



Green Isle: Feeding the World Farming for the Banker

Ken Meter

**CROSSROADS RESOURCE CENTER and
FARMER LABOR EDUCATION COMMITTEE**

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Introduction

Green Isle, Minnesota is weathering the nation's worst farm depression since 1932. Dairy herds have been scaled back to minimum survival levels. The local farm implement factory has closed its doors, in spite of the fact that the parent company's best machinists worked at the Green Isle plant. Main Street businesses have folded. Jobs which farm men once held in factories near the cities have disappeared. Very few young people have any

which dictate how farming is done.

Green Isle is in the midst of a respected dairy producing region. By reputation, dairy farmers are more prosperous than most. It is true they have benefited from federal support prices which were higher than for many other crops. Still, the price is well below the cost of production. And the Reagan administration is trying to slash support prices drastically.

The farm community was its own source of credit.

hope of starting a new farm operation.

Green Isle is accustomed to better times. Not that anyone has become rich farming in Green Isle, but there is a closely-held tradition of persistent, careful labor. Those who farm in Green Isle have survived the affronts of an economy that has displaced 851 farms of 2334 which once thrived in the county. Remaining are the farmers who have been the best managers, or the hardest working, or the most lucky.

These farmers are not the ones most vulnerable in this depression; rather they are among the family farms most likely to survive. Yet in Green Isle dwells a deep discontent with the forces

dairy men—who effectively shatter the stereotypes that farmers are “rugged individualists” who cannot cooperate. For these men share ideas, equipment, and struggles in an intimate way, and exemplify the careful collaboration which a rural community can muster.

Because these people have worked side by side for so long, they have a wealth of well-considered stories. Honed sharp by the comebacks of attentive neighbors, these stories survive only if they ring true. Most telling is their collective sense of—a fairly prosperous era—the late forties.

Long before the days of massive exports and “labor-saving” technology, these farmers had work which had an end. There was time to relax with neighbors. There was a feeling of pride and optimism. In highest contrast to the current economy, *the farm community was its own source of credit*. Young men starting out could earn enough money by farming to pay for the purchase of land. “Borrowing was almost like a sin,” as one of the Green Isle farmers put it—and those who did borrow sought loans from a relative or neighbor if possible.

The key to this prosperity was the federal government's guarantee that commodity prices would cover the farmers' cost of production. True, World War II had encouraged farm mechanization and opened new markets for exports, but these would have

been irrelevant without a strong price. In the eighties, for instance, large equipment and high export levels could not prevent farmers from going broke.

This was *not* federal control of the farm economy. Rather, it was a case of the federal government creating a business climate in which farmers could remain competitive with the rest of the economy—and under which the rural economy could sustain *itself*.

In only thirty years, the United States government—over both Democratic and Republican leadership—has dismantled this self-reliant rural economy. Now, farmers are intensely dependent on outside capital. This has been accomplished by holding grain prices low in a conscious effort to force farmers off the land, to become laborers in the city.

A similar drain on the rural economy occurred in the 1920s. Urban areas prospered at the expense of farm and lumbering and mining communities. As a result, when the stock market crashed, the basic reservoir of our economy was drained.

Whatever solutions are found for this farm depression, they will not bring farms back to health unless small farms are once again a source of their own credit. For if those who nurture food—the burst of life in which one seed produces thousands—cannot sustain themselves, in the long run no one else will be able to, either.

We Talk Like Commercials

Bill Harjes' barn is wide, brightly lit. The speckled coat of paint is the original—only nine seasons of flies have settled on it.

Standing at the open door, with my back to the warm breeze curling in from the southwest, the barn is a long white tunnel full of shuffling cows. Full flanks raised to eye level measure the mileage to the gaping north door.

The feed alleys are unusually broad, enough to allow a large silage cart to pass through. The stanchions are set wide apart, so the cows have room to maneuver in their austere homes. Overhead, tons of drying hay are tucked neatly under a cavernous roof. The shingles are clean and straight.

Polka music scratches from a small radio hung from the ceiling. The surge pump gasps punctually. Bill weaves down the long row in a rapid step that never subsides. Crouching near a cow, gentle forceful hands soothing the final pint of milk out of

an udder, Bill shouts the name of the seventh cow down on the right. His teenage helper is already poised with the warm cloth, cleaning her udder.

