage shed. They also cut the south wall of the house—as if with a jigsaw—so the wall would remain with the shed. Workers had already salvaged some of the dull blue metal siding from the house, exposing the original bright green wood boards. The metal siding was saved to cover the areas of the shed where there had been windows. Workers had also removed windows, interior doors, cupboard doors, drawers, and other items worth salvaging. The built-in turquoise cubbyhole shelving in Dad’s office was still in place but empty above the space where his desk had stood. Nearby was a box of his VHS tapes, presumably of ISU football games, and an ISU football media guide. Mother’s bedroom seemed eerily vacant except for the plain, unpainted pine bed frame that Dad had built decades ago and the green and pink double-size mattress. There was a colorful poster of Mother’s that said “library” in the upstairs gold room where she had done her genealogy projects. The die had been cast. There was no going back and restoring this house.

Allan Brandhoij, who razed the homeplace house in 1990 and homeplace barn in 2011, was there once again with his hydraulic excavating machine. It was a golden yellow, 1990 John Deere diesel model 690, weighing 22 tons with the boom, stick, and clawed bucket having a reach of 24 feet. The bucket itself weighed one and a half tons. Allan said he bought the excavator used and that a new one would cost around \$350,000.

The excavator had been idling. Allan mounted the seat and moved the machine into position. I found a strategic place alone at a distance to set up my tripod and camcorder. The first action of the excavator was like a karate chop to the southeast corner of the roof. White particles that looked like large snowflakes or the loose stuffing from a pillow—most likely insulation—danced downward in the wind. A few more punches and there were large enough spaces in the exterior walls to expose the interior turquoise walls of the first floor and the brown diagonal mark where there had been a stairway to the second floor. An entire metal storm window fell from the second floor when a wall collapsed. I could see the lavender and gold rooms of the second floor. The library poster floated to the ground. Allan moved the excavator further north for more chops, punches, pushes, and pulls. Now just the west half of the north green face of the house from ground to roof stood. It was two-dimensional like a tall stage prop.



Helen’s sister, Clara Gunderson Hoover, a librarian by career, holds a sign that had belonged to their mother, Marion Gunderson, also a librarian, in the rubble of the Gunderson house when it was razed. 2018.



Driveway leads out of farmstead where Helen grew up to the gravel road that has been the center of this project about her heritage. Taken after her parents' house had been razed. 2018.

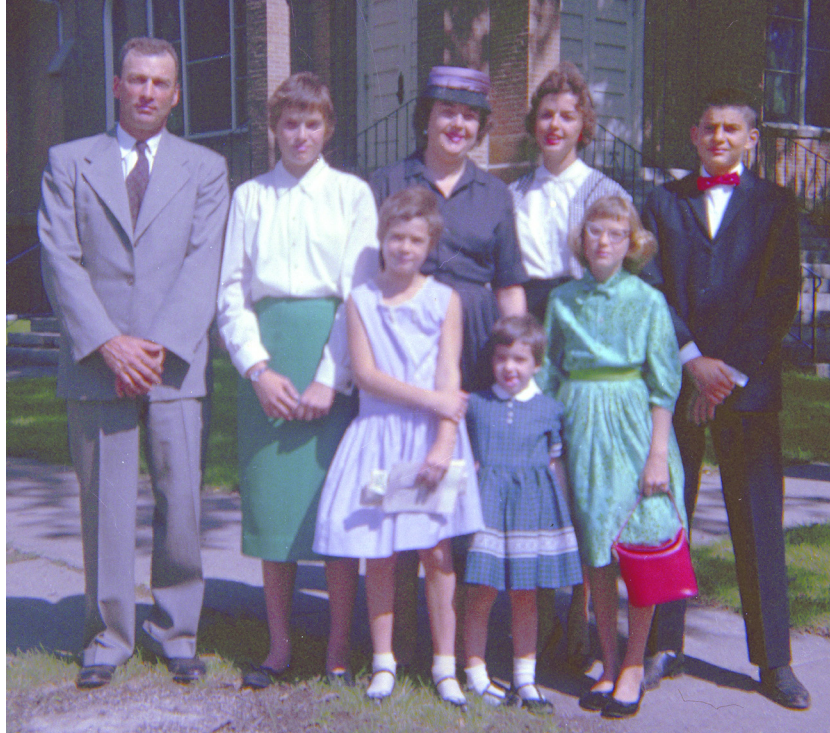
The sound of the machine dominated the air. But what most dominated my mind was the eerie sound of the dry studs, joists, and other wood. They creaked and cracked loudly and clearly on that cold, windy, gray day. Those boards that had once given structure to our family's epicenter snapped, crunched, and fell like fragile Tinkertoys, toothpicks, and match sticks.

Allan dug a deep hole in the ground for a burn pit and pushed a few items into it, but it was too windy to start a fire. Instead, he stopped and turned off the engine. All was quiet. Family members scampered around for closer looks at the rubble and took pictures. For instance, Clara and Peggy had their photo taken holding the library poster. There were a few discernible items in the rubble, such as an aluminum folding picnic chair with green plastic webbing and a three-foot-tall chunk of the brick chimney. But for the most part, there was mainly broken wood in the pile of rubble. The wooden studs and joists were unpainted, while the green siding looked like large, damaged Venetian blinds lying in the mess.

The bright orange windsock atop the oldest building on the farm—a round, brick corncrib that is no longer in use—flew fiercely toward the northwest. The air was clear and fresh except for the smell of the exhaust of the diesel excavator. The trees were dormant. Starlings congregated on a utility line then swarmed the brown turf of the large yard and nearby grove, looking for insects.

Knowing that it is hard to find a place in Pocahontas that meets my taste in food and where family members could linger to talk in at least semi-privacy, I told the others that I brought food to share and suggested we meet in the breakfast room of the Pocahontas Inn where several of us had rooms. We were fortunate that community-minded entrepreneurs in Pocahontas built the new motel in 2007.

I had chosen food that was reminiscent of what Mother would have served at home for lunch or taken in the trunk of the family's large sedan for tailgate lunches at Cyclone football games in the days when tailgating was not as elaborate and so much a matter of one-ups manship. I brought cloth calico napkins, Corelle dishes, and dill bread I had made, using



Helen's family, Easter Day in front of the Rolfe Presbyterian Church. Back row, left to right: Deane, Helen, Marion, Clara, Charles. Front row, left to right: Peggy, Louise, Martha. Circa 1959.

an adaptation of Mother's recipe to include half whole wheat flour rather than completely white flour. My version is more wholesome than hers would have been, and yet, her loaves with all white flour rose much higher and were more impressive looking than mine will ever be. I also brought a jar of my bread-and-butter pickles and small store-bought cans of fruit juice like what she brought to the tailgate gatherings, except that I could not find small cans of apricot nectar. My offerings also included some of the kinds of cookies that have been popular in our family: Fig Newtons, Oreos, and fudge-striped shortbread. I also contributed food that was not as common to our family: rice cakes, hummus, Kalamata olives, and Amy's black bean and rice soup. Gloria brought a large box of Casey's donuts and Louise provided a large pizza from the Pizza Ranch. It was a great space for our gathering and the conversation went well enough.

That evening, six of us gathered at the Family Table Restaurant in Pocahontas. Louise, Bill, and Mia had returned to their home near Perry. Each of us tried to find something satisfying on the menu, which from my perspective was limited. I tolerated a plate of soupy scalloped potatoes with ham and a small bowl of canned applesauce. We talked about our experiences of the day and memories of my parents and various rooms in the house. Then I suggested a notion that various siblings would possess different perspectives of the house, including different affinities for it, depending on their birth order.

It has often seemed like our family consisted of two families. Clara, Charles, and I had all lived in Waterloo when Dad worked at John Deere before moving back to the farm in 1945 into the old house when the place was quite rustic and he and Mother were learning how to be parents. In contrast, the younger three (Marti, Peggy, and Louise) had different experiences and, in ways, seemed like a second family. For Louise, the youngest and born in 1955, it could almost be said the house built in the 1950s was the only one she knew when growing up. Also,



The farmstead where Helen grew up has essentially become a bin site and operations center for Dan and Roger Allen, who live in Rolfe and Pocahontas respectively but who farm much of the land once owned by Deane and Marion that is now owned by Helen's sisters. Helen and her brother, Charles Gunderson, rent their land to other tenants. 2015.

after the older three of us graduated, there were only three children at home, then only two, then only one. They had a totally different relationship, not only with the house but also with Mother and Dad, than we older ones experienced.

The conversation that night was the most well-rounded, in-depth conversation that I have experienced with family. Although I sensed some self-protection on my part and perhaps from some others, it seemed like our egos had stepped aside, and no one got their Velcro hooked on another's Velcro. I learned a lot about the others and their perspectives, especially about what those years at home would have been like for my younger sisters. I am grateful for that day, for being able to witness and videotape the demise of the house, and for the dinner conversation.

My parents' house was more than a mere building. It was an icon that held energy and had been the focal point for our family, but it is now gone and no longer holds the center. It doesn't take much to enter a state of existential wonder and grief with the kind of questioning that happens after the death of a loved one. "Where did she go, where is she now?" Instead, the questions now are: "Where did that house go? Which of our memories are real? Which are imagined?" Even so, I am glad the house is gone. We siblings continue on our own journeys with our own focal points in the places we live, our relationships, and our hearts. As siblings and in-laws, we will either keep in touch or not, depending on the strength of our existing connections and what we each desire. Our focus will no longer be on caring for Mother and Dad, gathering at their place, or deferring to doing things their way. We are, indeed, free to live by our own standards. I am also free to let go of documenting that road. I've done my tour of duty these 30 years to monitor the changes and am happy for my journey, as well as for my current home, sense of family, and community here in Ames.

I recently rediscovered a scrap of paper in a box of miscellaneous papers related to this project. "Home is not a place, but the path you travel and where you meet your family." I also recall something the host leader at a New Year's retreat said when greeting the group of participants during orientation. "Family is who you meet on the journey of your life."

There will still be buildings at the farmstead where I grew up. The storage shed made by combining the garage and breezeway will be there. It is 664 square feet compared to my 884-square-foot house. Other buildings that will remain include the oldest structure on the



The round, brick corn crib built circa 1914, is the oldest building on the farm where Helen grew up. 2005.

farm: a round reddish-brown brick corncrib built in 1914; the large silver-colored metal grain bins; two large olive green metal Quonset sheds that Dad moved from town to the farm years ago for the tenants, Roger and Dan Allen, to store their combine and wagons; a smaller Quonset building that was Dad's shop; and the wooden red shed that used to be the hog house where I fed a liquid formula to orphaned baby pigs. Other remaining items include Dan and Roger's large fuel tank and grain augers. One remnant of the days of horse farming—a rusty brown dump rake used after mowing a field of hay—sits behind the farm buildings on the cusp of the farmstead and a square mile of corn and bean land. Clara is arranging to grow prairie patches where the house stood and in the turf area where at various times we siblings had our army tent, trampoline, and softball games.

When I journaled about the experience in my room at the Pocahontas Inn that night, I hummed tunes such as "Out of Africa," "Pomp and Circumstance," and "The Day of Resurrection." I was grateful the milestone of razing the house was behind me but also grateful I had been there that day and connected with family. The experience was akin to a metamorphosis, and I rejoiced in moving on.

Discovering a New Sense of Place, Purpose, and Connection

I do not often use the phrase "miracle," considering there is a fine line, if any, between what is mundane and sacred, and so much of how people interpret an event depends on their background and the lenses they wear. That said, I do believe it was a miracle to find this

884-square-foot, one-story house on this third of an acre urban lot in an ordinary residential neighborhood only a mile north of downtown Ames in 2006.

Discovering this home was also a dream come true. In the early 1990s, after the homeplace house was razed, I returned to California and worked with my therapist, Joan Chodorow, who emphasized the importance of paying attention to dreams. One night I dreamt I could have the homeplace house wherever I wanted, remodel it any way I wanted, and have anyone I wanted live with me. Indeed, being here does seem a spiritual extension of my experiences at the homeplace, enables me to feel more at home than at any other place I have lived, and has provided a haven after returning from trips such as those to document the razing of the homeplace barn and my parents' house.

In 2013, I purchased the house next door to this one. My friend Joy Leister and her husband had been contemplating selling their house in Gilbert where they had raised their children and that needed a lot of costly repairs, but they were not ready to move to be closer to grandchildren in Indiana. I offered them the opportunity to be my first renters, and the arrangements worked well. They moved in 2017, and I now rent the place to college students.

With the new lot's 10,000 square feet and the 15,400 square feet where I live, I have about a half-acre that I call the Burnett Urban Farm. It includes four house cats, seven chickens, and perennials such as prairie plants, asparagus, elderberries, raspberries, gooseberries, rhubarb, apples, peaches, cherries, hazelnuts, and Big Hip roses. There are also yearly vegetable crops such as peppers, tomatoes, cabbage, collards, kale, butternut squash, and dry beans.

In 1993, when I returned to Iowa from California, I moved into a brick four-plex apartment building in the town of Gilbert just four miles north of Ames. I anticipated it would have an atmosphere similar to what Rolfe had been when I was young. It did not take long, however, to discover that Gilbert was a bedroom town. There were far more people with far more loyalty to the school district, which spanned 48 square miles, including north Ames, than



Helen carries out the tradition of agrarian hospitality at her home in Ames. 2015.

there were people engaged in making Gilbert feel like a true community. In many ways, I enjoyed my stay there and got involved in the community. However, after a decade, I knew it was time to move to Ames.

Mother died in November 2004. When her estate was settled, I got a sense of how much I would receive from her and Dad when he would eventually die and decided I could afford to invest in a house. Kris Jurik, an Ames realtor, helped me search for a house from April 2004 to December 2005. We visited a few homes but found nothing coming close to satisfactory. I was downhearted. When spring came, though, I began driving around neighborhoods in Ames to see what might be available. There was a sign, "House for Sale by Owner," in the 1100 block of Burnett Avenue. I toured it with friends Andy Orngaard and Joy Leister.

It was a two-story wooden farmhouse built in 1910 on a lot that was 15,660 square feet. I had an eerie feeling when I was upstairs and looking out the window toward the large backyard. I felt as though I was looking out the upstairs window of my grandparents' farm home, built in 1907. I especially recall looking out that upstairs window of my grandparent's home when visiting Grandma after Grandpa had died. I did not have the language to know I was grieving and depressed. All I knew as I stared out the window in the late fall of 1956 toward the windmill and barn was that I missed Grandpa and felt empty with no solace.

I had wanted to find a place where I could live out my life and had to keep telling myself, "Helen, this house lures you, but it is not the place for you. That long, steep stairway to the second floor will be neither convenient nor safe." One day, there was an ad in the *Ames Tribune* announcing an open house at that house. I debated if should I go.

Finally, I drove to Ames for errands, then parked across the street from the house, turned off the engine, but resisted the temptation to walk over for a closer look. I told myself, "Helen, drive on, you cannot grow old there." I started the engine, slowly drove north, then noticed a small sign posted at the corner of 13th and Burnett. It said there was a house for sale by owner four blocks further north. I pulled up to the house, rang the doorbell, realized no one was



Backyard and house in Ames that Helen bought in 2006 before becoming an urban farm. Circa 2006.

home, and then, feeling nervous yet anticipatory, I walked around to the back and saw a huge yard. My jaw dropped, and I recognized, "This is my place."

I called and left a message for the owners, Jason and Sara Hoher, then went to my apartment in Gilbert. Little time had lapsed when Sara called, and I was back in Ames, touring the home. Fortunately, although her design style and mine are so different, I could see that it was a plain enough house with plenty of quality. Also, it was only one story with a clean basement and solid foundation and already had hardwood floors and a stacked clothes washer and dryer unit on the main floor next to the bathroom.

Andy and Joy toured the house with me within a few days and gave me a thumbs-up, delighting with me in finding this home. Sara and I did a little dance of offer, counteroffer, and final offer. However, I wanted the place so much that I would have been willing to pay their original asking price to ensure no one else would get the house but thought people might scold me for not negotiating a lower price.

This house on Burnett is the second one I have owned. In the 1970s, while in Fargo, I owned a one-story square house just four blocks east of the university. It was slightly smaller (792 square feet) with nearly the same floor plan, and the yard seemed large, but with 7,000 square feet, it was less than half the size of this Burnett yard.

A Tale of Two Grandmothers

In 1990, while I lingered around the homeplace house, observing and photographing Allan Brandhoij and his co-worker Doug Lanning deconstructing the interior, I would learn another bit of family history that most likely is a major factor in why the heritage of that place means so much to me.

One afternoon, Allan and Doug swept a small mouse-bitten envelope that contained a letter from deep inside the pocket of a sliding door. They gave it to me. The envelope had a three-cent stamp and was dated September 1945, the same month that as an infant I first moved to the Rolfe area with my folks, sister Clara, and brother Charles. The letter was addressed to Mother's mother, whom we children called Nanna, who was visiting from Utah and staying with Grandpa and Grandma at the homeplace while Mother and Dad were settling into a rather rundown house on the farmstead where my family would live until we built a new house in 1956. I assume Nanna had taken the train from Ogden, Utah, to either Omaha or Sioux City and on to either Manson or Rolfe. Her husband, whom we called Bompa, had typed the perfunctory note at his office at the family wholesale hardware business in Ogden. The note informed Nanna of his travel plans—coming by car—to meet her at the farm.

That evening, I showed the envelope and note to Mother and Dad while at supper at their round oak table. The artifacts did not trigger any memories with Mother but reminded Dad that when our family moved back to the Rolfe area and was settling into the old farmhouse, both Grandma and Nanna had spent time together at the homeplace. That was a surprise to me because the two grandmothers seemed of such different cultural backgrounds. I had never thought of the two of them as spending time together, and especially never thought of Nanna as staying at the homeplace.

DeElda Lighter Gunderson's parents owned the Rolfe *Reveille* newspaper. There is no record that she graduated from high school. She sang in the Methodist choir, belonged to Eastern Star, and was a retail businesswoman before marrying Grandpa and moving to the farm where I remember her large garden. Helen Loomis Abbott grew up in a railroad family in Sioux City, was valedictorian of her high school class, attended one year of college at Iowa State where she met Bompa, moved to Utah with him, and was an Episcopalian, statewide president of the women's philanthropic organization P.E.O., and Victorian in disposition. She had a Japanese gardener who grew flowers.



Top photo this page: First phase of tearing down house at Gunderson homeplace farm. 1990. Bottom photo this page: Disassembling the dining room at the Gunderson homeplace farm. 1990. Top photo opposite page: Stairway to left and pocket door straight ahead at the Gunderson homeplace farm. 1990. Bottom photo opposite page: Disassembling the passthrough counter and cabinetry between the kitchen and dining room at the Gunderson homeplace farm. 1990.





Helen's grandparents from Ogden, Utah, visit the farm. Back row, left to right: Marion Abbott Gunderson holding infant Helen beside Jim and Helen Abbott. Front row: Charles and Clara. Circa 1945.

Grandpa and Grandma's cars were Mercury sedans. The first I recall was a 1940s large, frumpy-looking, light green sedan. Then Grandpa bought a new, spiffy-looking Mercury Montclair with white top and royal green bottom from the Pocahontas Ford dealership in 1956 without telling Grandma. In contrast, Nanna and Bompa in Utah had a Cadillac.

Grandma and Grandpa did not dance, play cards, or drink alcohol. In contrast, Nanna and Bompa belonged to the country club where Mother learned to dance, and there was a drinking culture along with slot machines and poker games even though gambling was not allowed in Utah. Dad said that whenever he and Mother visited Nanna and Bompa in Utah, Nanna swigged a glass of Scotch whiskey at the kitchen counter each night before they went out for dinner.

There are only two times when I have seen Dad cry or at least get choked up with feeling. One was when Mother traveled to Utah in July 1951 to be with Nanna, who had become ill, then died of a heart condition. Dad gathered us children in the dining room to inform us of her death. The other time was when he was in his later decades and talked about how beautiful Nanna had been, how relatively young she was when she died at age 60, and how in ways he felt responsible for her early death. It was clear that he loved Nanna even though he did not use those words. He explained that Nanna had been upset about the welfare of her daughter living in rural Iowa and having so many babies. He added that after I was born, Nanna said she would not again return to Iowa for the arrival of newly born children.

Dad said that during the first weeks of our family moving back to the Rolfe area, he and Mother had left me at the homeplace house in the care of both Grandma and Nanna. In light of how the Iowa male-dominated culture has affected me, it is interesting to ponder the effects of being left in the care of two grandmothers during that time. My attachment to the homeplace



Abandoned house where Helen visited her grandparents, DeElda and John Gunderson, at the Gunderson homeplace farm. Circa 1989.

heritage is not just because of my nostalgia for a diversified form of farming, Grandpa's use of horses, Grandma's garden, or being cared for as though I was an only child when I was there. My fondness must also be a result of the early nurturing from my two grandmothers, Helen and DeElda, who are my namesakes.

The feelings I hold for that part of my past are not something I can shed and are embedded in me. I want to honor the best qualities from whatever it is that flows through my genes, bloodstream, and soul from those days. It is more spiritual than physical, especially now after so many years have gone by. I do not want to err by living in the past. Also, I am not sure if Grandpa, Grandma, Bompa and Nanna walked in the room now that they would understand my urban farm and who I have become. But so be it. I do not need to cling to either the past or what they might think. Instead, I try to live in the present, but part of my present existence is the feelings I have toward the homeplace and my grandparents.

When I speak of my fondness for Grandpa and Grandma, I realize they and their place were not perfect. I also know that my father did not share the same nostalgia I had for the place. Once I asked him what he remembered of growing up on the homeplace farm and the qualities he saw in his parents. He said little except that how, considering their place was a farm, there was a lot that could go wrong but did not elaborate. He also said little about his parents and hardly ever, if ever, did I hear him refer to his parents as "Dad" or "Mother." It was either "Your Grandfather" or "Your Grandmother" or "John" or "DeElda."



Lone Wealthy apple tree and windfall of apples with row of tall conifers in the background at the Gunderson homeplace farm. 2006.

The Lone Wealthy Apple Tree

There is more, however, to the story of how the homeplace and my urban farm in Ames are connected. During the decade of the 1990s, I discovered there was still one apple tree at the homeplace. Dad said it was a Wealthy tree that Grandpa had planted in 1925. I remembered eating fruit from it and other apples trees at the homeplace as a child, but often, the apples were green and upset my stomach. As an adult, I learned to wait for the apples to turn red before eating them. Even then, the Wealthy apples tasted sour, but I loved the flavor and firm texture. If I were lucky and could be at the homeplace in a year when the tree was productive and the fruit ripe, I would harvest a bushel.

