

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.

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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.

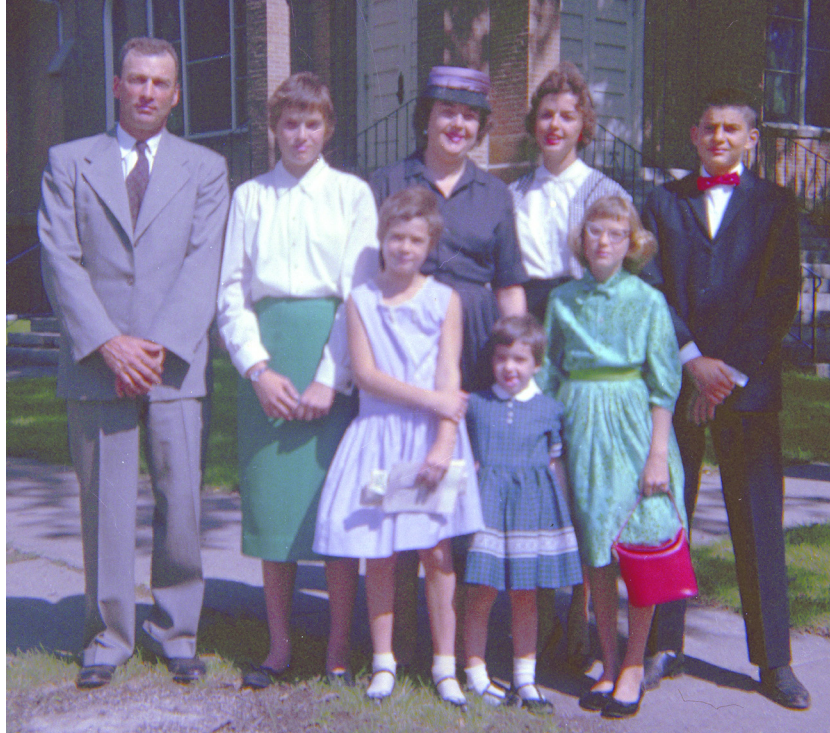
Allan dug a deep hole in the ground for a burn pit and pushed a few items into it, but it was too windy to start a fire. Instead, he stopped and turned off the engine. All was quiet. Family members scampered around for closer looks at the rubble and took pictures. For instance, Clara and Peggy had their 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 13<sup>th</sup> 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.



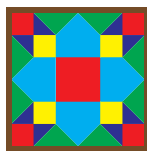
The many healthy Wealthy apple trees that Helen started on her first attempt at grafting while living in an apartment in Gilbert, Iowa, north of Ames. 2006.

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:

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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.