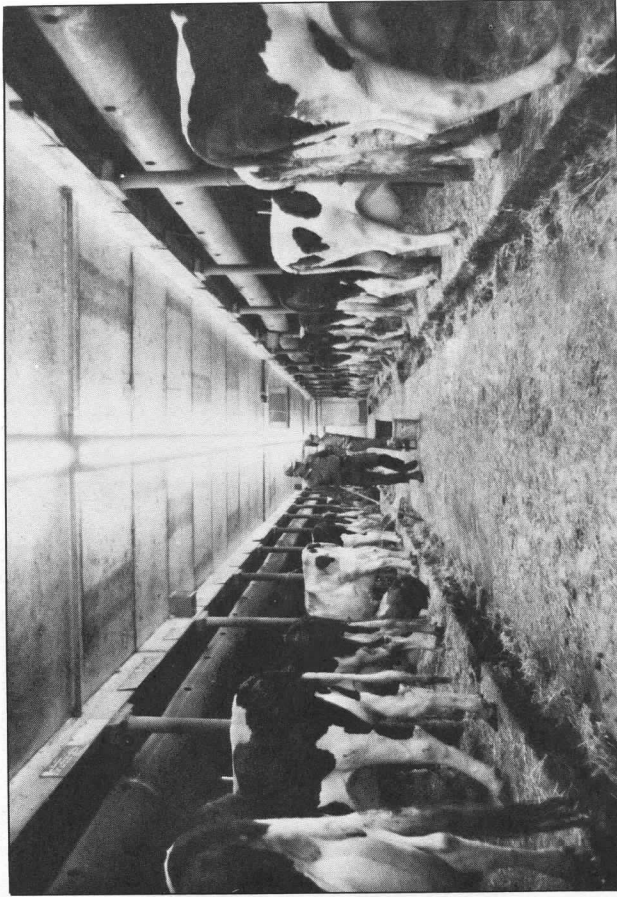
Between hurried massages, Bill and I talk. We catch up with each other like commercials amidst the two-hour parade he runs twice a day, every day. Today, we're talking about his barn.

"If I had my way," he begins, "I'd milk about half this many. About 25. That gives you more time for the field work, and some time with the family. But I need to milk 50 to pay for this place. I'm paying forty dollars a day to the bank just for interest. About half this many, that would be about right."

Fifty cows are fifty udders filling up with 26 pounds of milk, twice a day. Never lets up. Always hay to feed, always silage, always grain, always haylage. Piled quickly on the feeding alley, or carried to the trough outside. Clean manure off the floor. Two or three hours in the

"If I had my way, I'd milk about half this many. About 25. That gives you more time for the field work, and some time with the family."

field, to fix a fence or grind the grain. Coax the cows inside, sort them by name to their proper stall. A helper to tend to the incessant feeding and cleaning. Five-thirty in the morning until nine at night. Maybe eleven. Maybe two-thirty at harvest.



Bill Harjes & Andy Giesen

Every day. On Sunday, the chores are done before church.

Bill is luckier than some. He built in 1973, a good year for prices and the first year of the inflationary spurt. He decided he had to take the chance or lose it. He jumped in with both feet. New barn on top of an eight-year-old house.

But still, luckier than some. Neighbors who have bought in the last two years now carry interest bills of \$290 every day.

bales, to carry fence posts.

"I told the guy to look behind him. He turned around, and I said, see that house over there? I had it built fifteen years ago. That house cost the same then as this little Bobcat does now."

If the salesman answered, his words were lost in the wind.

Bill's Bobcat is not an isolated example. A tractor that cost \$13,000 in 1973 now costs \$62,000. Same model, same power, same features. In that

stretch of time, the price of corn—the most basic source of money most farmers have to bargain with—has continued to hover around \$2.25 per bushel.

The price Bill gets for his milk has been protected by price supports, so it has risen in the same period from \$5.00 per 100 pounds to \$13.50. Now it has declined to \$11.50 under pressure from the Reagan administration. That is 75 percent of what it costs to produce.

Farmers are being squeezed hard. The total net farm income in the U.S. was \$14 billion in 1981, a drastic drop from \$36 billion two years earlier, and only \$5 billion above the 1919 level, without accounting for the decline of the dollar's value. For all of the "advance" in productivity and technology, hardly any more money is flowing into rural communities.