Nowadays, I stay in Ames for Christmas and do not remember how long ago I last joined my family for a Christmas meal. However, I do recall that for one of the last years, I gleaned apples from the lone Wealthy tree at the abandoned farmstead where my grandparents had lived, cut and froze the apples, and at Christmas made a pie from scratch to take to the Christmas meal at Dad's house. I was proud of my resourcefulness in making the pie and thought surely Dad would also appreciate it, considering the apples were from the farm where he had grown up. Instead, he did not eat any of the pie. It seems that he had his fill of apples at the homeplace, especially during the Great Depression years, and was not fond of apple pie.

In late fall of 2003, I was telling Dean and Judy Henry of Berry Patch Farm near Ames about the lone Wealthy tree and what it meant to me. Dean and Judy told me about grafting and how I could make a clone of that tree. In February 2004, they drove me to the homeplace and cut some scion wood from the tree and invited me to come watch Dean graft new trees that spring. I ended up with three baby apple trees, but had no place to grow them, and gave them to friends. Unfortunately, within a year, careless lawnmowers and rabbits ended the lives of those young trees.

At the end of each year, PFI has a conference for its members who participate in on-farm research. After every meal, before the keynote speaker begins, the microphone is passed from table to table, and everyone has a chance to tell what he or she is curious about. In November 2005, considering that Dean and Judy were not willing to again get Wealthy wood from the homeplace and graft for me, I stood, took the microphone, and asked if anyone would like to graft some Wealthy trees for me. After the meal, PFI member and tree specialist Tom Wahl, whom I had never met, came to my table and said he would be willing to help me learn to graft trees. With his offer in mind, I had my tenants, Denny and Jeff, take me to the homeplace farm, where we got some scion wood from the Wealthy tree.

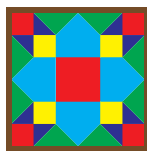


The many healthy Wealthy apple trees that Helen started on her first attempt at grafting while living in an apartment in Gilbert, Iowa, north of Ames. 2006.

In April, I started grafting apple trees at my Gilbert apartment. I had a high rate of success and ended up with 40 baby trees in pots in my two-bedroom apartment until the trees started to leaf out. Then I put the pots on my deck. I was concerned that I would have to give all the trees away, considering I had nearly lost hope of finding a place of my own in Ames. It is ironic that when I was looking for a home in Ames, I envisioned having a place simply large enough for just one tree and a small garden. However, I found this home of mine on Burnett with a large yard. In September, after nurturing the trees in pots on the deck, I planted three here at my new home and gave the rest away.

That lone Wealthy tree at the homeplace is gone. When I went to the farmstead one day in 2013, I was shocked that there was no sign of the tree except the clear-cut base, flush to the ground and showing its rings. I went to Charles' office and asked what happened. He was as surprised as me that the tree was gone. However, he had an idea of who the culprits were who had cut the tree.

This urban farm feels like an extension of my grandparents' home and is a place where I can continue the heritage of their Wealthy tree. As it is, my friend Steve Carlson from PFI and I have arranged each of the past three years to graft about 70 more apple trees from a variety of heirloom sources, including the Wealthy tree, to plant at our own homes and give away.



Agrarian Hospitality in an Urban Neighborhood

It is easy at times to say that this urban farm feels like utopia. However, putting the situation into perspective, considering it utopian might be considered improper. These lots are not something I have paid for out of my own earnings but have purchased with income from farmland that was given to me, as well as inherited funds. Some of that family wealth is a result of government policies that have benefited landowners. As a white woman, I also acknowledge my privilege in our nation's culture of racism, income inequality, hunger, food insecurity, lack of quality affordable homes, and homelessness, even in Ames. And I admit that some neighbors do not appreciate what I am doing. Fortunately, they are in the minority, and most of my neighbors seem to have high regard for my urban farming efforts.

If decades younger, would I like to live someplace else? Perhaps returning to California? No, I never could consider myself to be a Californian. Back to Minnesota? Maybe the Twin Cities with its many progressive features such as a high-speed rail system? Not really. To Dubuque where the mayor is a leader of green initiative? Not really. Would I want to live in a retirement community that will care for me the rest of my life? Not unless my health changes considerably.

I have shelter and am grounded here. I get to work with the soil. Also, for many years, I had looked for an excuse to become car-less. Finally, in 2009, when the air conditioning quit on my white 2000 Honda Civic, I decided against paying \$1,000 to replace the AC and sold the car. I would not buy another car until 2019. During that decade, I learned I can ride my bike in almost any weather and to almost any local place I want. I have also taken the bus and taxi, gotten rides from friends, and rented cars for travel outside of Ames.

In some ways Ames is like a second hometown to me, considering that Mother's parents, Nanna and Bompa, met at Iowa State. Then Mother and Dad met there while he got his two engineering degrees and she majored in applied art. Eventually, all of my siblings and I attended Iowa State, with all but one of us earning degrees here.

My urban farm is the mix of an agrarian and urban environment, and I am part of the growing trend of people who retire in university towns. Ames is not perfect, although it ranks high in many lists of cities and in 2018 had an unemployment rate of 1.5 percent, the lowest in the entire country. I hope to live out my life here. In many ways, it could be said that the road with the farmstead where my parents lived and my siblings and I grew up is an important part of who I am, but it is only part of the road, the journey, of my life.

Recently, I read the book *Women Rowing North: Navigating Life's Currents and Flourishing as We Age*, published in 2019 by Nebraska psychotherapist Mary Pipher. Many of Pipher's words have rung so true. Two messages stand out. One is in the chapter on authenticity and self-acceptance:

© Mary Pipher, 2019, *Women Rowing North*, Bloomsbury Publishing Plc

One of the greatest gifts of our later years is the possibility of authenticity, or what Margaret Fuller called the 'radiant sovereign self,' which comes from growing out of fears into wholeness. We may lose our false selves, acquired in childhood and carried with us through much of our long journey. We have the potential to discover our true selves deep inside and, at last, be able to tell the truth.

By engaging in the process of becoming more integrated and aware, we learn that the most important relationship is the one we have with ourselves. (221)



Helen at her urban farm in Ames. 2011. *Photo by her friend, Joy Leister.*

The fortune of having this urban farm probably is not in and by itself solely responsible for me feeling more at home with myself and the universe. I suspect age, privilege, access to good alternative health care providers, and luck may all be factors that allow me to experience some

of what Pipher says about discovering our true selves. However, one of Pipher's premises is that even people who have little money, are in poor health, are caring for sick loved ones, or have experienced the death of a close loved one such as a spouse can experience a wonderful sense of wholeness in their later years of life.

Currently, I do not feel the sense of loss that I had felt for so many decades, even though I am more concerned than ever about agriculture, the environment, and economy. I generally have good energy and a sense of equanimity. My edges have softened and one benefit of the passage of time is the ability to be a bit more compassionate. However, if some of the people out of my past walked in right now and behaved in some of the ways that they did in the past, my inner complexes would most likely raise their snarling heads and I would not be as gracious as I would like to be.

The other paragraph in Pipher's book that stands out is about the importance of grandchildren. Her words ring true about my connection with Grandpa and Grandma:

If we are lucky, our grandchildren light up when they see us. At least when they are young, we may be their favorite people. Unlike their parents, we don't have to be responsible for their daily lives. They can love us, and we can love them back. At best, this relationship is one of the purest and most golden relationships possible. It has a sacred quality... We accept our grandchildren for the unique beings they are. This acceptance gives them the confidence to feel they are worthy of the deep love they are given. It helps them see the universe as safe. It is the psychological equivalent of being given milk and cookies before bed and tucked in with a story and a kiss. This core confidence and sense of self-worth stay with children the rest of their lives. (207-208)

Though I am single and have no children, I sometimes feel a grandparent quality in my relationships with many of the young people who help with my urban farm or who I have met through my connections with the ISU program in sustainable agriculture. Some are the age my grandchildren would be if I had any. I am comfortable with them being in my home, and I believe they have liked having a place to be where they could feel at home in ways different from their regular environment. Sometimes, the workers and I simply sit and talk, perhaps sharing food or working alongside each other. Sometimes, I let them work on their own while I nap on the couch with my cats or work at the computer.

Of course, I would be negligent if I did not also acknowledge that the students appreciate me paying them well for working flexible hours on projects they like in an agrarian atmosphere. That said, though, not every young person would be content doing this kind of work.

They work not just outdoors growing food, watering plants, cleaning the chicken hotel, or building an orchard deck where I can host a small group for a meal or do yoga. They also work indoors starting seeds, preserving food, baking bread, or preparing the house for a potluck dinner. Indeed, some of the dinners have been for groups of sustainable agriculture students, sometimes having a mix of PFI members and students around the table to learn about each other.

When I speak of how it feels like a grandparent-grandchild quality in my relationships with some of the students who work here, there are characteristics common to my relationship with my grandparents. There is the context of the students being able to step outside the matrix of their daily lives and be a part of the agrarian atmosphere here. Certainly, this place offers a different way to feel at home in a university town. The student workers are in their 20s and 30s, while I am 74. But there are differences. In my relationship with my grandparents,



Top photo: Helen's cat Micah, mother of three other cats at the urban farm, sits on dresser in front of photo of the Gunderson homeplace barn. 2015. Bottom photo: A rainbow windsock flies above Helen's urban farm. 2012.

I was a child. The students and I are all adults. Our conversations are about matters on the surface of life and deeper topics. We are not related by biology or other standards, yet we share similar values. I listen to them, they to me. We are supportive of each other. There is a beauty to our relationships that is more complex than my relationship with my grandparents, and yet, the students will probably never play as major a role in my psyche as did Grandpa and Grandma.

To consider the connections between the students and me to be like a grandparent-child relationship may diminish the beauty or wonder of our connections. Perhaps instead, the analogy should be that ours is like me seeing them as a favored niece or nephew and them seeing me as a favorite aunt. But perhaps that even is not the best analogy. It may simply be best to consider us as friends—intergenerational ones at that—but friends. There is a mystery and wonder about all this. To understand deeper or explain further is difficult if not impossible. We like each other. Perhaps atop the idea of our being friends is the element of me admiring what they are doing with their lives and imagining how they will travel further into the future than me, accomplishing things I may never have envisioned or been able to accomplish. I like how they share some of my values, my increased energy when working with them, and how we simply enjoy each other. Reciprocally, it seems they admire what I am doing with my life, appreciate my values, and have some deference to me as an elder. In some respects, I provide them with an image of healthy ways to grow older, live differently, and think outside the box. These kinds of connections were not something that I envisioned when I bought this place or began recruiting student workers. I feel as though the students have a greater understanding of me than many of my family members have, considering I am estranged from some siblings who along with their children have vastly different lives and values than mine.

It seems fair to say that an element of love connects the young urban farm workers and me. Using the categories of love that Christian theologian C.S. Lewis writes about in his 1960 book



Helen incorporates permaculture principles in growing a diversity of prairie and food-producing plants on her urban farm. 2009.

The Four Loves, ours is not necessarily the agape or unconditional love that exists regardless of changing circumstances but is philia love or a friendship bond. Lewis believed that philia love was a higher level of love because it is freely chosen and based on appreciation but lamented that it was undervalued in the modern world.

Not only is this urban farm a unique setting, but I am an unconventional person and would certainly be part of a small percentage of the population in many respects. Not only have I been single for my whole life, but I grew up on a farm, own land, have a seminary degree, possessed no car for a decade, own no TV or smartphone, do not participate in social media, am content not to travel far but enjoy staying close to home, and have a unique blend of an urban-agrarian lifestyle. I treasure this place and these friendships. I treasure being able to bring some of the best of my upbringing and experiences into this space. I treasure this way of being even though there are times I feel I have bitten off too much with all the work there is to do here and am reminded of what my sister Clara said when I bought the place at age 60: “Helen, most people our age are slowing down and not taking on more responsibility.”

One of my favorite memories regarding these friendships is from the summer of 2015 when I went to a weeklong yoga retreat at Prairiewoods Franciscan Spirituality Center near Cedar Rapids. I had sent home the ISU extension recipe for bread-and-butter pickles with notes about my modifications, as well as the canning pot, canning jars and lids, jar lifter, canning salt, sugar, vinegar, mustard seeds, celery seeds, and turmeric, but not yet the cucumbers, with a septuagenarian friend, Jonah Powell, to make bread-and-butter pickles. Students Erica Johnson, Nataliya Apanovich, and Hannah Dankbar were working for me and said they would call Jonah when they harvested enough fresh cucumbers so Jonah could return and get enough to make a batch of pickles. I would hear later that Jonah ended up with dizzy spells



A raspberry trellis, peach tree, and path lead to the back of Helen’s lot where rain barrels are stored for winter and a shed that reminds her of her grandfather’s tool shop at the homeplace farm. 2017.



Bread made with Iowa-grown grains at Helen's urban farm. 2015.

and could not follow through with the plans. Her daughter, Anne Powell, a microbiology professor, returned the recipe and other items. Not all was lost. Erica, Nataliya, and Hannah held forth in my kitchen and learned to make the pickles and can them. The result was 18 pint jars of pickles with great taste and texture. The same day, another friend, Betsy Wentzel, who is retired after being a nurse practitioner with Doctors Without Borders, was at my house using basil from my farm and making several batches of pesto and freezing them.

Later in the season, some of the Sustainable Agriculture Student Association members harvested 24 cabbages here, and we went to a local church kitchen where we made several gallons of sauerkraut. We stored the jars at my place, and then in the winter served some of the sauerkraut at Food at First, a local nonprofit that provides daily meals for those in need. I am surprised in situations such as these to find myself in the crone role, mentoring young people on culinary projects. It is the kind of role I never dreamt of when I was a child and disdained cooking because I viewed it as women's work.

Nonetheless, I believe in generating hospitality and building community and could never have such great success developing this urban farm without the help of many people. I have had great mentors and helpers. I am grateful to Mark Runquist for recommending the masterpiece book on permaculture, *Gaia's Garden: A Guide to Home-Scale Permaculture*, by Toby Hemenway, when I first began developing the turf on this place into an urban farm. It has been a joy to work with contractor generalist Kent Savely, professional gardening assistants Steve Libbey and Tom Jordan, arborist Matt Michael, graduate students in horticulture and sustainable agriculture, other young people, and friends who have volunteered their help. I



Chickens at Helen's urban farm. 2011.

smile in remembering Dick and Sharon Thompson, Dick and Anita Fincham, Marilyn and Paul Andersen, and Gina McAndrews for allowing me to get manure from their livestock yards, and to Erv Klaas and Toby Ewing, who loaned me their old Ford pickup trucks for running farm errands. Also, I am extremely grateful to Ann Predgen, who set me up with my cat family: Micah, Shimmer, Jasmine, and Buddy; Amber Anderson, who introduced me to raising chickens; and Marti Owen, who has cleaned my house and helped with a variety of other projects for the past decade.

I can only imagine that if I owned my grandparents' farmstead and the 40 acres around it, which brother Charles currently owns, and developed it into a place to live and grow food like I do here, I would feel isolated. I would also be surrounded by a monoculture of chemical and GMO agriculture. Admittedly, I would be remiss if I did not acknowledge the prevalent use of lawn chemicals across Ames and specifically by most of my neighbors. That said, on any given day here at the Burnett Urban Farm, I can feel the agrarian spirit, work with the soil and plants, be entertained by my chickens and cats, connect with those people who stop by, ride my bicycle to run errands, eat at Wheatsfield Co-op, go to cultural events, and visit friends.

Even if I have to move from this urban farm, I hope I would still have the finances to continue owning it. However, what tugs at my heart is whether this place will continue as an urban farm after I am gone. It could perhaps be a greater legacy than my farmland, which I plan to give to non-profit organizations. I am proud that I have had the vision, resourcefulness, relationships, and persistence to develop this space into an urban farm. Yet I know that I have

no final control over whether these lots are converted to something drastically different and that it is important to practice detachment from whatever the outcome will be. My hope is that any money from the sale of the property, if that is what comes to pass, would be used toward the end of carrying on an agricultural heritage that includes an emphasis on hospitality, community, and locally grown food. Also, my hope is that there will be more properties in general where people would grow food and that this area with its large backyards that face each other would be recognized as a collaborative urban farming bowl.

In the end, it is simply wise to understand that nothing lasts forever except in spirit—not grandparents, not parents, not friendships, not a homeplace, not a rural neighborhood, not even an urban farm. I can handle that and want to continue enjoying the present, being grateful for what I have, living the best I can, which means being compassionate toward myself, other people, my cats, and my chickens. This urban farm is now a significant part of who I have become. It is not only a place of refuge, beauty, and growing food. It is my creation. Yes, I am proud of the photography, video, and writing that I have done. But this place, in a way, is also a work of art.



Helen's urban farm. May 2020.



A pair of valley oak trees along Silverado Trail in Napa County, California. Helen took the photo when she lived in Saint Helena after graduating from San Francisco Theological Seminary in 1985 and was deciding whether or not to return to live in her home state of Iowa. Circa 1988.

A PERSPECTIVE FROM THE PANDEMIC

July 31, 2020

My mother's father from Utah, Jim Abbott (we called him Bompá), co-owned the George A. Lowe wholesale hardware company in Ogden with his brother, George Abbott. In the 1950s, the store had a large toy department, and each year Bompá would send or bring us gifts. One year, it was hula hoops, and our family was the first in the community to have the novel toy. It was then that I recognized that trends in the U.S. often show up first on one coast, then the other before gradually seeping into the Midwest.

In that era, it was easy to think we who lived in the Midwest were safe from such perils as a foreign attack, yet news on the television one afternoon after I came home from school in the mid-50s ruined that sense of security for me. Sitting on the couch in the basement by myself, I was terrified when I heard that the Russians had developed an Intercontinental Ballistic Missile (ICBM) that could reach the Midwest.

In January 2020, COVID-19 seemed like a problem limited to China and other Asian or European countries such as Italy but not so much for the U.S. Then it became a crisis for coastal states such as New York, Washington, and California that were recording large numbers of deaths while there had yet to be any serious virus detection in Iowa. On March 8, Governor Kim Reynolds announced news of the first Iowan to become infected, and the numbers continued to increase. By mid-May, Reynolds believed the trend was no longer as threatening and revoked some stay-in-place orders, and many retail stores and other locations opened.

A *New York Times* article updated on May 13, 2020, listed the Iowa towns of Waterloo-Cedar Falls and Sioux City among the top 10 U.S. metropolitan areas with the highest percentage rates of growth of COVID-19 infection in relation to the population of the city. The high rates of infection have been tied to conditions at meatpacking plants.

In January 2019, I began writing the second volume of this book and finished the task in September 2019. Although the ISU library's digital press worked on my book for many months in 2019, the library leadership and I met in January 2020 and decided it would be best for me to hire a commercial printing company to do the book. My relationship with Heuss Printing in Ames began about the same time as the coronavirus was making significant inroads into the U.S. In some respects, I felt my work paled in importance compared to the challenge of the pandemic. My exploration of loss, remembering a neighborhood and era, examining agricultural issues, and sharing some of my life's journey simply did not seem important enough to push toward completion. On the other hand, I had committed too many years to the project to simply wrap it up until the pandemic had passed. Who knew how long I could keep the mental clarity to finish the book, whether I could recover from another hiatus from the project, if a local printing company could keep its workers healthy and productive, and if the company could weather the economic strain created by the pandemic. I also realized that the issues I addressed in the book are integrally connected to some of the issues and challenges exacerbated by the pandemic.

It has been said many times, at many levels and in many ways that this pandemic will undoubtedly change our culture. A caveat, though, is that we have no clear idea what those

changes might be. My guess is that once the threat of the pandemic has passed, if that were ever to happen, systems and individuals will revert as much as possible to business and life as usual.



Farming practices that were intensive by the standards of the 1930s were some of the culprits causing the Dust Bowl during that decade in the southwestern United States. The classic scenes from photographs and films showing wind and dust wiping away entire farms may seem a part of the past. However, there are current environmental issues, especially in light of climate change and water quality, that are just as serious, and it's as if today's proponents and operators of status quo farming have not taken the lessons of the Dust Bowl to heart enough in the last 80 years nor have they reformed agriculture sufficiently.

Conventional farmers have removed fence rows from their fields and now plant corn or soybeans far into the road ditches of adjacent gravel roads or infringe on the banks of drainage ditches. For example, not many years ago a farmer grew corn to the edge of the steep bank of Crooked Creek diagonally across the road and bridge from a field where I have a 100-foot conservation buffer strip of native plants along the same drainage ditch. Not only was there evidence of agricultural chemical burn in his corn rows, Brome grass, and other weeds on the ridge of the ditch, which could contaminate the water flowing into the creek, but part of the bank had collapsed, causing erosion and the potential for soil to slide into the channel of water. I doubt this farmer likes to farm that intensively, but he rents from Shannon Family Farms, Inc. The corporation with its over 3,000 nearly adjacent acres of land, whose owners throughout the decades have never lived in Iowa, is now owned by an investor in Florida, who also owns other farmland. I imagine the farmer is like many other operators in believing he needs to farm every possible inch of the property in order to pay a high rate of cash rent.



Young, green cover crops growing in corn stubble following harvest. *Photo courtesy of Practical Farmers of Iowa.*

Nearly all of Iowa's corn and bean crop land lies bare in the winter. Environmentalists worried about the problems presented by that bare ground have been promoting the use of cover crops planted in the fall after the main crops are harvested.

The Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education program defines a cover crop as "a plant that is used primarily to slow erosion, improve soil health, enhance water availability, smother weeds, help control pests and diseases, increase biodiversity, and bring a host of other benefits to your farm. Cover crops have also been shown to increase crop yields, break through a plow pan, add organic matter to the soil, improve crop diversity on farms and attract pollinators. There is an increasing body of evidence that growing cover crops increases resilience in the face of erratic and increasingly intensive rainfall, as well as under drought conditions. Cover crops help when it doesn't rain, they help when it rains, and they help when it pours!"



Practical Farmers of Iowa T-shirt design to promote cover crops. 2019.
Image courtesy of PFI.

