



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 11<sup>th</sup> 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**

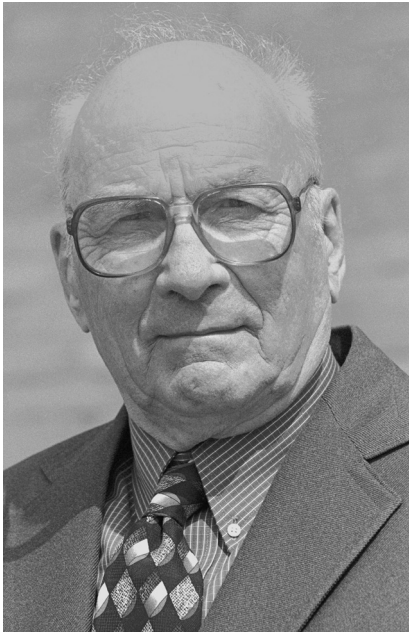
In terms of my driven quest to learn about my land and be able to manage it, will I ever make progress? What would it mean to manage my own land? Thank goodness I have met new people or gotten to know former acquaintances in new ways . . . people who know about Iowa culture and farming but who support 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 40<sup>th</sup> 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.