For the first time ever, over half of a Minnesota farm family's income is coming from off-farm sources.

I mull this over, following Bill to the next stall. He works intently, then turns to me. He has another story about erosion. This one's about the local bank.

"When I banked there, only two people worked there. You went to the bank closest to you—like a church, like a creamery. That's what made them strong. People had to go because they couldn't afford to drive everywhere."



Bill Harjes

Several years ago, Bill needed to expand in order to keep his farm operation alive. He became bigger than the local bank could afford. So, he started borrowing from another bank, farther away. He has discovered he works better with the new banker.

The local bank is now owned by a man from the Cities, who Bill has never met.

"I just wonder who is behind him."

What bothers Bill about an outside owner?

"It's the pressure to get big."

As we finish chores, the milk truck pulls in to haul the milk to the creamery. The new stainless steel truck will drive to a large regional processor, halfway to Minneapolis. Bill rinses the milk bucket; the warm breeze curls in from the southwest.

The Pressure to Get Big

The pressure to get big. What started out as a hope for prosperity and leisure time became a hollow joke. Longer hours than ever. Forced to buy out your neighbor to survive. Herds two or three times as big as you really want to handle. And debt bigger than you can imagine.

On a rare evening in winter, a group of neighbors gathers. They begin at 9 pm, after milking is done. As certainly as the winter chills the spine, the talk turns to credit.

Bill talks about his nearest neighbor. "He bought a tractor this month. Twenty years ago, he would have gone to his neighbor for a loan like that, not to a bank."

In an earlier time, farmers had choices—to borrow from a neighbor, to take out a bank loan, or to finance themselves.

Stung by the depression, when many rural banks had closed down, when mortgages were foreclosed, farmers grew suspicious. Like a family facing a threat, the farm community pulled into itself and helped each other out.

What money had survived the bank holidays was pulled out of banks and stored at home. People saved on their own. Farmers borrowed from each

other instead of going to the banker.

"When I was young, if I had gone to the bank to borrow," adds Gordy Bates, "they'd have laughed at me: 'Who are you to borrow money?' Our folks never borrowed money. It was almost like a sin to borrow money. That was the only way you could start out was to borrow money and there was no means of borrowing money."

Art Berger continues: "You couldn't borrow money from a bank."

Kenny Narr responds, "You got your money from a neighbor, didn't you, Art, on a contract for deed?"

"Yes, you'd get it from a neighbor. The bank wouldn't give you no money. There was always some reason. They were afraid you wouldn't make a go of it."

Art is now one of the better established farmers in the neighborhood. "That's all I ever did, was pay interest and debts on it."

Bill breaks in. "I think we talked about this one night a few years ago, how the neighbors helped each other out."

"We had that one year," Art continued. "We had to borrow money to pay the interest."



Arnie Narr

“Well, then, the guy’d say, ‘That’s all right. I see you tried,’ because he lived right next to you. The banks only loaned to sure things.”

Then again, there were breakthroughs. A banker who would take the risk, who would follow his intuition.

“Who was that guy from Arlington?” Bill pointed to the nearby town. “Clifford Boerner. He went to the bank there. He wanted money for three horses, a two-row cultivator and a sawtooth plow, and they wouldn’t give it to him.”

“He come down to James F. Mullen (at the Green Isle bank). They’d never met before, and that’s when banknotes came in a block, just like check blanks.

Mullen was looking at the notes—he listened to Boerner’s story, he’d never met him, first meeting. He told him his story, Mullen turned the note block around and said, ‘Sign here.’ They still bank there today.”

A local banker established himself. A banker, doing what he can to strengthen his own community, trusting his own judgment. Reinvesting the community’s capital into local producers.

At that time, credit was a way to build a community. To be successful, bankers had to blend their own financial goals with the needs of the rural community. The community had the funds to work around a narrow-minded banker.

But those days did not last.

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As machinery got bigger, and more chemicals were introduced, as farms expanded, the need for credit jumped. Suddenly a farmer needed more credit than a neighbor could afford to loan. As neighbors competed with each other, loans became another way to lose a friend.

The farmer learned to want more than his community could finance. Money started to flow in from outside in unprecedented quantity. The only place to get money was to go to a credit institution.