Practical Farmers of Iowa (PFI) works to educate policy makers, landowners, and farmers about cover crops and has a slogan, "Don't farm naked, plant cover crops."

Sarah Carlson, lead cover crop specialist for PFI, traveled with me to visit with my farm tenants, Jeff DeWall and Denny Flaherty, in September 2013. We met at the Pizza Ranch in Pocahontas and had a great discussion. I was ecstatic that Jeff and Denny agreed to try cover crops on a 40-acre field that year and work alfalfa into the crop rotation of yet another field the next year. However, those plans fizzled. Cereal rye and oat seed was extraordinarily expensive that year with the added expense of hiring a pilot to sow the seed aerially. Jeff and Denny could not sow the seed until late in the fall, and there was little to no precipitation to foster germination and growth. When spring arrived, there was no sign of rye growing in the field. Jeff and Denny said they would not try cover crops again and that if I wanted alfalfa included in my crop rotation, I needed to rent my ground to someone else. It was as though they were saying, "Been there done that, it didn't work and won't work," and did not realize that cover crops are a long-term investment that should benefit not only the environment but the farmer's pocket book. Jeff continues to farm 77-acres for me. Denny retired at the end of 2019. They are not alone in their reluctance to incorporate cover crop practices.

In 2019, the Iowa Environmental Council (IEC), a non-profit organization, published a critique of the state's Nutrient Reduction Strategy. "The NRS, which Iowa adopted in 2013, grew out of a stakeholder development process that originated in the multi-state Gulf Hypoxia Task Force, a coalition formed by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency in 1997 to address the growing 'Dead Zone' in the Gulf of Mexico. This Dead Zone has continued to grow despite efforts to address its causes. It is an area of water featuring little to no oxygen, caused by the growth of algae due to excess nutrients, which renders the water inhospitable to other aquatic life.

"The Nutrient Reduction Strategy seeks to reduce nitrogen and phosphorus contributions to Iowa's waterways through a suite of conservation practices, including cover crops, wetlands, and bioreactors. It does not, however, include specific reduction target amounts or timelines to achieve such reduction."

The IEC report continues, "The increase in the rate of cover crop implementation has slowed drastically. At the current rate of implementation, it will be 2110 by the time the state reaches the NRS goal of 12.6 million acres of cover crops." And in summary, it says, "Less than one million acres have been treated by the three practices in scenario one – just three percent of the 26.3 million acres of cropland in Iowa. At the same time, a recent study from the University of Iowa revealed that, despite adoption of the NRS in 2013, Iowa's nitrogen load to the Gulf of Mexico has increased by nearly 50% since 2003."

Iowa's conventional farmers, landowners, communities, and the state's treasury itself have become accustomed to and financially dependent on these and other unsustainable practices. The COVID-19 pandemic is now exposing the frail nature of those highly hyped practices.



The pandemic is harshly hitting meat-processing plants such as those in Sioux City, Storm Lake, Waterloo, and Cedar Falls, and their large number of COVID-19 cases has forced some to close. Unfortunately, there are people in power who unwisely are suggesting the plants be forced to remain open at what would be increased peril to the workers.

Wisconsin dairy farmer Jim Goodman wrote to the *Wisconsin Examiner*, whose motto is "Digging up the truth in the Badger State." In a May 4, 2020, column titled "That this system would fail was entirely predictable," Goodman says, "More than 40 years ago as a graduate student gathering research data, I spent considerable time in what was then the John Morrell plant in Sioux Falls, S.D." He then critiques the current meat packing industry:

The workers I knew were union members, they were paid well enough to buy cars, homes and send their kids to college. Over the past decades the workforce is increasingly made up of immigrants and minorities, people who have been a target for President Trump. Meat processing was always dangerous work, but COVID-19 has upped the ante. The recent executive order to force plants to re-open while relying on plant owners to determine what additional safety measures were feasible — as opposed to health and workplace safety experts, has highlighted Trump's disdain for the people who do so much of the backbreaking labor to produce Americans' food.

Meat industry experts claim, “It is not a broken system by any means,” and of course they claim plant “shutdowns were a Black Swan even”—meaning they were not predictable. Please. A highly consolidated system with millions of animals running through too few giant processing plants has always been a disaster waiting to happen. The system is not, as *Progressive Farmer* magazine calls it, “a well oiled machine,” while also noting that “USDA has initiated steps to limit labor shortages for critical tasks”—sure, bring on the forced labor of immigrants and minorities. Or, perhaps, let’s have less meat and more personal protective equipment?

When I was a child, the farms in the area where I grew up were much more diverse than they are now with many crops and kinds of livestock. Dad claimed a farmer would grow a few hogs as a “mortgage lifter,” meaning that the farmer could count on the sale of hogs to convert corn that was selling at a low price to meat that was selling at a more profitable rate and generate extra income to help with basic expenses and pay off the mortgage.

Many farmers grew a range of ages of hogs from farrowing piglets, raising them to market weight, and selling them directly to a stock yard. A farmer might even take a mature hog to the local butcher for processing and storing the packages of meat in a freezer compartment assigned to a family. Both the plant itself and the individual storage compartments were called lockers. We did business with Telmer Simes Refrigerated Locker, which opened in 1938, that became the Rolfe Food Lockers in 1959 on an acreage on the east side of town. An article in *The Rolfe Arrow* newspaper describes the 96x16 foot building as having a 36-degree receiving room and 16-degree locker room with 150 lockers “of the very latest pattern,” and the potential to add 100 more. Mother had a key, and I remember going with her, checking in, walking down an aisle of the freezing cold room with its white-faced lockers, finding our locker, loading a handful of packages of meat — all wrapped in white butcher paper — into a box — and taking them home. The Rolfe Food Lockers closed in 1971. Rolfe and most other small towns no longer have lockers.

The predominant organizing structure of hog production today is called “vertical integration.” Only a handful of large corporations control the industry, owning the hogs at each level of development from birth to piglet to mature hog as well as owning the slaughterhouses and controlling the retail market. Farmers do have a role, managing facilities and livestock but essentially operating as hired help for the companies. Some critics of the system suggest that anti-trust laws should be used to reform the industry and allow a more significant and profitable role for independent producers and processors. Although federal laws could apply to collaborations such as price-fixing among the top beef-producing companies, they don’t specifically address issues of vertical integration within one corporation.

Sudden closures at processing plants caused by the pandemic resulted, for a time, in livestock farmers, especially those with large CAFOs (Concentrated Animal Feeding Operations) being unable to move their mature livestock to market. Instead, they are faced with the challenges of slaughtering and disposing of the bodies of huge numbers of animals.

Sally Worley, Practical Farmers of Iowa’s executive director, often reminds members that agriculture needs all kinds of farmers from large-scale to small-scale and conventional to regenerative to organic. She advises members to not have an “us against them” mentality. I appreciate her advice. My concern, though, is that agriculture is dominated by powerful corporations that endow university programs and have heavy lobbying arms, promoting large-scale conventional agriculture even though they might give lip service and funding to small-scale farming.

I am concerned, also, that government policy favors large-scale, conventional farming. It is easy, however, to err on the side of glib generalizations. So I wrote to the Practical Farmer of Iowa listserv, David Swenson, Iowa State University research economist, and Kelvin Leibold, ISU Extension agricultural business management specialist to get further perspectives.

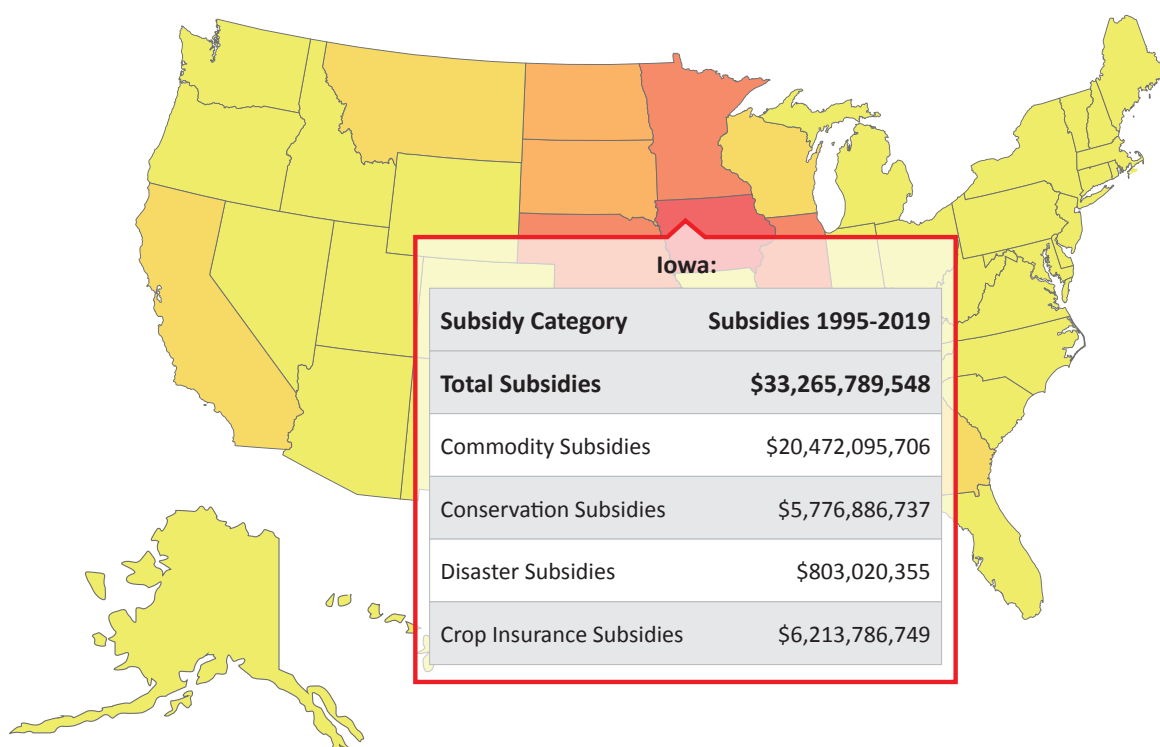
One PFI member responded, “All I know is government benefits those who can lobby. This needs to change. Government should be for all, however it is not.”

A second PFI member, “As long as the government is involved it will not get much better. Large scale farmers believe that they are independent and yet are completely dependent upon policies and payments. The government policies are set up to pay per acre or per bushel so that incentivizes farmers to get bigger. I wish that farm program recipients would at a minimum have to be good stewards of the land before they were paid, but I don’t find that to be true at all.”

There could be much debate about whether or not there should be government aid to farmers and landowners or whether the USDA programs need to be radically changed, perhaps putting strict caps on payments to wealthy recipients and basing payments on whether a farmer uses practices that have the potential to sequester carbon.

David Swenson wrote, “The thorough unwillingness of public policy to deal with serious ag externalities (soil depletion, nutrient runoff, ubiquitous water quality damage) is a major policy failure and a glaring market failure. Not tying public subsidy to best environmental practices (for decades) has been tragic.”

A third PFI member, Mark Quee, farm manager at Scattergood Friends School in eastern Iowa, sent a link to the Environmental Working Group (EWG) web site that provides data about who receives government subsidies. I doubt those figures lie regarding the USDA’s relative priorities for farm support. A page titled “Iowa Farm Subsidy Information” shows that from 1995 to 2019, \$33.3 billion in federal support went to the state’s farmers and landowners, second only to Texas. A total of \$26.7 billion was invested in commodity programs and crop insurance subsidies, which in Iowa are mainly for corn and soybean production. That total is 4.5 times greater than the \$5.8 billion invested in conservation.



<https://farm.ewg.org/region.php?fips=19000&statename=Iowa>

**Iowa, second highest state in USDA payments
to its farmers and landowners 1995-2019:**

Commodity Programs	\$20.5 billion
Crop Insurance Subsidies.....	\$6.2 billion
Conservation Programs	\$5.8 billion
Disaster Programs	\$803.0 million

Top USDA programs in Iowa 1995-2019

Corn Subsidies	\$19.4 billion
Soybean Subsidies	\$6.2 billion
Conservation Reserve Program.....	\$5.5 billion
Disaster Payments	\$69.1 billion
Livestock Subsidies	\$43.4 billion

**Pocahontas County, ranked 28th of the state's 100
counties in USDA payments 1995-2019:**

Commodity Programs	\$285.0 million
Crop Insurance Subsidies.....	\$75.8 million
Conservation Programs	\$29.8 million
Disaster Programs	\$2.6 million

Top USDA programs in Pocahontas County 1995-2019

Corn Subsidies	\$257.9 million
Soybean Subsidies	\$90.1 million
Conservation Reserve Program.....	\$28.6 million
Disaster Payments	\$2.6 million
Livestock Subsidies	\$1.8 million

Data for individual landowners can be misleading. For instance, in the years that my tenants and I operated with crop share leases, meaning we split the input costs for seed, fertilizer, and chemicals 50-50 and the bushels of corn and soybeans 50-50, I received half the farm program payments for the land directly from the government. Those dollars are listed as part of my payments on the EWG site. When I switched to cash rent leases in 2009, however, all program payments were paid to my tenants, with the EWG showing no record of income to me, even though the payment to the tenants helped them pay the rent.

The Conservation Reserve Program (CRP) payments can also be misleading. I do not consider them to be subsidies. Instead, annual CRP income is a form of rent payment. The CRP money also covers an initial incentive payment to encourage a landowner to sign up for the program and the government's share of the cost of seed, sowing the seed, mowing, and prairie burning.

I have mixed feelings about deriving government farm aid for commodity crops. The payments don't seem fair, but my lifestyle would be much different without them. That being said, I am proud to rank 14th of the 1,558 Pocahontas County recipients of CRP during the last 14 years. Critics might say the CRP program takes land away from farmers. I would respond (1) that by putting 77 acres into a pollinator habitat and receiving rent of \$306 per acre from the USDA, I was able to lease a smaller, more manageable plot of land to Betsy Dahl, a young organic farmer, at the low rate of \$140 per acre. My income for the whole farm averaged \$223 per acre, which was comparable to what I was charging my more experienced operators, and I believed the pollinator project would benefit both her farm operation and the environment.

(2) Some morsels of land simply are not suitable for corn and beans. (3) Having corn and soybeans monopolize the county's landscape is not beneficial to communities, the economy, or the environment.



The National Sustainable Agriculture Coalition's blog includes a December 21, 2017, post that states, "A recent pair of reports from the Economic Research Service (ERS) confirms that federal subsidies to farms are increasingly going to larger and larger farms, thus supporting the cycle of the big getting bigger. Fewer and bigger farms mean less money circulating in local economies, fewer farm jobs in rural areas, and fewer opportunities for beginning and young farmers to get into the business."

The NSAC post continues, "Increased land prices and rents resulting from government subsidies have detrimental impacts on mid-scale, beginning, and young farmers. When government payments of all types increase, they make land more expensive to rent and buy, thus making it more expensive for those farmers just starting out. The payments also have the perverse effect of helping the largest farms (which receive the largest portion of the payments and indemnities) get bigger by allowing them to capitalize subsidies in order to bid higher for land or pay higher rents thus perpetuating the cycle. This was laid bare in a recent *Wall Street Journal* article, where a farmer with over 10,000 acres in Kansas acknowledged the difficulty any young or new farmer would have in trying to outbid him for land."

The Civil Eats web site posted a review of the book *Eating Tomorrow: Agribusiness, Family Farmers, and the Battle for the Future of Food*, by Timothy A. Wise, on March 7, 2019. He is director of the Land and Food Rights Program at the Small Planet Institute and a research fellow at the Global Development and Environment Institute at Tufts University.

Civil Eats introduces the book, "In country after country, *Eating Tomorrow* examines the influence of corporate agribusiness on policy, diet, and landscape. Wise explores the global expansion of genetically modified seed markets, international trade agreements, land grabs, and the biofuel boom and argues that philanthropic, agribusiness, and government bodies have formed powerful coalitions to shape food policies that feed corporate interests.



Ethanol plant between Ames and Nevada, Iowa. 2014.

“Agribusiness companies have such a powerful hold in the United States that they have convinced policy-makers and the general public—and even many farmers—that their interests are completely aligned with those of farmers,” Wise said. “Nothing could be further from the truth.”

Wise said in his interview with Civil Eats, “People forget that the expansion of U.S. corn ethanol, under the stimuli of the 2005 and 2007 Renewable Fuel Acts, was the most important driver of the food price spikes we saw in 2007-8. In a very short time period, we saw some 15 percent of global corn production diverted out of food and feed markets and into fuel tanks. It was a demand shock to the system.

“In Iowa, the impact was to take hundreds of thousands of acres out of the Conservation Reserve Program as farmers rushed to cash in. That only exacerbated the state’s water pollution problems. Farmers planted every inch they could, right up to the edge of waterways, eliminating the [buffer zones] that helped filter runoff. It is not coincidence that the ‘dead zone’ in the Gulf of Mexico has now reached record size. It is ironic indeed that the deadly mess flows south under the cargoes of corn and soybeans being shipped to Mexico and other destinations.”

David Swenson also wrote, “All subsidies contain inherent benefits to the recipients and, concomitantly, to the policymakers. But the most egregious policies in recent years involve, in my opinion, the persistent strong-arming by the corn lobby to create an ethanol golden calf that all politicians had to swear fealty to.”

I have also wondered about the effect county zoning laws, with what is called a 40-acre rule, have on small-scale farmers. Kelvin Leibold explains, “County zoning laws have been a long, contentious topic. Most of the counties (and it varies from county to county) that have the 40-acre rule do so to keep people from building houses in rural areas and then wanting county services like better snow removal and better roads. Rural acreages also may have to drill wells if they don’t already have rural water and have their own septic systems. So the 40-acre rule may have some impact on smaller farms but one still has the opportunity to rent small tracts like 5 acres and plant high value crops. . . Iowa does allow a lease up to 20 years.”

LaVon Griffieon, who is a founding member of 1000 Friends of Iowa, an organization focusing on land use, is also a landowner/farmer. She lives on the family’s Century Farm adjacent to the rapidly-growing town of Ankeny just north of Des Moines and that is nearly engulfed by residential sprawl. LaVon thought the rule to be a good one, “It reduces sprawl by limiting farmers from selling off a small parcel of their farm for development especially during hard times and along highways. I’ve seen proof of this in TN and PA. Houses line the road along highways and there will be a working farm directly behind the houses.”

The rule, though, means that the land will most likely stay in conventional, row-crop farming unless there is great legal pressure for changing zoning codes to allow the development of residential sub-divisions.

PFI member Teresa Troxel owns and operates Iowana Farm near Crescent in the Iowa Loess Hills in western Iowa. The 66-acre farm has hillsides of oak savannah and tall grass prairie. Teresa and her crew grow vegetables for their CSA on 6.5 acres at the site of her grandfather’s old barn yard and alfalfa hay on 13.5 acres—all certified organic. She wrote, “I have volunteers that come through my farm and many of them have a dream of their own vegetable farm and maybe small numbers of livestock. They are mostly looking for 5 to 10 acres with a house and a shed. That is the most that they think they will ever be able to afford.”

Teresa also wrote of the immense help she received as a beginning organic farmer from the USDA in 2008-2012 through EQIP (Environmental Quality Incentives Program) grants. The funds “paid for soil testing, cover crop seed, soil amendments, screening and cover cloth for my high tunnels. I now still use the same shade cloth bought with grant money to keep out

moths, grasshoppers, and deer. And I was also able to experiment with beneficial insects to control pest insects.”

I am concerned, too, about how some proponents of large-scale agriculture castigate smaller-scale, sustainable, organic, and local agriculture. Their argument is that those farmers will never be able to feed the world. What they have not said is that their own farming systems do not truly feed the world. Now the pandemic is showing that status quo agriculture and its supply chains are frail and definitely *not* feeding the world.

Messages posted on the Practical Farmers of Iowa listserv after the onset of the pandemic suggest that the demand for food grown by its smaller-scale members has increased tremendously. The challenge is not only how these smaller-scale and local farmers can grow more food to meet demand but where and how they will be able to have their products processed and distributed.

Amber Miller of Carney Family Farms delivered packages of frozen beef and chicken to my home earlier this spring, then later visited to dig up rhubarb roots to transplant at her home. As we worked together, I asked her perspective. She agreed with Sally that agriculture needs a wide range of farmers.

Amber likes to take pre-orders months in advance of processing her meat products, customers arrange to have freezer space at home to store the meat and are willing to pay the price for the higher quality and locally raised product. She declines to use the term “commercial” to describe her business but would call it a relational enterprise. For her, the term “commercial” could be considered interchangeable with the term “industrial,” in which consumers are not so concerned about the environmental and nutritional issues of the meat they buy, want easy access to picking up a pack of meat on short notice from the meat counter at a grocery store, and aren’t able or willing to pay a higher price for local, farmer-raised meat. She acknowledges that there is a huge demand for commercial meat and that there need to be farmers to produce it, but she simply is not in that kind of market.

The short-term challenge for Amber during the pandemic with increased demand for her meat products is that she does not have a lot of extra to sell. Instead, it is necessary for her to plan far in advance to grow the number of animals needed to produce the meat to fill the orders her clients place and committing to a delivery date at the locker to have her animals processed. The delivery date for her beef is scheduled a year in advance. She seemed confident she could increase production in response to increased demand and be able to schedule processors, considering she has an excellent track record of working with them for the past several years.”

I have often attended PFI field days out of interest in topics such as growing vegetables or apples and to gather video footage for PFI projects. My visit in 2010 to the Grinnell Heritage Farm for a field day was to do both. Andy and Melissa Dunham began operating the 80-acre farm in 2007. It sits near Grinnell, Iowa, and has been in Andy’s family for more than 150 years. Andy is a fifth-generation Iowa farmer and former Peace Corp volunteer. Melissa is from the Twin Cities and has served on the PFI board of directors. They have had as many as 22 acres of well-defined, lush plots of vegetables, high tunnels to extend the growing season, and a produce-packing house. Their place seemed like a poster farm for local, organic, Iowa-grown food production. Andy and Melissa, themselves, seemed to be naturals not only at growing food but educating and building relationships with field day guests, CSA shareholders, visitors to farmers markets, and managers at retail grocery stores. Of course, I saw only the surface of their operation and understood little of the complexities and challenges of their work.

When I reflect on what I know of friends and others who are in the business of growing food and selling it, I wonder, “How can any grower get a decent monetary return on their investments of time and money?” It was impolite, though, in Iowa-nice country to ask,

“Tell me, are you really making any money at what you do, especially taking into account all your hours of labor and the amount of infrastructure that you have had to build?” Infrastructure would include such features as a well, irrigation system, greenhouse, walk-in cooler, driveway, parking area, small tractor, produce bins, and a delivery van or truck. There could also be computer, certification, and insurance costs. The ease of access I have to buying quality produce from local growers is a privilege, and my pride in supporting the local food movement is and has been, to a certain degree, a matter of thriving from the efforts of growers who were passionate about their dreams of being local food producers but who whose enterprises would not survive.



Andy and Melissa Dunham, photo from their collection. Circa 2015.

On February 26, 2020, I realized that Andy was one of three guests on Iowa Public Radio’s program “Talk of Iowa” discussing how the lack of structural support in Iowa was crippling the local foods movement. It came as a surprise when host Charity Nebbe reported that Andy and Melissa would be making some radical changes in their farm operation. Not listening closely, I assumed they were closing the farm because they were experiencing too little interest in local foods or that other factors made it too hard for them to make a living from farming.

As the pandemic surged upwards in numbers this spring, crippling the food supply chain, and creating more demand for produce from local growers, I remembered that radio conversation and wondered if Andy and Melissa were sorry they had gotten out of farming before the boom of consumer interest in local foods. So, I called and talked with Andy. He corrected my misinterpretation, explaining that he and Melissa were not closing the farm but scaling back, selling some equipment, ending their CSA program, discontinuing sales to retail stores, and taking off farm jobs. They still were (and are) involved in direct marketing to customers who pre-order produce on-line to pick up at the farm. However, Andy says that venue has its own challenges in the face of the pandemic, with the farm needing to take extra safety and health precautions to prevent the spread of COVID-19 at an added cost that farm sales are not capturing.

Andy was quick to say that he and Melissa have no regrets in letting go of what had been a distinguished part of their farm’s mission. Although he knows that the pandemic has increased the demand for food sold directly from farms to consumers, he does not believe the increased bloom will be a sustained one.

He also spoke about how nearly all institutions in the state, including schools, universities, hospitals, restaurants, brokers, and grocery stores, now order less produce than they did a few years ago and how there has been no demand from restaurants because they have been closed due to the pandemic.

Andy then talked about a disappointing relationship with a major grocery company (one that he declines to name publicly) in Iowa that practices what some environmentalists would call green washing. According to Andy, the company publishes slick flyers telling how it believes in the value of providing locally and organically grown produce. However, store management appears to use local producers to “local-wash” their many stores by substituting conventionally grown product from out-of-state corporate growers and putting that product on the produce counter directly under a Grinnell Heritage Farm produce sign.

Andy is also concerned about poor leadership, wondering why the government does not enforce anti-trust laws against some of the major corporate grocers. He told about inadequate distributions systems, noting how inefficient it is for several farms, each with someone driving a pickup truck or van, to deliver produce to a retail grocer and be paid only \$50 to \$100. He considers that a token transaction for a trip – meaning the farmer would go home with a net loss for his or her effort. Andy believes Iowa’s vegetable growers could produce and provide the state’s grocers with all the lettuce, kale, and Swiss chard needed for six months, yet some grocers have exclusionary, yearlong contracts with out-of-state growers. Also, the grocers have done nothing to create a centralized distribution system where a farmer could deliver a large quantity of produce in one cost-effective trip with the corporation routing shares of that Iowa-grown food to each of its stores.

The Iowa State University Extension and Outreach service and several other organizations collected data in 2015 that they collated and released in 2017 in a document titled, “Iowa Commercial Horticulture Food Crop Survey Results.” The report tells how in the late 1910s into the 1920s, Iowa was a top apple and grape producing state and led “the world in canned sweet corn production.”

LaVon Griffion says that in 1929, Iowa produced 52,915 acres of vegetables. According to the 2017 ISU report, by 2000, only 7,055 acres of Iowa land were used for horticultural production, and in 2015, that number dropped to 6,186.

The ISU report also said, “According to the 2012 Census of Agriculture, 94 percent of harvested cropland in Iowa was field (not sweet) corn and soybeans, while only 0.05 percent was in edible horticultural crop production (vegetables, orchards, and berries).”

The report then takes on the onerous task of defining what the word “local” means. “Local foods usually are defined simply in geographic terms as those produced within a certain distance of where they are consumed. There is no commonly accepted definition of ‘local food,’ although the U.S. Congress in the 2008 Farm Bill defined it as a food product that travels less than 400 miles from its origin or stays within state lines. Furthermore, locally grown food also is commonly defined in terms of the relatively shorter ‘distance’ between farmers and consumers: i.e., through direct marketing arrangements or those in which there are far fewer intermediaries. Studies of ‘local food,’ therefore, can be tricky given that one local food buyer may define local as within the state, while another may define it more narrowly within a 50-mile radius or by simply knowing the farmer who produced the food. Unpublished results from a Leopold Center study showed that among buyers responding to a local food purchasing survey in 2013 (which included institutions, grocery stores, and restaurants), nearly half of the buyers defined ‘local’ as within a specified distance in miles of their institution, with an average of 113 miles cited.”

Whew, it is ridiculous that food grown 400 miles from the point of sale could be considered local. To me, that is regional food but simply not local compared to the 1950s when our family

arranged with the locker in Rolfe to butcher a whole hog from our farm or another farm for us. The ISU report partially answered my question about whether independent, local growers were able to make a decent income from their efforts to provide people with quality food. “Other data corroborate the suggestion that horticultural production is challenging in Iowa, as nearly one in three (31 percent) responding farmers in 2015 made less than \$1,000 in sales in 2015. Moreover, all three Iowa Commercial Horticulture Surveys for Food Crops (1989, 2000, and 2015) have shown horticulture producers derive only a small percentage of their gross income from the sale of these specialty crops. However, it appears that fewer and fewer horticulture producers receive significant income from horticultural sales. In 1989, 17 percent of respondents received 1 percent or less of their income from horticultural sales, which increased to 41 percent of respondents in 2015.”

Iowa’s inadequate distribution system for local foods was only one of the factors that forced Andy and Melissa to scale back their farming efforts. Andy talked on IPR about climate change also affecting the decision, citing how their farm experienced years of heavy rains in the spring at planting time and again in the fall at harvest time. The next year then presented an extraordinarily dry summer season, crippling the growth of plants.

With all the talk of the pandemic, it has been easy for the media and public to lose sight of the current and potential tragedies related to climate change. However, climate activists such as my friend Erv Klaas believe the risks can be even greater than those caused by the pandemic and are continuing their educational and legislative efforts.



Onion harvest at Helen’s urban farm. 2012.

I find it ironic, if not tragic, that Iowa, with its abundance of topsoil (recognized as some of the best in the world) and history of being a leading food-growing state, cannot support local growers in a viable way. For a population to be dependent on food grown far away is a matter of community and food insecurity. One would hope the pandemic will force policy makers and others to recognize the frail nature of our food systems. If there is to be change in response to the lessons learned from the pandemic, then large-scale, conventional corn and bean farming, with its detrimental effects, needs to lose its near sacred status and be examined with a new focus on smaller, healthier farms that actually grow food for the state.

The local food cooperative in Ames, Wheatsfield, strives to sell food grown by smaller, local producers who use sustainable practices. One week in May, the store announced by email that customers could buy only two packages of meat in a single visit to the store. I am reminded of the small book of ration stamps that I have in my baby book from the 1940s when the government rationed such items as sugar, meat, cooking oil, canned goods, and even rubber.

When I recently called Chuck Brekke, part of the family who owns Brekke's Town and Country Store, asking whether he could bring some cabbage seed when he delivered straw bales and chicken feed that I ordered, he said the store no longer sold vegetable seeds. Brekke's used to have a small room with a table, scale, and set of glass quart jars containing bulk seed. Customers could measure a small amount of the seeds of their choice into a paper envelope, weigh it, and pay by the ounce. Chuck, said, however, that the interest in gardening in recent years had gotten so low, that the store had stopped carrying seed. I assume it had also become easier to buy seeds at a wide variety of larger stores. Now with the pandemic and increased interest in gardening, Brekke's has many people asking if the store sells seed. He also said that this spring he has sold double the number of baby chickens he typically had sold in a year. Perhaps a survivalist mindset has crept in, and people are turning toward home-grown food production as well as buying food from small-scale, local farmers.

When and if the pandemic ends, will people remember how it revealed the fragile nature of our food supply system? Will government policies reduce support for corporate production and increase support to local, smaller scale producers? Will people use their time to grow food in their backyards?

The government directives for people to stay in place and not travel in order to slow the spread of the virus have reduced the consumption of fossil fuel to its lowest level in decades, drastically reducing the demand for gasoline and ethanol. The price of oil has turned negative, meaning oil producers who have a glut of oil and few, if any buyers, are paying for someone to take oil off their hands. The ethanol industry, which had been a huge income generator, albeit one heavily subsidized and inaccurately promoted as a renewable resource, had already seen plant closures in recent years, but even more plants are closing now with a ripple effect. Corn and soybeans are the mainstay crops of conventional agriculture. The price of corn, already low, plummeted in April to \$3.20 per bushel, but the break-even price per bushel is \$4.00 per bushel, meaning that farmers are planting fields of corn, knowing that they will lose money on their crop unless there are government subsidies. It is easy to fear that there will be suicides and other tragedies among farmers and in the state's rural communities similar to what there were in relation to the farm crisis of the early 1980s.

There certainly will be some regression to the way things were, but I cannot fathom how it would be possible to go back to the old normal. And just who would want to go back to the previous normal of CAFOs, slaughterhouses ripe for abuses to the immigrant workforce, or the heavily subsidized ethanol industry when none of these are sustainable or healthy for communities and the environment?

For over a century, the Iowa legislature has pushed its public schools to consolidate, resulting in larger schools meant to be more cost efficient and provide a better quality of education than smaller ones. In the 1932-33 academic year, there were 80 rural schools in Pocahontas County. By the fall of 1956, there were only eight schools, and they were all closed by the fall of 1957. My father attended the Roosevelt Township Number 7 school, a 28x28 foot wooden structure on an acre of land located a half mile from the farm where he lived. He then went to high school in Rolfe, graduating in 1935. Neither my siblings nor I experienced country school life.

Not all of the school consolidations resulted from legislative mandate. Some were ballot box decisions. In what *The Rolfe Arrow* newspaper (May 1, 1947) called, "the most important school election ever to be held in Rolfe," residents of Garfield, Lake, and Roosevelt townships and the Rolfe independent school district voted overwhelmingly to join together in what they called a "consolidated district." Then in 1959, the Rolfe and Des Moines Township school districts merged to become the Rolfe Community School District.



Left: rural school, Gillette Grove Township, Clay County, Iowa. 1939. Right: students at Doyle Township School #5, Clarke County, Iowa. 1943. *From the Loren Horton collection. Both photos courtesy of the State Historical Society of Iowa, Iowa City.*

Although some of the other towns in the county were losing their schools in the mid-1900s, Rolfe residents probably never envisioned their town would not have its own school. As fate would have it, Rolfe graduated its last senior class in 1990. The next year, high school students from the Rolfe area would attend school in Pocahontas. By 2006, Rolfe's elementary and middle school students would also travel to Pocahontas, the seat of county government and now the only town in the county with a high school.

In 2009, following voter approval of a 10 million dollar bond issue, the Pocahontas Area Community School District began building a new middle and high school facility that was first occupied in 2011. The PAC website describes it as "a new, state-of-the-art, multi-million dollar building. The building includes the latest and most up-to-date innovations in lighting, technology, security, climate control and structural design."

The Gilbert Community School District, headquartered in the small town of Gilbert, where I lived from 1993 to 2006, covers 48 square miles, including northern subdivisions of Ames. Its enrollment is more than 1,500 students, which is greater than the town's population of some 1,174 residents. The Ames Community School District serves most of the Ames area and has an enrollment of over 4,500 students compared to a population of 67,962 residents in the university town. Although the distance between Gilbert and Ames has been about four miles, the development of new homes on the rural landscape is filling the gap. The two school districts, although located almost like two peas in a pod or two bugs snug in a rug when compared to Pocahontas County with its one high school, have each invested millions of dollars in renovations and new buildings in the past two decades. In the fall of 2013, Gilbert completed a new high school, and Ames is currently constructing a new high school.

Beginning this spring, school districts across the state, including Gilbert and Ames, closed their buildings as a safety measure in the face of the pandemic. It was wise to close the facilities and wise now to keep them closed even longer. One could question, though, if centralized, large schools had gotten too big and whether the pandemic would have been less of a threat had the districts of the state adopted a different format for education. Obviously, even if this were still the era of country schools, and more towns had their own high schools, it would still be wise to cancel classes in the face of the pandemic. This situation, though, is a reminder of humankind's fragility, considering that all the movement toward consolidation and investments in new facilities could not protect students and teachers from threat of the COVID-19 virus.

One must wonder what kinds of strategies that school districts will implement in order to open their buildings again and accommodate all the students in their districts. Will districts need to retrofit buildings to have smaller classes and keep staff and students a healthy

distance apart? Will hand sanitizer and face mask dispensers become as common as paper towel dispensers or electric dryers? Will there be signs saying, “No shirt, no shoes, no shield, no school?” Will school supply vendors promote face shields with fashionable designs that incorporate the school colors and mascots? Will there be automated systems to monitor body temperatures? Will students spend less time on campus and more time at home or at other sites such as a community center or church, but be connected to the school via the Internet? Will more families choose to homeschool their children?

The new Meeker Elementary School building, first occupied in August 2015, sits on the far south end of a nearly 12-acre property just north of where I live. The old building, which stood on the north end, has been razed and replaced with a playground. Considering the pandemic with its related issues of unemployment, the broken food supply chain, and the extra time that some people have on their hands, it would seem wise for the school district to establish community gardens at the school. However, I remember the multiple times, day after day, when semi-trucks loudly rumbled up and down Burnett Avenue with their earth-moving dump trailers, carrying away black topsoil, to prepare the Meeker site for its new building. Weeks later, the same or similar trucks returned with lower quality soil for excavation and fill purposes. It was not hard to tell that the school district had no intention of growing food on that land.

A friend, Shellie Orngaard, was director of the Volunteer Center of Story County in 2010 when the center and another organization known as Ames Unity, which was formed after city discussions about racial issues, collaborated with Trinity Christian Reformed Church to start a community garden on its grounds. The garden would be called the Service Patch and operated by AmesZone, a group of young people guided by AmeriCorps volunteers. AmesZone envisioned both growing food to share with people in need and growing healthy relationships.

Interest in community gardening spread, and the VCSC arranged for AmeriCorps and other volunteers to help two Ames elementary schools, Kate Mitchell and Abby Sawyer, establish school gardens. Prairie Rivers of Iowa, founded in 2001 in affiliation with the USDA’s Natural Resources Conservation Service and now a non-profit environmental group with leaders from several central Iowa counties, also supported development of the two school gardens.

A Mitchell web site said its garden was started in “response to the issues of food insecurity and lack of healthy food amongst students of the school.” The volunteers and students successfully planned their gardens, worked the soil, grew vegetables, and organized not only farmers markets to sell their produce but also festivals that helped in building community spirit. Some of the student organizers were invited to join Michelle Obama in Washington, DC, when she kicked off the Fourth Annual White House Garden in 2012.

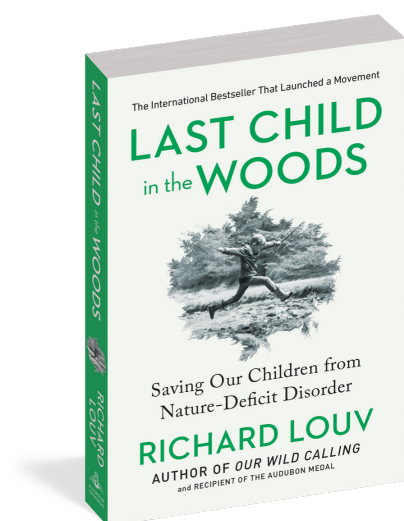
My friend Erv Klaas has been involved with Prairie Rivers since its inception in 2001. He says that principals and teachers at Mitchell and Sawyer told him the gardens fostered a whole, positive change in the atmosphere at their schools. Before long, though, both gardens were removed to prepare for site renovations. Erv recalls some of the district’s central office administrators telling him, “We don’t like these gardens.” The Trinity Church garden is still in existence but in collaboration with Ames Food at First program to feed the hungry and operated by the ISU Sustainable Agriculture Student Association.

A man I know through church, Mike Todd, visited Washington, DC, in 2019 to receive the Presidential Award for Excellence in Mathematics and Science Teaching, the highest honor for a science teacher in the nation. Mike teaches at Ames High School, where he has organized, without extra pay, both an ECO Club and Garden Club. He is frustrated the school administration does not support school garden programs and that the AHS garden, although it has been on the high school campus since 2011, has been marginalized.

As an example of skewed priorities, Mike shared how the administration told the garden group in February 2020 that there would be no on-site space for a school garden for four years during construction of a new high school building and razing of the old one. However, the school had found ways to provide for football, soccer, and other sports, as well as fund a new \$80,000 shot put and discus field to be used only temporarily during the construction phase. Mike said that after he and other garden advocates raised a stink, the administration reversed itself and committed to a garden on school grounds in all but one of those four transitional years. However, Mike is saddened that many of the cool projects that the garden group has developed (rain garden, composting system, edible garden, and permaculture plot) have been demolished over the years. He also knows that students are motivated to engage in their education by many different elements and need different educational opportunities. He laments that the school is not meeting those needs and says the consequences are reflected in the number of suicides or suicide attempts by Ames students, as well as a lack of engagement in school by many students.

In 2016, Mike and another award-winning Ames teacher, Collin Reichert, began discussions with fellow educators to create an alternative school. By 2017, they had organized The Community Academy with the goal of it becoming a full-time, year-round school. Its mission: “to engage young people in authentic educational experiences that enrich our community and promote a sense of place in nature.” Its vision: “an educational model in which students form deep, meaningful relationships with staff, students, the community, the environment, and themselves.” The Ames school district does not actively support the program.

Tyler Harms, executive director of the Iowa Young Birders Association, is one of the people I have most resonated with in this neighborhood. In a conversation about the dearth of natural space at the school, Tyler told me about the notion of Vitamin “N” (as in nature) and the work of Richard Louv, author of the international bestseller *Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Children from Nature-Deficit Disorder*.



Louv wrote in an October 15, 2019, blog:

Although human beings have been urbanizing, and then moving indoors, since the introduction of agriculture, social and technological changes in the past three decades have accelerated the human disconnect from the natural world.

Among the reasons: the proliferation of electronic communications; poor urban planning and disappearing open space; increased street traffic; diminished importance of the natural world in public and private education; and parental fear magnified by news and entertainment media.

Since 2005, the number of studies of the impact of nature experience on human development has grown from a handful to nearly one thousand. This expanding body of scientific evidence suggests that nature-deficit disorder contributes to a diminished use of the senses, attention difficulties, conditions of obesity, and higher rates of emotional and physical illnesses. Research also suggests that the nature-deficit weakens ecological literacy and stewardship of the natural world. These problems are linked more broadly to what health care experts call the “epidemic of inactivity,” and to a devaluing of independent play. Nonetheless, we believe that society’s nature-deficit disorder can be reversed.

I hope that my urban farm would be a haven for at least a few people, young and old, to experience nature in the heart of a suburban neighborhood although this is a far cry from being a truly wild space. I have tried to make connections with the school staff, but with little success. That’s okay. I have more autonomy in what I do here than if I had to meet the standards of a school district.

I also hope this urban farm with the opportunities it provides will allow me to carry on some of the agrarian hospitality most exemplified by stories that Don Grant, a childhood crony of my father, told me about his mother Addie Grant. Don remembered Addie’s large garden in the 1920s and 1930s and how she loved to preserve and cook food both for her family and to give away. “Mother was always taking a basket of something into town. When



Addie and Cap Grant. Circa 1948. *Photo from the Don and Rosie Grant Collection.*

we went to town whether by buggy or car, she knew somebody that needed something to eat. She would take a few jars of this and a few cans of that and give it to somebody.”

Much of my reason for being and having this urban farm is my desire to be hospitable. I love to host meals whether for a group of six friends around my living room table, a group of 22 seated in my office and living room for a solstice dinner, or a PFI back-to-school picnic the day before the opening of classes at Iowa State.

Normally, when I sow seeds for cucumber plants in the spring, I think of the pickles I plan to make, store, and serve at meals. When I pick and freeze fruit, I envision making compote to serve with ice cream or yogurt. When I buy 40-pound bags of wheat berries from the Early Morning Harvest farm, I envision making whole grain breads and sharing them. I have also accumulated a large supply of green cafeteria trays, 50-plus place settings of ivy-designed Corelle dinner ware, 70 homemade calico napkins, several chairs, and tables. I know of no other person or family so prepared to host meals without using paper plates, paper napkins, and Styrofoam cups and with so little, if anything, in the trash can at the end of an event. Since the beginning of the pandemic, though, I have not hosted a single meal, and I assume there will be no PFI picnic here at the end of August. I have met some of my need for sharing food by giving eggs and bread to friends and donating bread once a month to the Food at First community meals. In some respects, it has been a relief not to have to think about scheduling, maintaining guest lists, cleaning the house and yard, and making other preparations to host meals for guests. In other respects, I am saddened not to have the role of hosting meals.



Curtiss Hall, built in 1906 and known as Agriculture Hall but renamed in 1947 for Charles F. Curtiss, a long-time Dean of Agriculture. 2020.

The Des Moines Register reported on May 15, 2020, that the Iowa Board of Regents had cut 10 percent of Iowa Public Radio’s budget. IPR, an NPR affiliate and my go-to station when I want to listen to the radio, is supported in part by funding from the Regent universities, including Iowa State University, University of Northern Iowa, and University of Iowa. *The Register* article said, “The announcement comes two weeks after presidents at Iowa State University, the University of Iowa and the University of Northern Iowa told the Regents that the shutdown of classes due to COVID-19 cost will cost the schools \$187 million through the end of June. The presidents blamed added expenses as classes and administrative work moves online, along with a tuition refund the universities provided students because of campus shutdowns.”



Iowa State University central campus. Top photo: entrance to Curtiss Hall. Bottom left: the Fountain of the Four Seasons by Christian Petersen, Iowa State's artist-in-residence from 1934-55, near the Memorial Union is part of Art on Campus. Bottom right, Morrill Hall, constructed in 1891, is named after Senator Justin Smith Morrill, who created the Morrill Land-Grant Colleges Act. All photos 2020.