Even though farmers were at the heart of the economy, even though they produced most of the new wealth that ran the country, farmers were now dependent on outside sources for their capital.

Farmers became valued, not for what they produced, but for how much they were willing to borrow.

Kenny Narr remembers the time when the businessman on Main Street had an easier time borrowing than the farmer. “It was no trouble for the grocery store. People still had to eat. Where, now, it would probably be reversed. Now, they’d maybe

loan to a farmer because his land is valued artificially high.”

Even the financial clout farmers have mustered is based on false values. The price of land—now well about \$2,000 per acre in this county—is jacked up above what the land can produce. An inflated asset that lets you borrow at inflated rates. To buy equipment priced high because you have the borrowing power. To grow crops that are priced at half what it costs to grow them. And credit is only available to the well-established.

As a result, the credit system cannot sustain itself. Only a few can join. An innovative idea is “too large a financial risk.” New farmers can’t borrow local money because they need more than a local bank can afford to offer. Federal money—through channels like the Farmers Home Administration—is the only credit source for a new farm. And that source is drying up, too.

In 1980, land prices peaked. Holding at a stable level, they are in fact declining in value when inflation is accounted for. This means a farmer is attempting to borrow against declining equity,

The local bank, faced with the same pressure to get big, sought outside investors for its capital. In 1975, the Citizen's State Bank of Green Isle was sold to an outside owner. Credit policies are now set by a Twin Cities investor.

A young man has been sitting silently in the corner of the room until I ask, "How is it different to work with a locally-owned bank, than with one from far away?" Denny Tuchtenhagen, who is considered a new farmer after six years in the neighbor-

hood, breaks the silence to blurt out an answer.

"I'll tell you the difference. To get a loan from the FmHA, you have to be turned down by two banks. I can go to Green Isle and get turned down in five minutes."

The farmers roar with laughter, a raucous mixture of surprise and relief. Dennis' candor is praised with hearty outbursts, but there is an icy chill in the room. Not the cold winter winds; this is a shudder for the future.

The price of land is jacked up above what the land can produce.

Look at the Bright Side

Question: "If the government commodity loan supports were dropped, how would it affect the bank?"

Answer: "Oh, it wouldn't affect the bank. It would affect the farmers."

In the sunny corner of a flat brick building sits Don Herd. Two picture windows offer as commanding a view as one can have of Green Isle. The west window is covered by drapery. The north window scans over to the meeting hall across the street, the church, the baseball field.

through the envelopes on his desk. Cutting them open with a sharp opener, he piles up letters after a quick glance, discarding the inessential.

It is a brisk winter day. The weather is dry; the soil sprouts large cracks. The sun has been shining for weeks. Talk of a drought is in the air. FmHA has been curtailed by the new administration; the township committee will soon stop meeting for lack of funds. The parking lot at the local implement factory is one-third emptier than a year ago.



Green Isle's implement factory closed in 1982.

Don sits amid two desks, a handful of trophies, and a stack of mail. As we talk, he is sorting

The Citizen's State Bank is the only bank in town. As President, Mr. Herd is in a unique spot to

appreciate the economics of farming in this community. Born and raised near Green Isle, Herd has worked at the bank for 25 years.

Asked how farm financing has changed over that stretch of time, Herd replies, simply: "It's a lot harder now. Every bank has a certain amount they can work with." Meanwhile, costs have escalated, and credit needs have risen.

"Look how things change. You can't hardly go from month to month, week to week. You don't know what's going to happen."

Doesn't that worry you?

"Why do you think we don't sleep at night?"

Herd supervises a portfolio of loans which are extended to three or four hundred farmers in the area around Green Isle. In 1980, the bank loaned \$10 million to both town and rural customers.

In 1975, the bank was bought by John Barrie. Barrie owns

"You serve the community to the best of your ability whether locally-owned or owned by Mr. Barrie. There's not a heck of a lot of difference."

In spite of the massive increases in debt, Herd says, "I don't see any credit problems coming. You can't think of foreclosures, not in this bank, there wouldn't be any foreclosures. There's enough violent things around here; I think you should look at the bright side."

"But don't you think that's a possibility, in this depression?" I asked.

"Are we in a depression? I'd hate to say. You should probably go ask Reagan, is there a depression?"

"Would you call it a recession?"