The article included an email by Josh Lehman, senior communications director for the Regents, that said in part, "The universities are needing to reallocate resources to support other core functions, primarily providing a top-quality education for our students. There will be many difficult financial decisions to come, none of which are easy nor made lightly."

More than a month later on July 29, Charles Flesher of *The Register* reported, "Iowa's three public universities will take a \$65.4 million cut this budgeted year as a result of declining enrollment amid the ongoing coronavirus pandemic and an \$8 million cut in state funding approved by the Legislature last month." Flesher continues, The universities expect to bring in \$53 million less in tuition this year as a result of the enrollment decline and an across-the-board tuition freeze approved by the regents in June."

Not many years ago, Iowa State boasted of an increased enrollment. I had heard from reliable sources that the bubble was due in part to reduced admissions standards created to improve the health of the university pocketbook. I recall riding my bicycle to church and every week for a few months seeing horse paddocks and pastures removed along 13th Street and replaced with rapidly built apartment complexes and parking lots. This spring, due to the pandemic, the university closed the campus, ousted students from dorms and other housing, and offered its classes on-line only. After the pandemic subsides, what will happen to the level of enrollment, nature of classes, and those new apartment buildings and parking lots? Will there be another bubble with unemployed people enrolling in the university for something meaningful to do and needing on-campus housing? Would potential students be able to pay for tuition or willing to take on student loans? Or would they decline from attending the university because of its diminished capacity or quality as the result of slashed budgets? Or opt for community colleges and tele-learning? If there would be less student demand for housing, would anyone dare suggest offering university apartments to low-income residents for affordable housing?

My parents and five of us siblings are ISU alumni. Mother and Dad started bringing us to football games when we were youngsters. They groomed us to believe that Iowa State was like a golden castle on a hill—the epitome of a place to attend school — and Ames was an ideal place to live. We cheered for the Cyclones and learned the words to the “Fight Song” and what could be considered a university hymn, “The Bells of Iowa State.” When my siblings and I were students at Iowa State in the 1960s, the school was on a quarter system that consisted of three 10-week terms compared to today’s semester system with 18-week terms. Clara, who graduated in 1964, remembers tuition was \$100 per quarter for Iowa residents and \$200 per quarter for non-residents. The current rate for in-state residents is close to \$4,000 per semester with the cost for non-residents close to \$11,000. The much lower rate in the sixties may have been in part because the state was healthier financially, and the public believed more in supporting its institutions of higher education than it does now.



Left: Deane and Marion Gunderson with family and friends at an ISU football game. Right: Deane and Marion pose with the ISU mascot, Cy, in front of a statue of Cy that Deane built and donated to ISU in the 1970s. Both photos are from 1981, the year Deane was named as Cy’s Favorite Alum. *Photos from the Clara Gunderson Hoover collection.*

Dad and Mother, especially Dad, were avid Cyclone fans. He had football season tickets and attended games until the last year of his life, and the tales of his devotion to the program are numerous. I have wondered what it was deep in his psychology that propelled him to have such unfettered loyalty to a football program. Fortunately, he and Mother supported a variety of projects at the university, and Iowa State was only one recipient of their philanthropic contributions.

Other members of the family have continued to convene at games in the section where they used to join Dad and Mother. Myself – I weaned myself from an interest in college sports decades ago. This fall will be the first season that sister Clara and her husband, Hal, will not be coming to the football games from Omaha. In part, their change in plans is a letdown, considering how on at least one of their game day trips they would take the time to visit me.

Clara and Hal's interest in traveling to games had already waned before the pandemic. Now the university athletic department is deciding whether it can host games in a way that ensures good player and public health. I well remember with cynicism how the department highly promoted its goal of filling the 60,000-capacity stadium in recent years, even when the football team was doing poorly. I found it easy to wonder what the carbon footprint might be of encouraging such high attendance that could only happen if lots of people burned fossil fuel to get to the stadium either in passenger cars or the large RVs, used for tailgating parties, that clogged the roads to the stadium for hours, if not a day, before a game. I also wondered whether it would have been wiser for the department to reduce its expectations and provide satellite viewing on large monitors at remote sites hosted by the likes of a county Cyclone club. I know that my criticism and creative ideas would have been folly to many people, especially when one considers how the football and basketball programs draw fans to Ames and in turn generate income for the community, but look what is happening now. The athletic department has allowed those people who have prepaid to defer use of their tickets until the 2021 season, which Clara and Hal have opted to do. The athletic department is also considering restricting attendance to 30,000 spectators who will be asked to sit a safe distance apart. Frankly, it is hard to imagine how the security crew will be able to police and otherwise maintain good social distancing if there is a lot of fan vigor. Even more recently, Ames has become a national hotspot in terms of the rate of increase in the virus here, and the Story County Health Board recommended that the university not allow fans at its football games.



It is not a great stretch of the imagination to worry the pandemic is a long-term or permanent catastrophic event and that doomsday or the apocalypse might be near. I look, however, to events in history that were as horrific, or more so, when societies found the resilience to recover, even if extremely slowly.

This winter, when researching my Norwegian heritage, I was shocked to read that when the Black Death sacked Norway in 1349 to 1350, two-thirds of the nation's population died. Another site estimates that Norway's population would have been 300,000 to 400,000 with deaths numbering between 180,000 and 240,000. That same site estimated that 60 percent of the European population, or some 50 million people, may have died from the Black Death.

I recall hearing that my farming grandfather, John Gunderson, was quarantined in his farm home a century ago from September through December, not able to help with harvest and dependent on his workers to take care of the farm. When I have told people the story, they automatically asked if it was the 1918 influenza pandemic. I did not know. When I asked sister Clara and brother Charles what they remembered, they said they had not heard of the story. I needed to learn the scope of the 1918 flu. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, "It is estimated that about 500 million people or one-third of the world's population became infected with this virus. The number of deaths was estimated to be at least 50 million worldwide with about 675,000 occurring in the United States. Mortality was

high in people younger than 5 years old, 20-40 years old, and 65 years and older. The high mortality in healthy people, including those in the 20-40 year age group, was a unique feature of this pandemic.”

It is not as though pandemics are entirely new happenings or that a pandemic will inevitably wipe out humanity. COVID-19 is extraordinarily scary perhaps because it is so worldwide, affecting people whose lives may have seemed secure, and hitting close to home. The pandemic is also causing record numbers of unemployment in the U.S. and damaging the nation’s economy — all of that happening during the tenure of a president who is pitting state governments against the federal government and standing in the way of experts in health and science, sometimes denouncing them, and preventing them from leading effectively.

From what I know of my family history as far back as 1900, the only encounter we have had with a wide-sweeping disease was something I did not know until recently after asking Clara and Charles about Grandpa being quarantined. They both said Dad had suffered from scarlet fever when five years old. A search of the digital archives of *The Rolfe Arrow* newspaper shows two articles on the same page of local news called “Local Diddings” on May 15, 1924. The first article reported on my grandmother’s mother. “Mrs. Emma Lighter was called to the country Tuesday to assist in caring for her grandson, Dean [sic] Gunderson, who contracted scarlet fever six weeks ago and who has been having a serious time with it. His ears have



Deane Gunderson. Circa 1923. Photo from the Marion and Deane Gunderson collection.

gathered and broken and he is carrying considerable fever. We hope he may rapidly change for the better under grandmother’s care.” The second article reported, “... the Gundersons are under quarantine, the son, Dean [sic], having a very prolonged siege of scarlet fever.”

A June 5, 1924, *Arrow* article said that Grandpa and Grandma had brought Dad home from Webster City, a town about 60 miles away, where Dad “had been in a hospital recovering from the after effects of scarlet fever.” Clara and Charles explained that the fever damaged Dad’s ears, perforating an ear drum. I knew of his damaged ear but had heard it was due to his being

near a mechanical accident. In either case, the damage resulted in Dad being exempted from military service during World War II, as well as being extremely hard of hearing, especially in the last decades of his life.

The pandemic has not changed my lifestyle all that much. For years, I have stayed relatively close to my urban farm. However, I had become dependent on going to Wheatsfield Co-op three or more days a week for meals from the cafeteria hot bar. Those trips motivated me to get out of the house and ride my bicycle downtown. They also were a key part of my social life, considering that I often had great conversations with old friends, new acquaintances, and staff while there. I had wondered what I would do socially if Wheatsfield ever went out of business. The store had been vulnerable when the franchise store Fresh Thyme, akin to Whole Foods, set up shop in Ames in 2018, but the new store announced its closure at the end of 2019. Wheatsfield survived but has indefinitely closed its cafeteria bar. I don't miss being able to dine at Wheatsfield as much as I had imagined I would. The conversations were great. The food was healthy, varied, and tasted good. Yet I have discovered there is enough social life around here, and I am doing more home cooking and enjoying the process of making good food.



Helen at home during the COVID-19 pandemic. April 2020.

Cutting my own hair for the first time has been the most novel event for me during this social distancing phase. On March 9, I had my last hair cut appointment at the JC Penney salon. When I arrived there, I told Suzanne Clark, the stylist, how frustrated I was with my short but stubborn hair. I also anticipated that the salons might be forced to close due to the pandemic. I asked, "Can we do a buzz cut?" She said, "Sure." We had a wonderful conversation, and gave me a great cut, but it was not short enough to be truly considered a buzz cut. That was fine with me. I suspected neither of us was ready to risk something shorter. Not many weeks later, I watched some YouTube demonstrations of how a person could cut her own hair. It was men doing the shows, but I was bound to do a buzz cut, and gender did not matter. Then I asked my interior designer friend, Lou Cathcart, who had been a stylist in a former lifetime, about

what kind of clippers to buy, then ordered a Wahl clipper and hair cutting scissors online. Never in high school had I been good at putting curlers or bobby pins in my hair, and I was clumsy using a curling iron the few times I tried one. As I anticipated cutting my hair, I was apprehensive about whether I had the courage to cut my hair and worried just how bad it would look. However, I also knew that this season of self-isolating would be the best window of opportunity in my lifetime to try such an adventure.

Last fall, anticipating my 75th birthday on April 19, I reserved a house at Four Mounds Retreat and Conference Center in Dubuque for 21 to 22 (Earth Day) and invited a dozen friends to go on a two-day retreat there and visit the Convivium Urban Farmstead. On March 14, I cancelled the plans and was disappointed but relieved. Spring is a full season for me with gardening responsibilities, and now I could stay in place, engage in my projects, and not worry about the logistics of hosting the retreat.

Sunday, April 19, was a slow day. I stayed home alone, changed the sheets on my bed, did laundry, ate good food, watched a Netflix film, and visited with friends on the phone. I felt just fine, but Monday morning, I felt blue with little ambition. Yet I asked myself, "If not now, when?" Gradually, I rose to the occasion and cut my hair. I did well and loved the new look and the idea that I might make it a habit to cut my own hair even after the threat of the pandemic. Fortunately, my friend Betsy Wentzel, who had cut her husband's and sons' hair decades ago, trimmed the hairline at the back of my head. I shake my head occasionally, wondering about all the fuss with permanents and hair curlers in my younger days and what life would have been like if I could have had a buzz cut all along.

My life may have been different if I had known of short-haired women role models in my developmental years. I recall attending a retreat at the Prairiewoods Franciscan Spirituality Center near Cedar Rapids and seeing a video presentation by Zen priest Joan Halifax. She was both beautiful and handsome with shaved head or hair slightly grown out in a buzz cut style. She was wise. The same could be said of images of Zen priest Pema Chodron, whose book, *When Things Fall Apart: Heart Advice for Difficult Times*, is relevant to people wanting a sense of how to proceed during this pandemic.

Since 2009, I had gone without owning a car, getting around town mainly on bicycle and enjoying that mode of travel. Then in November 2019, I bought a 2008 Honda CRV and appreciated having it during the winter, considering that I am not as comfortable with cold weather as I had been for a long time. Now with the pandemic and stay-in-place directives dictating there are few places that I can or want to go, I seldom drive the car but loan it to my renter, Diane, for her personal use and to do errands for me. I wonder if I had known the pandemic was coming, would I have bought a car?



Many of my Ames friends, who are in their sixties and older, have moved from their single-family homes to apartments or town houses in retirement communities. As examples, Erv Klaas moved a year ago to Green Hills Retirement Center on the south side of town, and another friend Janie Lohnes moved several years ago to Northcrest Community Center on the near north side of Ames. Both places have a range of health care services, supporting residents throughout their later stages of life from full health, to assisted living, memory care, and long-term care. As the Northcrest website says, "Moving to Northcrest is a choice that provides you with carefree independent living for the rest of your life..."

I might be in denial when I say I want to live out my life in this small home. I do want to be in an inter-generational, mixed income neighborhood where I can see families walking or biking their children to school. I do want to have my urban farm and have it be easily accessible so a variety of visitors can see my chickens and their elaborate set of tunnels that lead to roosting pens under the cherry trees. The question, although greatly repressed, has haunted me. “Just how long can I stay here, and when I can’t, what will I do?” I have feared that if I wait too long to consider moving, I might not be in good enough health to qualify to enroll in one of those places. Fortunately, as time passes and baby boomers age, more retirement and assisted living options, including stay-at-home care programs, are becoming available in Ames.

The pandemic has put a whole new spin on the matter with the Green Hills and Northcrest residents now having strict guidelines from upper management in order to get permission for leaving, then coming home to their facilities. Each time they return, staff members ask them a battery of questions and take their temperatures. Erv is thankful, putting it this way, “The Green Hills management is taking extra good care of its residents.” I believe him. The management at both communities most likely does care personally about the well-being of each resident. They presumably also are being pragmatic, knowing their residents are in the age range most susceptible to the virus, and their public image would suffer if there were to be a COVID-19 outbreak at their sites. Janie says that Northcrest residents are even asked not to visit one another in their apartments.

Erv and Janie often remind me that different people have different needs and most likely recognize I would not fit into the social atmosphere at their facilities. I can be obstreperous. Then again, Janie can be spunky. The last time I talked with her was in a 10 p.m. phone call. She told me how she had been working in the Northcrest gardens with a staff gardener. Later, the gardener learned he had contracted the virus, and when the administrators learned the news, Janie was told to stay in her apartment for two weeks. She can be dutiful, but that night, she was waiting until everyone else in her section had retired for the night so she could skip out of her room and take her trash to the garbage pickup room without anyone knowing of her trip. In an email this week, she says, “I have been free from quarantine for a week and it feels so good to be able to go outside. I spent seven hours in the garden my first day out!”

The challenges for residents of nursing homes and their families can be even greater than those that Erv and Janie are experiencing. Jeff Dewall farms for me. Age 60 and single, he lived with his mother Geri Dewall in their farm home until early March 2020, when Jeff and his sisters moved Jeri to the Pocahontas Manor, a care facility. Geri is 90 and has been widowed since December 2002 when her husband, Don, died. Jeff and his sisters were able to visit Geri a couple of times before the Manor locked the doors to guests. Geri has been dealing with congestive heart issues, has dementia, and does not understand why family members cannot enter the facility to visit her. They can merely stand at her window and attempt to communicate through the screen, which makes for a difficult conversation since Geri has a hard time hearing. Jeff says some of his sisters rise to the challenge, remove the screen, and stick their heads through the window to visit more clearly with their mother.

Earlier this year, former PFI director and friend Teresa Opheim, who lives in Minneapolis, moved her parents, Barb and Wayne Opheim, from north central Iowa into assisted living facilities. However, due to COVID-19, it was not possible for them to be together in the same place. Now Barb, age 84, is in Eagan and Wayne, 91, in Bloomington – both southern suburbs of Minneapolis.

In a June 9 email, Teresa acknowledged, “This is a really hard time, just taking it day-to-day and need a lot of silence. My mother’s memory care unit has had 17 COVID cases with residents and 10 with staff. No new ones in the last five days, so perhaps they are getting

this under control. I haven't been able to see or help my parents for several months now, and have no idea how my mom's care is, as she cannot tell us."

I wrote back, telling her about Jeff and his mother. Teresa responded, "I wish I could stand outside a window and see either of my parents! Dementia is awful already, without COVID. My mother had a fever last night, so they have given her another COVID test and I should hear the results today. It is a good idea to document the COVID reactions — I keep telling myself this is an unusual time, and it is not a surprise that it is hard. I sob every couple days, which is unusual for me."

In an update, Teresa added, "Her place has no COVID cases now. They are not being transparent about how many of those people who had it were hospitalized or died. But they seem to have gotten it under control for now. The only thing that made her happy was seeing her family, and she cannot do that now. Like Jeff's mom, she doesn't understand from moment to moment why we cannot visit and walk up and down the hall all day. When we admitted her, our plan was to visit regularly, wash and color her hair, take her on walks, love her. And we cannot do that. My dad has bounced back some from his hospital stay. Several of us talk with him every day, and it is a delight to do so. I was reminded on Father's Day that I have had almost 60 years with this man guiding me. What a gift."

Fortunately, for me, this urban farm and small one-story home make for an ideal place to self-isolate with an occasional guest or work crew. Generally, we wear masks and keep an appropriate distance, but we can get lax. Workers for Andersen Windows installed a picture window that I ordered last fall for my bedroom that doubles as my yoga studio so I can have an excellent view of the farmstead. Rachel Knapp from Early Morning Harvest Farm has delivered 50 pounds of wheat berries for baking bread. Friends stop to get eggs or homemade wheat bread, and I deliver some to neighbors. Passers-by see the sign at the end of my driveway offering free tomato or pepper seedlings. They email and arrange to pick up their plants. One of the people who rents my house next door, Diane Ercse, is my key helper doing a variety of jobs and running errands. Also, I have my four cats and 10 chickens to keep me company. By mid-to-late May, I had ventured out to three retail stores: Wheatsfield, Ace Hardware, and Brekke's Town and Country to shop. I also went to Heuss Printing for a meeting about my book. Yet, based on the advice I read or hear from experts, who suggest the worse is yet to come with the pandemic, I am not eager to go into those stores again, and for sure, not often.

In May, *The Des Moines Register* reported that J.C. Penney, Inc., was declaring bankruptcy and would close selected stores. I have heard nothing about the status of the Penney's store



Signs for free pepper and tomato seedlings near curb at Helen's urban farm. Pepper sign by Izzy Ercse. 2020.

in the North Grand Mall in Ames, but that is a place I like to buy items such as my billfold, sheets, pocket T-shirts, and socks. The store also has a beauty salon, and Suzanne has cut my hair for many years; however, she has opted to take early retirement on July 30. Although the governor has said that salons can now open again, I am not ready to go back to a salon and may continue to cut my own hair. The Penney's store and salon, however, were places I could count on even though the store has shown signs of diminished vitality in recent years. I did not mind so much when the North Grand Mall lost Sears, then Younkers. But I would mind if it lost Penney's.

Herrick Dental, Ames Yoga Center, Ames Acupuncture, and Ames Center for Health and Harmony where I get massages are all closed. However, Ruthann Hadish of the yoga center is now offering classes via Zoom. No need to change clothes or leave home. Some of my cats attend class with me at no extra charge, and it's fun to see the homes and cats of other students via Zoom. Late in May, the dental office wrote to say it would be opening again but with an entire restrictive set of safety procedures. I was definitely ready to have the hygienist, Deb Penney, clean my teeth and thankful I had prescheduled an appointment with her on June 3. Deb has cleaned my teeth for nearly 20 years and at age 71, she kept being urged to stay on for just another day; however, she finally retired completely in late June.

Fortunately, my major medical challenge of the past year, having cataract surgery in both eyes, was completed in December 2019 at Mary Greeley Medical Center in Ames, and by mid-January, before the COVID-19 virus had spread significantly to Iowa, I had new glasses with a new prescription. Had my surgeries been scheduled later, I would have been anxious about going to a hospital in general and specifically about being in an operating room.

It is easy to succumb to thinking I will be just fine during the pandemic, considering that I have been generally healthy and never critically sick. I can be smug about how well life is going here with many meaningful projects, a good inventory of food on the shelves and in the freezer, access to fresh eggs from my chickens and fruit and vegetables from my orchard and garden beds. I also have meaningful people connections, yet I get to live alone in a single family home and don't have to deal with cigarette smoke wafting into my space from a nearby apartment or second hand noise from hate-spewing radio and TV commentators or proselytizing televangelists.

I am reminded, though, of the wise words that the sixth century Chinese philosopher, Lao Tzu, wrote in the *Tao Te Ching*: "He who knows, does not speak. He who speaks, does not know." There may be ways that keeping busy with farm projects and writing extensively these days serve to create a sense of bravado that masks the underlying fear of my fragile nature. I know how freaked out I'd be if I came anywhere near being homeless, my bank account was empty, and my credit cards would not work. I recall the angst of my overnight stay in the hospital after a bicycle accident in 2015, crying out like a panicked child when I had acute leg cramps at 3 am and could not get prompt attention from the nurses. When two did come to my room, the more experienced one checked my vitals while the other, who seemed like an inexperienced aide, did not know how to deal with the cramps. I found it hard to be tolerant and accept her level of experience.

There have been other times when I have gone to the emergency room for concerns that seemed minor but were of the nature that the First Nurse hotline and friends advised I go to the ER. Events such as my mind going blank and forgetting the last half of a sentence even when I would start the sentence over, remembering the first half. The diagnosis was that of a simple TIA (transient ischemic attack). Or there was the evening while resting on the couch after eating too much at a community Thanksgiving Day potluck when I had a heart rate of 150 and felt a small, but tight band around my chest. Both of those ER visits resulted in the doctors arranging for me to take several tests and sending me to a hospital room

where I experienced long waits between tests and before I was allowed to eat any food. In the worst instance, I felt I lost control of my life – that the doctors and nursing staff had not communicated well with each other and I had few, if any, alternatives except to simply wait out the time there. I could get pissy, but often with no results. Thank goodness, though, for the staff person, no matter at what level, who would listen, empathize, and make at least a little difference in my circumstances.

Now with the medical industry frail from so much demand for pandemic services, I can imagine that were I to get the virus, especially if I had to leave my home, I would feel even more desolate, out of control, and panicked. I would want to be considerate and kind, understanding I was just one of thousands in a similar condition, but I would feel overwhelmed.

This is the scariest time some of my friends and I have known in terms of health, environmental, social, economic, and political issues. Yet I am privileged and understand that other people may have had so much duress in their lives in other eras that their perspective would be different than mine. What might the results be if an all-encompassing brain scan could be processed of the population of our country or the world, measuring how scary this era is for every person? I imagine there are people who would say this is not the scariest of times for them, especially if they have lost family members in school shootings or to opioid misuse; lived through forest fires, hurricanes, floods, droughts, famine, political insurrection, or civil war; experienced domestic violence or workplace harassment; suffered from mental illness, homelessness, hunger, or poverty; or found themselves on the brunt end of systematic racism and police misconduct. What may be unique in relation to the pandemic is its ubiquitous nature. It is creating tragedy everywhere, whereas, in the past, the news might have been focused on the forest fires in Paradise, California, or hurricanes in New Orleans.



Political and social conditions before news of the coronavirus crept onto our radar screens were already complex and overwhelming with the global spread of the pandemic making them even incomprehensible. I suspect the pandemic will last at least another year, there always will be some threat posed by COVID-19 or similar virus, and the economic and social spillover could last for a decade if not more.

The New York Times headline on the day before Memorial Day (May 24, 2020) said, “U.S. Deaths Near 100,000, An Incalculable Loss.” The sub-headline added, “They were not simply names on a list, they were us.” The newspaper filled all the columns of the front page with names of one percent of those who had died from the virus and a few words about each.

A bold red-letter headline on the evening of the first Wednesday after Memorial Day (May 27) on *HuffPost* shouted, “American Carnage, 100,000 Dead.” The next morning, I could not find the headline again. Instead, the media had turned its focus to the May 25 incident when Minneapolis white police officer Derek Chauvin was processing the arrest of a Black man, George Floyd. The latter allegedly had passed a counterfeit \$20 bill at a Cup Foods grocery store to buy a package of cigarettes. Chauvin knelt over Floyd, who was handcuffed and lying face down on the ground, with a knee on Floyd’s neck for nearly nine minutes. Although Floyd gasped more than once that he could not breathe, Chauvin did not back off nor did any of his fellow police officers stop him. The result,

Floyd died. Since then commentary about systematic racism and police brutality along with news of protests, riots, damage, demands for legislative changes, and Floyd's memorial service have dominated the media. *HuffPost's* phrase, "American Carnage," could aptly be used not only to describe the enormous loss of life and disruption of social systems due to the pandemic, but it could refer as well to how the nation's systemic racism has again been exposed with an inflamed response in the form of protests, some violent, in cities and towns across the country.

The killing of George Floyd is one of a long list of incidents of Black people dying at the hands of police officers acting brutally and with apparent impunity throughout the years. Yet his death and the death of Michael Brown in 2014 in Ferguson, Missouri, have happened close to home. I know little about Missouri, but I have lived in Duluth, Minnesota, and Fargo, North Dakota, just across the river from Moorhead, Minnesota. I have had great respect for what I have known about the twin cities of Minneapolis and Saint Paul with their cultural opportunities, mass transit system, bicycle trails, and easy access to the rustic north woods and lakes. Over the years, I sometimes have thought I might want to live in that area, being envious of what seemed like its progressive nature. The news, though, of the murder of George Floyd has taught me that Minneapolis is not as shining of a city as I had thought it was. A June 2, 2020, excerpt from National Public Radio's "Planet Money Newsletter" under the header "America Reckons with Racial Injustice" and titled "Minneapolis Ranks Near the Bottom for Racial Equality" sought to find data about Minneapolis. The article claimed, "So about Minneapolis... we found it, and the Twin Cities area more generally, has some of the most abysmal numbers on racial inequality in the nation."

It is wrong for any person to misuse the power of his or her authority – whether a parent, pastor, physician, caretaker, teacher, treasurer, lawmaker, or other. To have a police officer kneel on the neck of a handcuffed human being of any race, lying face down on the street and gasping, "I cannot breathe," with no fellow officer stopping the killing is a terrible misuse of authority. The situation is even more tragic when the assailant is a white police officer, the victim a Black civilian, and the city's numbers on racial inequality are known to be abysmal.

The killing of George Floyd precipitated a range of protests from peaceful ones to those of looting, violence, and destruction. My friend Teresa Opheim in Minneapolis said in an email that her home is a couple of miles from the site of Floyd's murder and 10 blocks from the police precinct headquarters. Teresa shared, "Many of my neighborhood businesses are gone, we have had smoke and sirens and helicopters and all kinds of chaos. It is unbelievable. And I am shocked at what happened to the neighborhood I love, but I now know what many people in the world face on a daily basis."

The American Civil Liberties Union website carried a June 3, 2020, report by staff attorney Brian Hauss and director of the Minnesota ACLU, Teresa Nelson. They said, "Throughout the George Floyd protests, there have been numerous, well-documented instances of deliberate abuse against journalists by law enforcement officers."

The ACLU post continues: "These attacks violate the press's clearly established First Amendment right to report on public protests and police activities. An open society depends on a free press to keep the public informed and to bear witness to government actions. When law enforcement officers target members of the press with impunity, they strike at the root of our democracy. Law enforcement officers who perpetrate these abuses must be held accountable for their actions to the fullest extent of the law."

A set of incidents occurring from early Friday, May 29, to the evening of Monday, June 1, 2020, provides a vivid and scary example of the president's immaturity, inflammatory style, and desire for his office to have unbridled authority.

Referring to the Minneapolis protestors in a 12:53 a.m. tweet on Friday, the president said, “...These THUGS are dishonoring the memory of George Floyd, and I won’t let that happen. Just spoke to Governor Tim Walz and told him that the Military is with him all the way. Any difficulty and we will assume control but, when the looting starts, the shooting starts. Thank you!”

USA Today published, “A timeline of confrontation, contention and confusion surrounding Trump’s photo op at Washington church,” prepared by Karl Gelles, Veronica Bravo, and George Petras originally dated June 5, 2020, and updated on June 11. The events on the list begin on Sunday, May 31, “Demonstrators set fire to the basement nursery of St. John’s Episcopal Church at about 10 p.m. The fire is extinguished by District firefighters. Church officials say the nursery is destroyed and the church is later boarded up.”

In an *Associated Press News* article on June 1, 2020, titled, “Tear gas, threats for protestors before Trump visits church,” Jill Colvin and Darlene Superville describe what then occurred on Monday. They wrote the president had intended to address the nation from the White House Rose Garden at 7 p.m., but at 6:30 p.m., “law enforcement officers were aggressively forcing the protestors back, firing tear gas and deploying flash bangs into the crowd to disperse them from the park for seemingly no reason.” The story continued, “With smoke still wafting and isolated tussles continuing in the crowd, Trump emerged in the Rose Garden for a dramatic split-screen of his own creation.”

“‘I am your president of law and order and an ally of all peaceful protestors,’ he declared, before demanding that governors across the nation deploy the National Guard ‘in sufficient numbers that we dominate the streets.’ And he warned that, if they refused, he would deploy the United States military ‘and quickly solve the problem for them.’”

In introducing their *USA Today* timeline, the authors reported, “U.S. and military police drove protestors out of Lafayette Square, located between the White House and the historic St. John’s Episcopal Church, shortly before a presidential photo op with a Bible at the church on June 1.”

They continued, “White House Press Secretary Kayleigh McEnany said the president wanted to send ‘a very powerful message that we will not be overcome by looting, by rioting, by burning’ and compared Trump’s visit to British Prime Minister Winston Churchill’s inspection of bomb damage during the London Blitz in World War II.”

The president is no Winston Churchill. He does not exude the oratory skill, confidence, and leadership that Churchill presented in inspiring the British people in response to the German invasions of World War II. Nor does the president exude the mature and reassuring leadership of President Franklin Delano Roosevelt during the years of the Great Depression through WWII.

From my perspective of watching *Washington Post* and Fox News video footage, the president was awkward and indifferent during his trip to St. John’s. Dressed in a plain navy blue suit, he strode through Lafayette Park, alone, several feet ahead of his phalanx of colleagues with security officers herding civilians away from his path. He had a sour look on his face, was neither comforting nor inspiring, showed no familiarity with or care for the Bible that his daughter, Ivanka, handed him but fidgeted with it before holding it aloft in his right hand. When asked if it was his Bible, the president responded in terse one-line phrases: “We have a great country. That’s my thoughts. Greatest country in the world. Gonna make it even greater, and it won’t take long. It’s not going to take long. We’re coming back, and we’re coming back strong. We’ll be greater than ever before.”

His notions about greatness stand in sharp contrast to at least one central teaching of Christianity, expressed by Jesus of Nazareth in a conversation with his disciples as recorded in the Gospel of Mark, Chapter 9, Verses 33-36. The Biblical passage says:

Then they came to Capernaum; and when he was in the house he asked them, "What were you arguing about on the way?" But they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another who was the greatest. He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, "Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all."

On June 2, CNN's Paul LeBlanc reported the Right Rev. Mariann Edgar Budde, Episcopal bishop of Washington, as saying, "Let me be clear, the president just used a Bible, the most sacred text of the Judeo-Christian tradition, and one of the churches of my diocese, without permission, as a backdrop for a message antithetical to the teachings of Jesus." She added, "This was a charade that in some ways was meant to bolster a message that does nothing to calm — to calm the soul and to reassure the nation that we can recover from this moment which is what we need from a President, and that's what the faith communities stand for."

On June 4, CNN's Steven Collison wrote, "In a true Washington bombshell on Wednesday evening, former Defense Secretary James Mattis, a warrior revered by his troops, told Americans they must come together without the President:

"Donald Trump is the first president in my lifetime who does not try to unite the American people — does not even pretend to try," said Mattis, who has kept silent since resigning in 2018.

"Instead, he tries to divide us. We are witnessing the consequences of three years of this deliberate effort. We are witnessing the consequences of three years without mature leadership," said the retired Marine general in a statement, criticizing Trump for threatening to deploy regular troops to quell unrest in a flagrant threat to US political stability.

I am reminded of a documentary motion picture class at Montana State University in 1971, when I first saw the 1935 German film *Triumph of the Will* produced by Leni Reifenstahl. The highly acclaimed, artistic filmmaker produced the documentary for German chancellor Adolf Hitler, showcasing the Reich Party Congress, its rallies, and marches in Nuremberg in 1934. Reifenstahl took great care in selecting scenes and symbolism to manipulate the viewer's emotions.

The film opens with a long sequence of large, dark cumulus clouds edged with sunshine filmed from the cockpit of a plane, followed by aerial views of the castles and streets of Nuremberg, including a massive military parade. The camera then moves to ground level with shots of the airplane — what could be considered the German equivalent of Air Force One — flying over the city. The clouds have cleared, and the plane is basked in sunshine. It lands at an airport where large crowds wait and salute as the door opens and Hitler steps out. The soundtrack consists of inspirational, symphonic music — the Nazi anthem, also known as the "Horst Wessel Song." One can imagine that Reifenstahl had intended that Hitler would appear to have descended to earth from the heavens.

Blogger Maksym Chorny, on his web site about war documentaries, analyzes the opening of the film. "After the shots of the airplane filled with mysticism and symbols, we can observe Hitler himself, facing the public. The visual narration presents us with its main character — the central part of the entire Nuremberg Congress. In a scene when the Fuhrer motorcade moves through the streets of the city of Nuremberg, he is presented as the long-awaited Messiah of the German people, receiving enthusiastic applause, smiles and even flowers from a little girl. Sunlight breaks through his palm raised in the Nazi salute and it seems, even a cat on the windowsill of one of the houses is waiting for a chance to see the leader of the nation."

Mistakenly, I recalled that Reifensahl had used a cathedral and the Bible as two of the symbols in *Triumph of the Will*, but when I recently reviewed the entire documentary, looking for those symbols, I found neither. The Third Reich Congress, however, did hold rallies in a large hall that appeared somewhat like a church gathering, and the film did include many scenes of Nazi banners, as well as flags on flag poles, each topped with an ornamental, golden eagle.

Germany had been worn down by World War I (1914 -1918) and was bearing the weight of the harsh stipulations the Allied nations demanded in the Treaty of Versailles, which was signed on June 28, 1919. Many Germans called the treaty a dictated peace.

A series of titles at the beginning of *Triumph of the Will* establishes the timing of the 1934 Reich Party Congress as “sixteen years after the start of the German suffering” and “nineteen months after the start of Germany’s rebirth” in January 1933, when Hitler had been appointed as chancellor. His mantra could just as easily have been, “Make Germany great again.”

Reifensahl most likely would never have choreographed a scene as awkward and ineffective as the one of the U.S. president at St. John’s Episcopal Church on June 1, 2020. His walk there, escorted by enablers who should have known better, was a matter of authority gone awry. The events of the day may be a signal that the president is coming closer to implementing, or at least wanting to implement, legislation called the Insurrection Act that dates back to 1807.

On June 3, 2020, Ian Shapira of *The Washington Post* explained the Insurrection Act. “Originally signed by Thomas Jefferson and amended over the years, it states: ‘Whenever there is an insurrection in any State against its government, the President may, upon the request of its legislature or of its governor if the legislature cannot be convened,’” send in military troops.

In case governors don’t comply with Trump’s demands, one provision of the law, passed in 1956, gives him the power to act unilaterally: “Whenever the President considers unlawful obstructions, combinations, or assemblages or rebellion against the authority of the United States, [that] make it impracticable to enforce the laws ... in any State ... he may call into Federal service such of the militia of any State, and use such of the armed forces, as he considers necessary to enforce those laws or to suppress the rebellion.”

Even before the murder of George Floyd, systematic racism was a factor in the COVID-19 pandemic with people of color afflicted and dying in significantly greater numbers from the virus than white people. Then with the confluence of the pandemic, Floyd’s death, and the increased roiling of racial tensions, the role of government authority became extra complex and the population extra vulnerable.

People were still being advised to shelter-in-place and not attend large gatherings in order to flatten the curve of the pandemic. However, there are those who feel and felt strongly about the need to take action in response to systematic racism and police brutality that they are and were willing to attend congested gatherings such as protests. Society itself is also extra vulnerable to police or state and federal government officials who would opt to overstep their authority to deal with the pandemic and the protests.

The result of the president’s trip to St. John’s Episcopal Church may have been different had he asked Bishop Budde to host a silent vigil, prayer session, or mediated listening session with leaders and other participants from all kinds of faith traditions, as well as for those who claim no prescribed faith, with a focus on seeking wisdom, generating compassion, facilitating healing, and implementing legislative and policy changes.

Although I distrust Republican presidents the most, I also have reservations about Democratic presidents and candidates, considering how hard it is for any one person to court

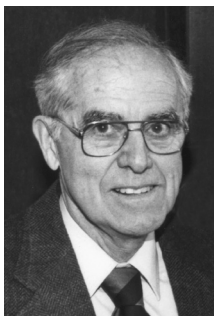
the support of the country's power mongers and raise the money needed to be elected to the Oval Office while maintaining any semblance of purity.

I have said that Dwight D. Eisenhower was the first president I voted for. Of course, that's an attempt at humor, considering I was only seven and not of the age to vote when he was first elected in 1952. Yet I grew up in a Republican family, and Eisenhower was the first presidential nominee whose name I would recognize. Admittedly, his being a West Point graduate, five-star Army general, and Supreme Commander of the Allied Expeditionary Force in Europe during WWII would mean he knew how to operate within spheres of elite influence and that he was not as pure a person as his gentle persona with an easy, wide, gentle smile would lead one to believe. I remember, though, proudly wearing my one-inch round campaign button that said, "I like Ike." My fondness for Eisenhower, who was 62 when first elected, was like that of the endearment a child might have for a kind grandfather.

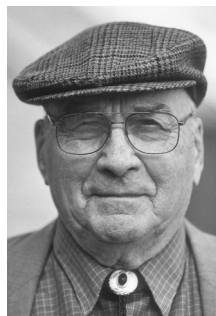
Eisenhower's foresight and wisdom in his final speech to the nation on January 17, 1961, is impressive and needs to be invoked now about the perils of the military-industrial complex:

In the councils of government, we must guard against the acquisition of unwarranted influence, whether sought or unsought, by the military-industrial complex. The potential for the disastrous rise of misplaced power exists and will persist. We must never let the weight of this combination endanger our liberties or democratic processes. We should take nothing for granted. Only an alert and knowledgeable citizenry can compel the proper meshing of the huge industrial and military machinery of defense with our peaceful methods and goals, so that security and liberty may prosper together.

It is three quarters of a century since 1945 when I was born on April 19 and Adolf Hitler and his long-time companion and wife of fewer than 40 hours, Eva Braun, took their lives in a bunker on April 30. Then on May 7, Germany surrendered to the Allied Forces.



Roger De Wall



Deane Gunderson



Joe Reigelsberger



Verle Howard



Don Grant

In September of that year, my parents, two older siblings, and I moved from Waterloo, Iowa, where Dad worked for the John Deere Tractor Company, designing tail hooks for Grumman aircraft for the war effort, to the farm where I grew up. This project has documented many of the changes in that rural neighborhood, as well as regionally and nationally, and it is appropriate to wonder what Eisenhower would think of today's president. Or what would the men and women who grew up during the Great Depression and fought in WWII or in other ways helped win it think of him? Surely, they fought against tyranny and would not have expected it to come here in such a conspicuous fashion.

There are people who would disagree 180 degrees from my perspective and point to what they view as the tyranny of today's liberals. However, it was a shock when I encountered such a difference of opinion this spring. I had been corresponding by email as part of fact-checking for my book with a person I have known and admired in my home county. They responded in a friendly, helpful way. They also wrote of the pandemic, reporting that they wear their face mask wherever they go and there had been only three cases of the COVID-19 virus in the county. They added, "It is a challenging time but I think the Lord is trying to tell us something and too many are not listening!!!!"

Although I understand Lord or God language, I generally choose not to use it. However, I realize there is a lot that can be learned from the pandemic, and if I were to use God talk, I would say God is not manipulative and does not create tragedies for the sake of providing teachable moments for human kind. Tragic events such as pandemics do happen, and there is potential to learn from them.

When I called the person to clarify their information, I referred to their comment in the email about the Lord. I knew them to be well-educated and a community leader and thought their concerns might be similar in nature to mine about how the pandemic has exposed some of the frailties of society, including racism or classism. Or perhaps they were hopeful the pandemic would force people to be more compassionate toward other people or pay more attention to their personal spiritual lives and practices. That was not the case. They responded with great vigor with a long rationale to the effect, "Oh, don't you know, what Nancy Pelosi [Speaker of the House] and Adam Schiff [U.S. Representative who led the presidential impeachment hearings] have been up to? It is simply terrible how they are treating that man [President Trump.] He is doing a great job, and they should just get out of his way."

Whew. I was silent, listened out of respect, and wanted to avoid a complex discussion or even a hint of a fight. Finally, I simply and quietly spoke, "This is where I have to disagree with you." They responded that I had a right to disagree. Yes, this is a democracy. I wonder, though, at what point is it most helpful, on one hand, to drop a conversation or, on the other hand, to explain my perspective to a person who so wholeheartedly holds an opinion that I believe to be so wrong. In this instance, I sensed the case was closed. I still think highly of my friend even though I am disappointed and recognize they are not alone in their attitude. It runs rampant in most of the counties of this congressional district.

For the record, Republican State Senator Randy Feenstra defeated incumbent Republican U.S. Representative Steve King, who has been in Congress since 2003, in Iowa's June 2020 primary election. Feenstra received 45.7 percent of the vote. King 36 percent. I was flummoxed that 28,977 people voted for King, considering he has received so much negative publicity over the past three decades for his white supremacist language that many people perceived as an embarrassment to Iowa and prompted his own party in Congress to censor him. Among his many controversial remarks, King has claimed he would like America to be a more homogenous country where people looked more alike and criticized multiculturalism, saying "Diversity is not our strength."

I wish the Democratic nominee, J.D. Scholten, well and am supporting him as he continues his current campaign to become the fourth Democratic representative in Iowa's delegation of four in Congress, but conservative Republican ideologies have a lock on politics in this district. The business manager for Scholten's campaign said their team plans to attack Feenstra's loyalty to President Trump. Considering how much the president is sliding in popularity polls, Scholten's strategy might just work.

Enough about politics. Even in less volatile times, I have felt that news of the presidency dominated news cycles and social conversations way too much. Yes, there is need for awareness and vigilance. However, becoming fixated on presidential news can be a distraction from

being present to who we essentially are in the moment in a mindful way, having deeply meaningful conversations, and finding ways to effectively be of service.

Independence Day was different in Ames this year. The mayor and city council members did not serve their traditional pancake breakfast. The city hosted no live band concert, no fireworks celebration, no parade. Wheatsfield did not serve a hot dog and brat lunch, and the 10-million dollar Furman Aquatic Center with lazy river, water slides, and other features built just a decade ago is closed for the season.

I have a suggestion for celebrating this day creatively. The day is called “Independence Day” because our founders wanted independence from the tyrannical rule of a king. Continuing to celebrate and pursue that ideal is more relevant now than ever. Why not think of the day also as “Interdependence Day,” considering the interconnected nature of people, especially in the face of the pandemic, racial and class tensions, economic struggles, and environmental challenges such as climate change? Recognize and resist the idolatry of rugged individualism and militarism. Recognize and resist the idolatry of privilege. Recognize and resist tyranny and other misuses of authority. Have a gentle Interdependence Day that includes consideration of neighbors when shooting off fireworks and a choice of other elements such as solitude to reflect on what is important, good food and companionship, discussions with family and friends about privilege or what patriotism means, reading alone or to another person, writing, painting, making music, throwing a Frisbee, walking the dog, brushing the cat, acts of kindness, being of service, and participating in a protest to name a few options.



Flag at the Velma and Verle Howard farm home. 1989.

During my years enrolled in San Francisco Theological Seminary (SFTS) in the 1980s, several students were heavily involved in social justice activism, especially against U.S. military intervention in Nicaragua. Some activists appeared to be caught up too easily in the outer focus of spirituality without being grounded in the interior dimensions of spirituality. Others of us erred in being too focused on the inner life, not taking the risks that our classmates were making. I may be continuing to err in the direction of inner spirituality even now. However, there is a place for practicing yoga, mindfulness, and meditation as well as learning more about the issues, being open to self-reflection, and discerning how to be involved to make a difference.