"No comment."

"But there have been dozens of layoffs at the factory . . ."

"Well, you should talk to the men. I don't know how many they have on a shift now."

"You never know what's going

How Does it Feel?

Back in the farmhouse, the men are still gathered in a circle. A nervous chuckle darts around the room. I have just asked, "How does it feel to be so far in debt?"

NSP (the local utility) or anybody else, to a point. If you want to get that big in farming, debt is a part of it. What angers me is that we're being exploited. With this 20 percent interest.

"I finally got a chance to get started. Now, I get to thinking, what if I can't make it, because of high interest rates or something? I don't know what else I'd do if I can't farm."

Kenny begins. "You feel like everyone else, you get so damn depressed. The thing is, you just learn to accept it."

Denny Tuchtenhagen: "I finally got a chance to get started. Now, I get to thinking, what if I can't make it, because of high interest rates or something? I'm only 32 years old. When work gets to this point, I'd just as soon keep paying as long as I can because I don't know what else I'd do if I can't farm. I don't know what I'd want to do."

Kenny elaborates. He doesn't mind the debt. He's tired of working so hard, just to pay off high interest: "I guess what I'm angry about is, with the economy the way it has been from the '50s on down, we've learned to accept that we're part of big business, because really, now, agriculture is part of big business. We're no different than

That's what angers me. That just burns me."

Gordy looks beyond the debt. "Indebtedness is a heavy load. It puts weight on your shoulders like you can't believe. On the other hand, one thing that counteracts that is very personal. You do get a feeling of accomplishment. You really realize what the dignity of being a man is. That alone justifies the increasing debt."

Art: "You're working for yourself."

Kenny: "I agree with what Gordy said, but I go a step beyond that. I don't see why farmers can't get a return on their investment. I think if we go too far with what Gordy said, then we accept 20 percent interest. It becomes our excuse—you live out here in the fresh air, and all that. There I don't go along. I've been angry with this

Question: "If government commodity loan supports were dropped, how would it affect the bank?"

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another bank near the Twin Cities, holds partial interest in four other banks in Minnesota, and several others in Wisconsin.

Herd says the change in ownership has not affected his way of operating.

to happen. Hopefully it will change for the better. Things are pretty good now, but you don't know how they will change." (This interview was conducted Jan., 1980. In 1982, the factory closed its doors.)

all my life. I'd like to do something about it."

Debt is a heavy load to carry. You enter willingly, because people need the food. And the economy needs the wealth you create. So you expect the debt to be repaid. Still, a certain fear lingers—what if something breaks down?

Now, with high interest rates, flows a tide of anger. These farmers lose money producing new wealth. The fruit of their labor is sucked away by large mortgages and high interest payments. Of the 50 cows in Bill's herd, perhaps five cover the cost

Kenny continues: "If we're gonna subsidize the economy with our food . . . Boy, we can't do it!"

Gordy: "Agriculture puts more people to work than all the other segments of industry combined. That's a fact. You compare this with the subsidies given to other segments of the economy—we're being cheated, drastically. Yet this is new wealth that's being generated, and this is what's keeping the country intact. We have every right to demand a support price of parity. They subsidize Chrysler because that keeps jobs and puts

peanuts compared to the new wealth from the farms and agriculture-related industries."

Bill: "That's where you know that they've got us again, because we're in a minority."