The protests and riots this spring and early summer are beyond my comprehension. I have stayed my distance, partially due to not knowing how to get involved but mainly out of fear. That said, I do admire the resolve of people who have stood against racism, promoted the overhaul of police departments, and lobbied state and federal governments. I have heard the criticism directed at white people — that if they are not finding a way to take a stand against racism, they are just as culpable as anyone else for the misuse of authority. *Mea culpa*. Even from a young age, I have felt conflicted about classism and the privilege I have had being part of a family that owned more than 3,000 acres of land. Admittedly, this book is about a white neighborhood and heritage; however, I am not new at understanding that systemic racism exists and being part of a racist society means that I, too, am a racist even though I am uncomfortable with accepting that label.



My spirits are heavier these days than in April when the pandemic and the practice of staying in place were still novel. Often, I have nightmares such as one last week when I found it hard to awake from a plot in which I suffered from dementia, was homeless with no friends or other support, and possessed no privilege in the streets of Oakland, California, where nary a soul was to be seen due to the pandemic. Each day, it takes a while for me to find ambition, especially after a disturbing dream such as that one. However, I am not giving up on the future as if doomsday is here. Even if it were at our doorstep, I will continue to nurture the baby apple trees that I grafted this spring with scionwood carrying the DNA of the wealthy apple tree at my grandparents' home and find homes for them. I will transplant one in my back yard and give the other trees away even though I do not know yet where they will find new homes. No matter where they are transplanted, there will be at least five years before they produce their first apples. I will water and weed my pepper, tomato, collards, kale, and cabbage plants and take produce to the Food at First pantry in Ames and make bread for FAF meals. I will continue providing a place of hospitality, albeit much less than usual due to the pandemic and its distancing. And I will be a catalyst, helping others who want to begin or continue growing food at their homes.

This urban farm is a great teacher. One of the biggest learning opportunities relates to the value of diversity. In 2006 when I bought my home in Ames with visions of growing food here, Mark Runquist, a church friend, gave me the book *Gaia's Garden* about permaculture and its principle of fostering diversity. I was mesmerized as I read. Originally, I thought the word was a combination of "permanent" and "agriculture" and meant using the land in sustainable ways. There are, however, many kinds of permaculture principles that can be applied to many planning disciplines.

Farm fields developed with permaculture principles look far different from those of the 21 million acres of Iowa farmland planted only to corn or soybeans. With the latter, there is hardly any variation of plant size within a given field, due to the use of high-tech hybrid seed, and nary a weed, due to the use of herbicides. Urban lots developed with permaculture in mind look far different than the vast number of city, town, and suburban lots with neatly-manicured and chemically-treated lawns.

I do my best to practice permaculture. The principles foremost in my mind are (1) working with nature instead of against it, (2) growing plants and animals that serve more than one purpose, (3) planning with a long-term perspective rather than for immediate gratification, and (4) developing diversity.



Backyard view of Helen's urban farm. 2020.

In our attempts to work with nature at my Ames urban farm, we have developed a large plot of prairie in a low area at the back of the rental lot, an area that floods almost every spring. We start far more apple trees than we will ever need and in a variety of areas we believe are conducive to their health to see how well each terrain suits them. We don't expect all trees to thrive, but the ones that do thrive get to stay. We consider how plants and animals might serve different purposes. For instance, the cherry trees provide habitat and food for birds and bees, cherries and the recreation of picking them for humans, shade for chickens, and beauty to behold. The mixed breeds of chickens provide eggs, fertilizer, insect and weed control to a certain extent, entertainment, companionship, and again, beauty to behold.

Creating diversity is the most obvious principle we incorporate here. The farm is a collage of what some guests might consider to be a random, motley assortment of prairie plots, garden beds, fruit trees and patches. In many locations, it is hard to tell where the native plants end and the domestic plants begin.

The "Three Sisters guild" with corn, beans, and squash growing next to each other is a common example of growing diverse plants together for their common good. We tried growing a Three Sisters plot only once, losing the corn to raccoons. The equivalent here, though, is our apple guilds with yarrow, rhubarb, and comfrey nested around each apple tree to benefit each other. We also grow basil beside tomato plants and sweet alyssum in our cabbage beds. There are no large garden beds with only one vegetable growing in them. We annually rotate our crops, knowing, for instance, that it would be folly to grow only tomatoes in one large space year after year, risking extensive blight damage that would mean no more tomatoes or other members of the night shade family (peppers, potatoes, eggplant) in that space for at least three years.



Bowl of Helen's mystery tomatoes. 2020.

Our mystery tomato plants are one exception to the diversity principle. I eat few, if any tomatoes, during the summer, due to their effect on my digestive system, so my only purpose for growing them is to make pizza sauce and dehydrate some for wintertime snacks. I don't require a wide variety of tomatoes like some culinary enthusiasts might demand. Also, I had been disappointed for nearly a decade with how the various heirloom tomatoes that I grew, more often than not, were disappointing with sunscald, blight, cracks, not ripening fully before the first freeze, and other problems. Then in 2016, I discovered a volunteer tomato plant just south of my house. I saved seed from it and have continued to grow that line of tomato in my plots while Diane next door grows a greater variety for her place. I call the volunteer "Helen's mystery tomato plant" and start several each year, giving some away and transplanting nine here with three each in three different areas of my yard. These mystery tomatoes usually are about the size of a tennis ball, smooth, dark red, beautiful with no blemishes and ripen from late July through the end September. Although they defy any measure of diversity, they are an example of working with nature.

We grow several cultivars of apple trees, and for most of our vegetables, we intend to grow at least two kinds of seed, getting much of it from Seed Savers Exchange near Decorah, Iowa. Our peppers include sweet ones such as Carmen and Revolution and the mildly hot Poblanos and Anaheims. Diane insists on growing even hotter ones, including Jalapenos, which I will not touch.

For kale, we plant Red Russian and Winterbor seed. For collards: Champion, Georgia Southern, or Vates. For cabbage: Copenhagen, Early Jersey Wakefield, Farao, or Murdoc. This place also has its own perennial, if not native, supply of green, leafy vegetables: purslane, lambsquarters, and another that is a relative of the Amaranth family and high in vitamin A.



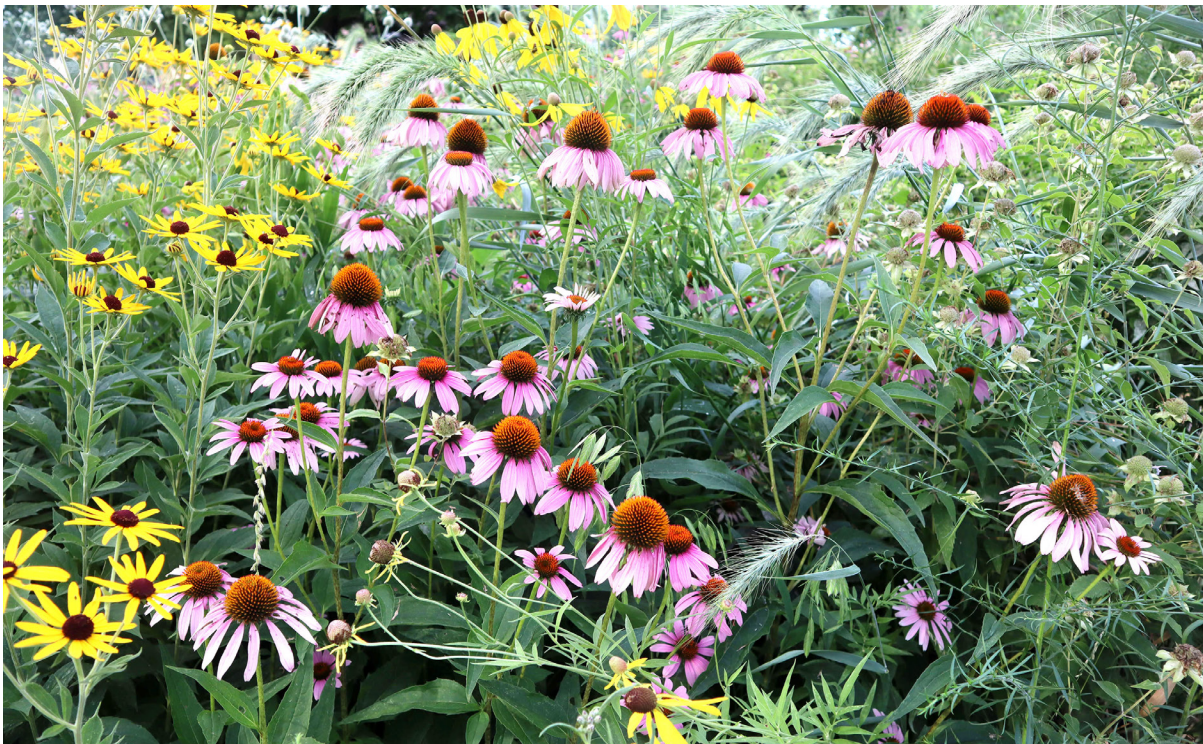
Bloodroot pigweed



Lambsquarters

Huong Nguyen, the weed specialist doctoral student who lived next door and pointed the latter out to me, said it is known as Redroot Pigweed. Although the three plants are generally considered to be weeds, I am having fun harvesting, cooking, and eating them, as well as freezing some for winter meals.

Diversity is one factor in our ability to grow many kinds of vegetables well without synthetic fertilizers and chemical herbicides. Diversity also means that many birds, bees, butterflies, and other insects are at home here. It also adds to the intrigue of the place and the way in which so many people, myself and guests included, enjoy simply meandering around the farm or sitting in a chair on the orchard deck for conversation or solitude, appreciating nature and feeling whole.



Prairie patch at Helen's urban farm. 2020.

I am not new to understanding that nature provides good examples of the value of diversity. Decades ago, while listening to public radio when driving north through Minnesota, I heard prairie scientists explain a research trial in which they had started several identically-sized test plots, I imagine about 10 x 10 feet each. They planted only one prairie species in some plots with increasing numbers in the others. The scientists observed and concluded that, as the diversity of prairie plants in the plots increased, the health, as well as the bulk of vegetation in the plots, increased.

Bret Lang, a friend who used to work at my urban farm and is now an environmental specialist with the Iowa Waste Reduction Center at the University of Northern Iowa, sent me an example of prairie diversity on 25 acres of land just north of Ames. “Doolittle Prairie is able to support 223 native species (and 42 non-native species) of plant life as well as at least 61 species of birds, 31 species of butterflies, and several mammal species. I couldn’t imagine how many species of insect live there.”

The prairie projects I implemented from the late 1990s to 2016 on my Pocahontas County farmland through the USDA Conservation Reserve Program involved restoring row crop acres to prairie. Most likely, they will never have the extent of diversity found at Doolittle, which is considered a virgin prairie. The 220 acres in Des Moines Township northeast of Rolfe, that I call DeElda Farm in memory of my grandmother, DeElda Gunderson, has a large variety of native flora and fauna. It provides a wonderful environment for monarch butterflies and is home to at least one “Species of Greatest Conservation Need” in Iowa, a small songbird known as the bobolink.

My 17-acre permanent pasture covered with Brome grass and scattered pockets of native plants has never been tilled due to its hilly terrain even though cattle grazed on it as late as the 1970s. My greatest hope lies with my 77-acre CRP pollinator habitat, considering its size and that the Iowa Natural Heritage Foundation is overseeing its development and arranged to have some 35-plus species of local ecotype prairie seed sown there, beginning in 2016. Shaped like a wide, rectangular picture frame, the pollinator project surrounds a 90-acre field that Abram Frank farms organically.



Aerial view of land that Helen calls “DeElda Farm” northeast of Rolfe, Iowa. Drone photography by Abram Frank. Camera faces south with the town barely visible in the upper right hand corner. 2020.

Another lesson at Burnett Urban Farm relates to how easy it is to become overwhelmed with all that is wrong and not remember that my attitude is what is important. Way too many thistles are blossoming and about to go to seed in my garden and prairie patches. Volunteer maple, mulberry, walnut, redbud, and other saplings can show up almost anywhere and are an ever-present challenge. The screened porch with three cat litter boxes and the workshop area in the garage are often cluttered. Inside the house, there are too many days when the kitchen is messy and the dirty dishes neglected for too long a time or when there are fuzz balls of cat hair floating in the air and spots where the cats have upchucked their food on the floor or furniture in other rooms of the house. I need to be patient and let go of the need for perfection. I also need to admit the work is too much for me and find help. Other times, I must overcome complacency, rise from a nap, and find the energy to take on at least one small task such as sweeping the porch, cleaning the litter boxes, watering the garden beds, feeding and watering the chickens, and taking pruning shears in hand to go after the thistles and saplings. Amazingly, doing one small task can generate enthusiasm to do more projects. I am not all that elderly and still have the ability to take responsibility for this place, especially for my plants, chickens, and cats who would not survive without me.

If I am wise, I will approach the day and its tasks with the attitude exemplified in the Zen saying, "Before enlightenment, chop wood, carry water. After enlightenment, chop wood, carry water."

Each year, there are some aspects of the farm that fail. This year's cherry crop was only five percent of normal. The cucumber vines died early. The apple and elderberry trees and patches of gooseberries and raspberries are flourishing as are herbs such as anise hyssop, beebalm, lemon balm, mint, oregano, and perilla. The lesson: not to be bummed by something that fails. Life is a matter of balance — especially of yin as yang — at any given moment.

I try to avoid being overwhelmed by news and thinking all is terrible or for naught, and yet, not err by denying the tragedies. I need to remember that the information I receive through the portals of listservs, organizational web sites, internet news sites, and public radio represents only selected streams of the whole of life and may be distorted either innocently or intentionally. I also need to be present to the close-to-home, daily reality as I experience it. The latter means being grateful for a range of wonderful and not so wonderful experiences. Fortunately, this week I can find plump, sweet red raspberries and plump, sour red and green gooseberries on my farm, pluck them from their patches, and eat them on location.

Could not the same be said about my relationship to the larger issues of society? To work on my attitude, learning more about the ways I am privileged? To acknowledge there is much, if not too much, that needs attention, yet learn to be patient and let go of perfectionism? To find balance and not be immobilized by guilt or be lulled into a privileged complacency? To realize I still have the capacity to be responsible? To recognize there is much that is good and be grateful?

What I learn from Ruthann, my yoga teacher; Eric Daishin McCabe and Sara Jisho Siebert, who are Zen priests living just down the street; and Pema Chodron, author of *When Things Fall Apart*, is the need for people interested in spiritual growth to feel their pain and learn from it. It is not as though a mindful person tries or can escape feelings such as anger, grief, and depression or the circumstances that precipitated those feelings. However, the lesson is for people to let go of the judging what the pain means and be attuned to the essence of who they are under the crust of those feelings. As Chodron says in her book:

Life is a good teacher and a good friend. Things are always in transition, if we could only realize it. Nothing ever sums itself up in the way that we like to dream about. The off-center, in-between state is an ideal situation, a situation in which we don't get caught and we can open our hearts and minds beyond limit.



I was age 36 when I enrolled in seminary and 40 when I graduated in 1985. During those years, I often felt like I was in a midlife crisis and was fortunate to be able to attend non-credit weekend seminars on spirituality. I believe author and philosopher, Sam Keen, was the guest leader whose advice continues to resonate with me. He said, “If we are lucky, we will experience a midlife crisis.” His metaphor — an acorn — suggesting that unless the shell of an acorn is cracked open, an oak tree will not emerge and that in our own personal growth, we too, must undergo transitions that are not always comfortable. Admittedly, some people do not make it through the crises of midlife but succumb to tragic circumstances, if not suicide. However, individuals can grow from midlife challenges, which could happen at any age and multiple times, and become a people they never envisioned they could become.

A nation, too, can grow from its challenges and become better than its people had envisioned it could be — not idealizing the past but open to possibilities that blend the best of the old and the new. One could pray for humankind to transcend the difficult times, learn, and arrive at new attitudes of decency toward each other as individuals, groups, communities and nations, existing together on this planet — our shared home.



Oak tree, known as “Big Beauty,” on land owned by Iowa Natural Heritage Foundation near Pella, Iowa. 2015. Photo by Tylar Samuels, INHF conservation easement specialist, and used courtesy of INHF.



Appendix

A Desire to Dance¹

My God, yes I need to dance more.
Not merely tulips, green grass
and slick ballroom floors.
But into life, living,
loving, creating, dancing.

Child, sweet child,
full of health and vigor,
where have I lost you?

The John Deere, model MT tractor
you used to drive to cultivate the corn
and now the oats.
Oh dreamer, contemplative one,
who even at that young age
appreciated the solitude and patterns
of the fields and nearby Lizard Creek.

Oh child of summer who knows
the pungency of farm life,
the animals, the manure,
the smell of straw baled and
stacked in the barn.
The wild flowers
beside the gravel road.
The volunteer tiger lilies
along the lane to the house.
The time your mother taught you
to bounce a ball.
Yes, the ball, red, white, and blue
with stars and stripes.
Bouncing it on the round concrete slab
that covered the underground coal bin
next to the house.

Yes, the dance, Dear One,
the roundness of the ball,
the roundness of the concrete sphere,
the circle that encompassed
you and your mother.

You must dance more.
It is your life and desire to move
with the rhythm of that ball,
the rhythm of the farm,
the land and the universe.

1. Helen wrote this poem in 1991 at a writing class at the Angela Center in Santa Rosa, California.

On Being at Home in the Garden²

I enter the garden, searching and yearning,
homing in on that visceral something that lures me.

The garden is home, sanctuary, embrace and acceptance.
It connects me to a voice not heard in religions whose steeples
pierce upward, away from earth, away from home.

The garden is home with no division between sacred and secular.
It nurtures and sustains, uniting people and nature,
the past with the present and future.

The garden calls me to that renewing center where I am loved
and where the spirits of those I love are with me.

The garden reminds me that eternal life has as much to do with
the quality of life in each grace-given moment
as it does with unending chronological time.

2. Poem written by Helen D. Gunderson. Circa 1991.

Residents and Former Residents of the Road¹

I. **Abandoned Farms** (listed by 1995 owner and going east to west down road)

A. **The first farm**

South side Section 7, Garfield Township

Owned by Velma Ives who lives on the farm on the highway on the east side of section. Farmed by her daughter's family, the Kathy and Gary Dahls. The Ives family bought the farm in 1983 from the Gunderson family.

1. DAN and Mary Allen
 - a. lived there 1973–1976
 - b. now live in Rolfe but Dan farms for my folks
2. John and Katherine Schurr
 - a. John was a hired hand for the Gundersons 1963–1971.
 - b. 4 children, 3 older ones did not live on road
 - (1) ELAINE IRLBECK, Coon Rapids, farm woman
3. Henry Hank and MARIE BAADE
 - a. Hank was a hired hand for the Gundersons 1960-62
 - b. children
 - (1) Karen Pedersen, Scotts Valley, CA, homemaker
 - (2) David, Fort Dodge, Cenex Land O Lakes
 - (3) Joyce Coburn, Liverpoole, NY, Dictaphone for doctor's office
 - (4) Susan Hundertmark, Rutland, Humboldt Sausage Company in lab
4. Lyman and Arlene George
 - a. tenants 1941–1958 for the Bruce heirs, then for John Gunderson who bought the farm in 1955
 - b. children
 - (1) Willard Bill, Des Moines, deceased 1963 at age of 42
 - (2) LORENE GUSTAFSON, Spirit Lake
 - (3) Ada Marie Colee, Blooming Prairie, MN, deceased
 - (4) BERTHA ELLEN WISEMAN, Mt. Pleasant
 - (5) Norma Jean Groenwold, Rushmore, MN
 - (6) MARJORIE SIMONSON, Des Moines
5. Jim and Carrie DeWolf
 - a. tenants for the Bruce heirs 1920–41
 - (1) ROGER DEWOLF, Eagle Grove, owner livestock equipment business
 - (2) Beverly Wiegert, rural Bradgate, farm woman
 - (3) Phyllis Thompson, Hayfield, MN, farm woman
6. Mary and Robert Hunter, Sr.
 - a. owners 1896–1910
 - b. 6 children: Ronda, William, Albert, Jennie, Clara, and Robert G. (Bobby 1898–1975 produce person and Maytag salesman in Rolfe)

1. This outline was prepared in 1995. It includes all names that were available through my research; however, it is not an exhaustive listing of the people who have lived along the road. Children are listed from oldest to youngest. Italicized name is nickname person goes by. CAPITALIZED NAME indicates a key contact person for the project. Dates and occupations are roughly accurate.

B. **The Brinkman farm**
North side Section 8, Garfield Township
Owned by California relatives. Farmed by ROBERT BRINKMAN

1. Floyd and Naomi Page
 - a. Floyd was a Brinkman hired hand 1947–1955.
 - b. 10 children, youngest did not live on road
 - (1) LAVONNE HOWLAND, Rolfe, cake and dressmaker
 - (2) MARLENE LINDEMAN, Dakota City, works in dress shop
 - (3) Dean, Farnhamville, deceased
 - (4) Sharon Sutton, St. Louis, American Airlines
 - (5) Max, Dakota City, Chantland manufacturing
 - (6) Steve, Fort Dodge, Iowa Illinois Gas and Electricity
 - (7) Barbara Barb Osterberg, Fort Dodge Becker’s florist shop
 - (8) Cheryl Geis, Duncomb, deceased
 - (9) Douglas Doug, Madison, WI
2. Albert and Hattie Ercelle Peers
 - a. Albert was a Brinkman hired hand 1928–1932.
 - b. WANDA HODGELL, rural Gilmore, farm woman
 - c. Helen Johnson, Webb, deceased
 - d. Audrey Johnson, Manson
 - e. Violet Vi Schoon, Arkansas (born in house on farm in 1930)

C. **The Cornwell farm**
Northeast corner Section 14, Roosevelt Township
Owned by Joy Cornwell. Farmed by Paul Howard. Bought by Cornwell family in 1895.

1. Irving and Velma Cornwell
 - a. owners 1946–1983
 - b. Daughter, Joy Cornwell Palmer, Forest City, medical journal librarian

D. **The farm where the Jordans lived**
South side, Section 10, Roosevelt Township. Owned by Martha Gunderson Carlson, who lives in Florida. Farmed by Dan and Roger Allen. Bought by Gunderson family in the 1960s.

1. Russel and Mary Jane Jordan
 - a. tenants 1951–1958 then they moved to the building site on north side of section until 1975
 - b. children
 - (1) Pam Wolfe, Elkhorn, The Woodshop retail store
 - (2) Judy Marnin, Atlantic, community college administrator
 - (3) Janet, Red Oak, elementary school teacher
 - (4) Jeanne Jordan, Boston, MA, video editor
 - (5) Jim, Atlantic area, quit farming and is going back to school
 - (6) Jon, Atlantic area, owns a trophy shop
2. Nels Pederson ?–1950
3. Walter Gahm

E. **The Shimon farm**

Northeast quarter, Section 15, Roosevelt Township

Owned by Marjorie Shimon of Pocahontas. Farmed by Chuck Wheatley. Bought by Shimon family in 1892.

1. Marshall and Marjorie Otto
 - a. tenants 1948–1963
 - b. 10 children, two youngest did not live on the road
 - (1) Shirley Najjar, Milpitas, CA
 - (2) JUDY LARSON, Anderson, CA
 - (3) Susan Otto, Omaha, NE
 - (4) Kathleen Wassam, Michigan
 - (5) Nona McLeran, Cherokee Village, AK
 - (6) Mark, Omaha, NE
 - (7) Weston, Santa Clara, CA
 - (8) Daniel, Minneapolis Lakeville, MN
2. SAM and Alberta Simpson
 - a. tenants March 1946–March 1949
 - b. 9 children, youngest five did not live on the road
 - (1) Allen, Boston, full-time sergeant in army reserves medical division
 - (2) Paul, dead, killed 25 years ago in motorcycle accident in CA
 - (3) Mavis Forby, Greenville, SC, clerk in a mission thrift store
 - (4) Linda Cordeiro, Des Moines, accountant for Brenton Bank
3. Adolph and Agnes Sefcik
 - a. tenants 1933–1940
 - b. children
 - (1) Albert, rural Pocahontas, farmer
 - (2) DENNIS, Laurens, Roman Catholic priest

F. **The Grant farm**

East half of northwest quarter, Section 15, Roosevelt Township

Owned by Lois Grant of Pocahontas. Farmed by Bob Joens.

Bought by Grant family in 1920.

1. BOB and Marlene Joens 1960
2. Henry and Esther Joens 1952–57 (Bob's uncle and Marjorie Otto's parents)
3. Cap and Addie Grant 1920–52
 - a. Duncan, Pocahontas, former county treasurer, deceased
 - b. DON, Colo, retired ISU engineering professor

G. **The last farm**

Southwest quarter, Section 9, Roosevelt Township

Owned by Mildred Ives of southern California. Farmed by Paul Harrold.

Bought by Ives family in 1954.

1. The Agnes and Harrold Young, Sr.
 - a. Harrold was a hired hand 1957.
 - b. children
 - (1) CHERALELLEN MORGAN, Clear Lake, teacher
 - (2) Joyce Means, Creston, disabled
 - (3) Harrold, Gunnison, CO, service manager in hardware store
2. Les and Opal Allen
 - a. Les was a hired hand 1955-56.
 - b. 7 children, youngest five probably did not live here
 - (1) DAN, Rolfe, farms for my folks
 - (2) ROGER, Pocahontas, farms for my folks
3. Henry Hank and MARIE BAADE, newly married hired hand March 1947–March 1948

II. **Occupied Farms** (listed by 1995 residents from east to west along road)

A. **The Reigelsberger farm**

South side, Section 12, Roosevelt Township

Farmed by Mick Reigelsberger. Bought by Eva and Lee Reigelsberger in 1929 who then moved there.

1. MICK AND SUE Reigelsberger, 1992–current
 - a. Mick's parents, Joe and Norine Reigelsberger, moved to Rolfe from farm in 1992
 - b. Mick's brother, Greg, lives in Ft. Dodge and is part owner of Stile's Golf, Bowling, and Trophy Shop
2. JOE AND NORINE Reigelsberger, November 1953–November 1992 (married August 13, 1953)
3. Eva and Lee Reigelsberger 1929–November 1953
 - a. children
 - (1) Joe, Rolfe, Pioneer Seed Dealer and retired farmer
 - (2) Helen Woelfel, Edina, MN, nursing instructor and related work
 - (3) Mary Therese Wolford, Louisville, KY, retired medical records librarian
4. James Dady 1918–1928

B. **The Gunderson farm**

North side, Section 13, Roosevelt Township

Farmed by Dan and Roger Allen. Bought by John Gunderson in 1939.

1. Deane and Marion Gunderson 1945–present
 - a. Children
 - (1) Clara Hoover, Omaha, school librarian, computer administrator
 - (2) Charles, Rolfe, attorney and farm manager
 - (3) Helen, Gilbert, photographer and videographer
 - (4) Martha Carlson, Largo, FL, communications
 - (5) Margaret Peggy Moore, Detroit, MI, homemaker and student
 - (6) Louise Shimon, Perry, public school media specialist

2. Fred Baade (not related to Henry Baade) was tenant for Rosa Dady and her estate @1920s–30s
3. David and Rosa Dady, 1883–1916, Rosa until 1929

C. **The Harrold farm**

South side, Section 11, Roosevelt Township

Farmed by Paul Harrold. Bought by Marion and Gladys Davis in 1942 who then moved there.

1. MARJORIE Harrold 1942–present and son PAUL 1976–present
2. Marjorie (Davis) and Faber Harrold married 1947, Faber died in 1989
 - a. children
 - (1) Paul Harrold lives with Marjorie and farms
 - (2) Paulelda Gilbert, Fort Dodge, food and nutrition specialist with ISU Extension Service
3. Marion and Gladys Davis lived there 1942–1952
 - a. Three sons and one daughter, Marjorie. The oldest boy was already farming on his own when the Davis family moved to the road. The next two boys, Melvin and Milton, were only there from spring through the fall of 1942.
4. The Biederman family lived there in the early 30s.
5. Cap and Addie Grant and two infant sons lived there 1918–1920.

D. **The Howard farm**

Northwest quarter, Section 14, Roosevelt Township

Farmed by Paul Harrold. Bought by Harry and Marian Howard in 1939 who moved there in 1940.

1. VELMA AND VERLE Howard lived there December 1961–present (married May 19, 1947)
 - a. Randy, Elkhorn, WI, in sales for Rexall
 - b. Joy Hayes, Aeia, HI, CEO for Perry's restaurant chain
 - c. Monte, deceased, fell off grain elevator while on construction job in July 1970
 - d. Hope Schneider, Battle Creek, NE, physical therapist in hospital
 - e. Kelly Hartman, Kanawha, account executive, telephone sales, with All-Star Pro Golf in Clarion
 - f. Karen Leyba, Thermopolis, WY, speech pathologist/therapist in hospital and schools
2. Harry and Marian Howard lived there 1940–December 1961

Had four children but the older two did not live on the road. Their two twins moved to the road with Harry and Marian, then graduated from high school in 1941.

 - a. Verle, lives on farm now, is retired
 - b. Doris, lives in California
3. Walter Gahm, tenant 1933–March 1939

The Swamplands¹

an 1884 perspective by J. J. Bruce

On the 28th of September, 1850, an act of Congress was approved by which the United States granted to the State of Iowa all of the swamp and overflowed lands within the limits of the state then undisposed of. Two years later the State of Iowa, by an act of the General Assembly, approved Feb. 2, 1853, granted these "swamp and overflowed lands" to the counties in which they were situated, and made provision for their selection. This was the status of these lands when Pocahontas County was organized. David Slosson, on behalf of the county and in pursuance of these acts, as soon as he was elected County Judge in March, 1859, entered into a contract with Ringland & Brady, of Fort Dodge, for their special survey and selection. As this contract does not appear on the records it is impossible to give its exact terms, but it has been stated the surveyors were to receive for their services a certain compensation for each acre thus selected. Two selections were made during the year 1859. The first one, by Messrs. Ringland & Brady, was rejected as a whole by the commissioner of the general land office; and one is not surprised at this result when it is known that the whole of township 91, range 32 (Lincoln), was included as swamp. The second one was made by G. S. Ringland and Guernsey Smith, who made their report Aug. 3, 1859. In this report they state that they were appointed commissioners by the County Judge to make selections of the swamp and overflowed lands, and it is presumed that such was the case, although no entry of their contract or appointment is found on the records. They swear that "they have examined the lines of each and every tract selected, and that the greater part of each is swamp and overflowed land." The number of acres according to their footing is 72,075.75, an amount equal to 114 sections or six sections more than three townships — about one-fifth of the entire county.

At this day it seems quite incredible that an amount of land so large should have been reported under oath as "swamp and overflowed." There are, however, three good reasons which may in a measure explain why an amount so large was selected. In the first place the compensation for the selection and survey was based on the number of acres selected; second, at that time the value of these treeless prairie lands was neither realized nor appreciated on the part of the pioneer residents of the county, many of whom were indifferent to a certain extent as to what became of them; and third, the cupidity of the parties who conspired to become possessors of so vast a domain. This second selection, however, had to be submitted to the commissioner of the general land office for his approval or rejection.

The contract with William E. Clark, of Baltimore, Md., of date Oct. 18, 1859, and declared Nov. 21st, following, as having been approved by the people on Nov. 14, 1860, "for good and valuable considerations in hand paid" was assigned by W. E. Clark to John M. Stockdale, of Webster County. The latter, under President Buchanan, had been register of the U.S. land office at Fort Dodge, and the former proved to be a mere figurehead working under his direction. When Lincoln was elected, the latter soon retired from the land office and assumed open control of his scheme.

The public building and bridge when completed by John M. Stockdale were accepted, and on Dec. 9, 1860, there was deeded to him, according to the government survey, 76,250 acres

1. This report of the Pocahontas County swamplands controversy is from pages 189–191 of R.E. Flickenger's book *The Early History of Iowa and Pioneer History of Pocahontas County* published by *The Fonda Times* in 1904. The account was originally written by J. J. Bruce for the *Pocahontas Record*, May 1, 1884, and later published in the *Plat Book of Pocahontas County*, 1887, page 5.

of land in Pocahontas County, the deed containing a clause that expressly released the county from all liability arising from the reclaiming of these lands. This deed was attested by John A. James, County Judge, and the estimated value of the lands conveyed was \$91,000.

It will be noticed that until this date the title to these lands rested upon an act of Congress and a subsequent one by the General Assembly of Iowa, both of which were of a general nature referring to a certain class of lands, namely, "swamp and overflowed lands" and not to particular tracts. This left the title of particular tracts without foundation until the selections should be approved by the government and their respective patents be issued. Until the land in particular tracts should be patented to the county, its title thereto would be imperfect and its deed to another would of course convey no title to the land. This was the kind of deed given to John M. Stockdale, who understood its imperfect nature, but expecting to secure the approval of his entire list, he was willing to let the entire matter rest in that condition. He began at once to sell particular tracts, putting his lists in the hands of agents in all parts of the country. He gave warranty deeds, selling generally large quantities to each purchaser and representing to parties purchasing that patents could be procured at any time upon application, but as the land was not taxable until patented, it was better to let them lie as they were and thus avoid taxation.

Of the 76,250 acres deeded by the county to John M. Stockdale, the commissioner of the general land office approved and issued patents to him for 29,000 acres, and formally rejected the remaining 47,000 acres as not swamp land within the meaning of the act. The last were disposed of by patent as follows: about 27,000 acres in a body to the Dubuque and Pacific Ry. Co., some to the Des Moines Valley Ry. Co., some to the Chicago, Milwaukee and St. Paul Ry. Co., some to the Agricultural College, some to cash purchasers and others were claimed by homesteaders. Nearly all of these lands are now occupied as farms. The tracts patented to the county on which the taxes have been paid annually, thereby avoiding entanglement by tax sales, have good and perfect title.

Another remarkable incident in the story of the swamplands is the fact that John M. Stockdale under his imperfect deed from the county, continued to sell all the lands included therein, he seeming to be entirely indifferent about the matter of patent. The fact that most of these lands had been patented to other parties made no difference to him so long as he could find buyers willing to purchase from him. The last lot sold by him was in the year 1882; it contained 9,000 acres and the price paid was \$200. Of the 29,000 acres patented to him and upon which the taxes have been paid the county probably suffered no great loss, since the amount originally received together with the taxes and interest paid would amount to about the present value of the land. The misfortune of the transaction came in a subsequent period of litigation over titles and consequent uncertainty in the minds of owners as to the stability of their tenures.

It will be seen, from this brief resume, that patented swamplands have good titles and the rejected selections had no valid title through John M. Stockdale.* The traffic in these respective swamplands was a great scandal upon land titles and many innocent parties were bled severely.

*Mr. Stockdale died in Washington, Pa., Sept. 17, 1897. He was well known to the early settlers of this county, and the titles to many farms bear his name as their first owner.

Corn Statistics

Iowa's Top Corn Growing Counties in 2000

County	Bushels (000)
Kossuth	47,940
Sioux	34,439
Pottawattamie	30,880
Webster	30,131
Pocahontas	27,163
Wright	26,860
Benton	26,239
Hancock	25,940
Clinton	25,681
Plymouth	25,668

The History of Iowa Corn Yields and Prices through 2003

Crop Year	Average Bushels per Acre	Average Price per Bushel*	Total Bushels Produced for Grain (in thousands)
1866	32		57,920
1867	41		74,210
1868	41		76,545
1869	34		69,680
1870	40		102,000
1871	44		133,110
1872	41		137,760
1873	33		117,000
1874	34		141,100
1875	35		161,000
1876	34		176,800
1877	34		194,300
1878	41		247,050
1879	42		275,226

*Average price received by farmers

**Preliminary calculation

***Prior to 1919, the harvested and production figures are for all corn, including that used for silage.

****The data for 2003 is based on forecasted numbers dated November 1, 2003.

From Iowa Agricultural Statistics. State Statistician: Jim Sands

210 Walnut Street, Suite 833, Des Moines, Iowa 50309-2195

<http://www.nass.usda.gov/ia> nass-ia@nass.usda.gov 1-800-772-0825

1880	40		274,525
1881	30		195,900
1882	31		205,570
1883	29		203,000
1884	40		290,720
1885	37		276,670
1886	29		230,840
1887	30		243,600
1888	40		333,380
1889	41		355,593
1890	28		246,120
1891	41		366,120
1892	31		239,730
1893	38		306,750
1894	15		131,250
1895	39		353,730
1896	43		393,880
1897	34		302,170
1898	36		311,760
1899	39		345,644
1900	45		409,500
1901	29		269,610
1902	38		363,280
1903	33		273,325
1904	39		372,450
1905	42		398,400
1906	46		439,075
1907	35		339,500
1908	38		355,300
1909	37	***\$0.52	348,777
1910	42	\$0.42	395,495
1911	36	\$0.60	349,675
1912	46	\$0.44	456,320
1913	38	\$0.61	364,500
1914	41	\$0.64	398,925
1915	33	\$0.63	321,750
1916	38	\$1.15	372,400
1917	39	\$1.30	404,250
1918	37	\$1.40	362,600
1919	42	\$1.34	368,950

1920	46	\$0.47	424,534
1921	43	\$0.41	396,718
1922	45	\$0.64	395,415
1923	41	\$0.75	364,743
1924	28	\$1.01	245,476
1925	44	\$0.60	424,294
1926	39	\$0.69	371,085
1927	35	\$0.83	316,225
1928	42	\$0.76	404,708
1929	40	\$0.73	389,297
1930	34	\$0.52	334,254
1931	33	\$0.28	330,217
1932	43	\$0.30	462,121
1933	40	\$0.50	417,400
1934	28	\$0.79	160,768
1935	38	\$0.62	340,556
1936	20	\$1.07	148,900
1937	45	\$0.44	460,800
1938	46	\$0.46	452,824
1939	52	\$0.53	467,712
1940	53	\$0.57	452,760
1941	51	\$0.72	439,416
1942	60	\$0.86	547,980
1943	55	\$0.99	556,985
1944	53	\$0.98	545,842
1945	45	\$1.23	441,618
1946	57	\$1.53	604,200
1947	31	\$2.15	297,228
1948	61	\$1.31	649,286
1949	47	\$1.27	521,747
1950	49	\$1.52	455,706
1951	44	\$1.61	421,080
1952	63	\$1.50	653,062
1953	53	\$1.50	572,983
1954	55	\$1.45	545,763
1955	49	\$1.44	499,210
1956	54	\$1.31	503,596
1957	62	\$1.50	611,320
1958	66	\$1.08	645,612
1959	65	\$1.01	789,035
1960	64	\$0.97	772,541
1961	76	\$1.09	753,188
1962	77	\$1.09	745,129
1963	80	\$1.05	851,600
1964	78	\$1.12	754,695
1965	82	\$1.13	814,506

1966	89	\$1.17	901,748
1967	89	\$1.01	986,332
1968	93	\$1.07	909,075
1969	99	\$1.11	945,351
1970	86	\$1.25	866,622
1971	102	\$1.04	1,178,100
1972	116	\$1.65	1,229,600
1973	107	\$2.58	1,206,960
1974	80	\$2.97	968,000
1975	90	\$2.50	1,117,800
1976	91	\$2.05	1,173,900
1977	86	\$1.99	1,092,200
1978	115	NA	1,477,750
1979	127	\$2.45	1,663,700
1980	110	\$3.00	1,463,000
1981	125	\$2.34	1,731,250
1982	120	\$2.69	1,578,000
1983	87	\$3.12	743,850
1984	112	\$2.51	1,444,800
1985	126	\$2.02	1,707,300
1986	135	\$1.41	1,626,750
1987	130	\$1.89	1,319,500
1988	84	\$2.45	898,800
1989	118	\$2.29	1,445,500
1990	126	\$2.21	1,562,400
1991	117	\$2.30	1,427,400
1992	147	\$2.00	1,903,650
1993	80	\$2.44	880,000
1994	152	\$2.22	1,915,200
1995	123	\$3.20	1,426,800
1996	138	\$2.60	1,711,200
1997	138	\$2.33	1,642,200
1998	145	\$1.86	1,769,000
1999	149	\$1.94	1,758,200
2000	144	\$1.77	1,728,000
2001	146	\$1.90	1,664,400
2002	165	**\$2.25	1,963,500
2003	****159		****1,908,000

Pocahontas County Population and Farm Data through 2003

Year	County Population	Number of Farms	Average Farm Size	Land Value A	Land Value B
1860	103			\$3	
1870	1,446			\$9	
1880	3,713			\$10	
1890	9,553		173	\$21	
1900	15,339		182	\$43	
1910	14,808		182	\$89	
1920	15,602		175	\$282	
1925			171	\$193	
1930	15,687		174	\$153	
1935			173	\$99	
1940	16,266	2,039	177	\$111	
1945		1,990	182	\$148	
1950	15,496	2,032	179	\$233	\$311
1954		1,907	188	\$273	\$340
1959		1,767	203	\$332	\$395
1960	14,234				
1964		1,511	242	\$352	\$413
1969		1,369	265	\$513	\$563
1970	12,793				
1972					\$647
1973					\$909
1974		1,239	289	\$992	\$1,224
1975					\$1,723
1976					\$2,086
1977					\$2,131
1978		1,177	308	\$2,264	\$2,394
1979					\$2,810
1980	11,369				\$2,891
1981					\$2,905
1982		1,105	323	\$2,164	\$2,364
1983					\$2,272
1984					\$1,738
1985					\$1,173
1986					\$995
1987		987	354		\$1,159
1990	9,525				\$1,644
1992		919	391		\$1,641
1995					\$1,893
1996					\$2,224
1997		778	459		\$2,437
2000	8,662				\$2,329
2001					\$2,381
2002					\$2,546
2003					\$2,762

Census data from the Iowa State University Department of Sociology Census Service, Willis Goudy, coordinator. Source A for land values is the federal government's agricultural census data. Source B for land value is the ISU Extension Program's Ag Land Value Survey super-vised by Michael Duffy at <http://ia.profiles.iastate.edu/data/landvalues>.

2020 Data Update

In 2010, the U.S. census reported a population of 7,310 residents in Pocahontas County. In 2018, the number dropped to 6,740 – a loss of about 8 percent of the population for an average of 1 percent per year. In 2012, there were 742 farms in the county for an average of 448 acres per farm. And in 2019, the average value of an acre of land in the county was \$8,666.

In 2019, Iowa's average yield of corn was 198 bushels per acre for a total of over 2.5 billion bushels, making it the top corn-producing state in the nation. The previous year, Pocahontas County had produced an average of 179 bushels per acre for a total of 31,475,000 bushels. In 2019, the average price per bushel of corn was \$3.85. As of June 1, 2020, it was \$3.53.

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*This is the best survey of Iowa history available.

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THE ROAD I GREW UP ON

Requiem for a Vanishing Era

VOLUME 2

Helen DeElda Gunderson

From the Foreword

I love reading books about rural life, books such as Mildred Armstrong Kalish's *Little Heathens* and Ronald Jager's *Eighty Acres*, but most of those accounts are not honest about the disadvantages of rural life. Helen's willingness to admit the "nostalgic and disenchantment, the love and disdain" is the reason *The Road I Grew Up On* is so fascinating.

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

Helen's book is not only a gift for today but for future generations, for those who may come to it to learn about an ancestor, old farming techniques, land ownership patterns, changing gender identities and much more.

From the foreword by **Teresa Opheim**

Minneapolis, Minnesota

Project Director, Climate Land Leaders

Main Street Project

www.mainstreetproject.org

Editor, *The Future of Family Farms: Practical Farmers'*

Legacy Letter Project

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Helen at prairie restoration project she gave to the Iowa Natural Heritage Foundation in 2011. Photo by Erin VanWaus, INHF. 2015.

Helen DeElda Gunderson is a fourth-generation, septuagenarian Iowan who grew up on a farm in Pocahontas County, Iowa, where she currently owns inherited farmland. After earning an undergraduate degree in physical education from Iowa State University, a master's degree in instructional technology and a Master of Divinity, and following a diverse career that took her to other states, Helen returned to Iowa in 1993. She now lives in Ames on what she calls her urban farm. Her book, *The Road I Grew Up On*, is a two-volume anthology written from a liberal perspective and consists of regional and neighborhood history, personal memoir, spiritual insights, other opinions, and photographs. The seeds for the project were sown in fall 1989 followed by years of Helen's taking photographs, shooting video footage, recording interviews, conducting other research, and writing about the neighborhood and culture where she grew up. The first volume consists primarily of material completed in 2004, while the second volume consists of chapters written in 2019 and one completed on July 31, 2020, about living in the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic.

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