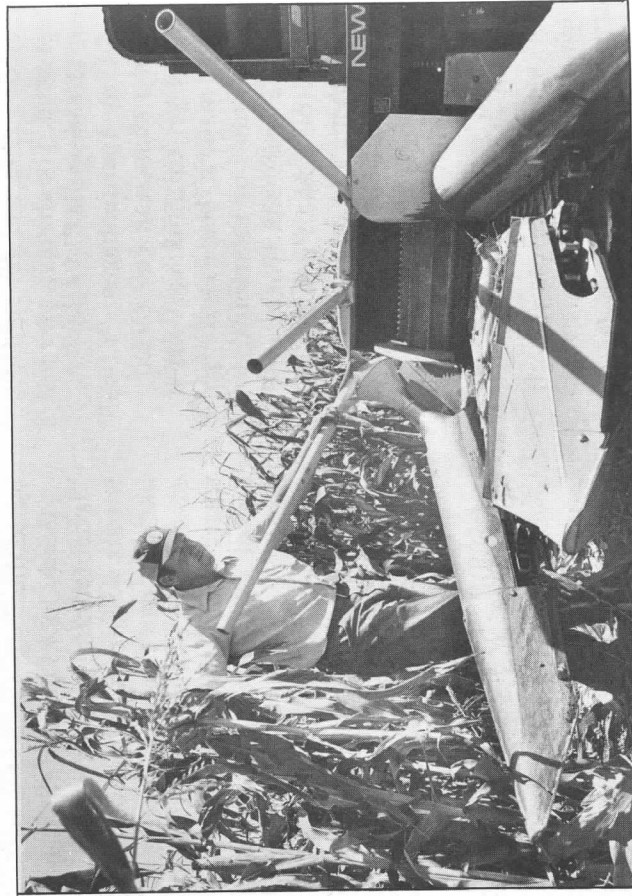
interest was. Had it been a sensible rate of interest, I would have bought that feed mill and somebody else would have had a job. And someone else would have had a commission."

Had it been a sensible rate of interest, I would have bought that feed mill and somebody else would have had a job.

Kenny: "We're in a majority here. You said we're in a minority. We're in the majority. We own all the food."

Bill: "One dollar generated here produces seven times over. As an example, I was contemplating buying a feed mill. I was just getting sick and tired. I just got so many hours in the day when the schedule is not my own to begin with, and then I've got to work around theirs (the feed store). Just when I'm using it, that's when they want it back. So I went up to the banker and I said, what does it look like for December 26, for rewriting the loan, and he told me what the

When farmers are struggling, others get hurt. Manufacturing and sales jobs are lost. High interest is a stream of capital diverted away from local businesses and local workers. The funds flow directly to bankers and investors instead. The credit system, once a way of strengthening a community, now becomes a way to extract capital away from those who produce it. No longer does money cycle in and out of the community, it simply flows out. By dutifully meeting their mortgage payments, these farmers drain the financial blood right out of their own community.



Gordy Bates

of running the farm. The rest are fed and milked just to pay back the bank.

money into the federal government. But the percentage of increase that's coming in is

Losing Money on Every Unit

There are nearly two hundred years of farm experience inside the room. Six men who have farmed for as little as six and as much as fifty years. Two centuries of reading the weather, working the soil, watching prices rise and fall. In this room are those who have survived—those who didn't get forced out by bad prices, a devastating accident, or by trying to grow too fast.

Yet none of these men claims that he is a shrewder operator than anyone else. All have watched their farms change in ways they do not like, but all have kept farming. All have seen neighbors fold, but none of these men are boastful.

"We just got through an FmHA meeting," said Bill, "and this one farm produced 8.5 pigs per litter and he didn't make a nickel. Father and son operation, and they didn't make one plum nickel. And they're some of the best operators we have. They went out!"

But farmers have been pushed off the land for years. As we traced the death of small farms, we went back to the forties, when demand was high and prices firm. A time when, these farmers agree, they had the purchasing power they deserved. Kenny Narr recalled the time.

"Okay, there was always 80-acre, or 120-acre, or even 40-acre farms. In those days, 160 acres was considered *big*. You had to be quite an operator to handle 160 acres in those days. And you had families, all the kids were born and raised on the farm, you didn't have any school problems—you knew where you were with enrollment and so on—and that's a matter of history. And then you eliminated farm after farm and everything started changing. Consolidation in the schools and then there was consolidation of everything else."

"The number of farmers that have been eliminated from the land is exactly equal to the number of unemployed in this country. Did you ever stop to think about that? There were 8.1 million farmers at one time, and now we're down to 1.5 million. You can take it back in history, from the time it started happening, from the late 40s. When the number of farmers dropped, unemployment went up."

How did farmers get forced off the land?

Art Berger answered. "Well, it happened once the tractors started coming in, peopled were forced off. People were using horses, and when you got a

tractor you could work more land. And the bigger the tractor, the more land you could work."

"And people started reading these damn farm magazines," added Jim Kreger. "You gotta get bigger to get better," they said. The University came out with them."

"They're some of the best operators we have. They went out!"

"And the University got grants," chimed in Kenny. "From International Harvester, John Deere, and so on—they received grants from all the major machinery companies who then taught, 'get bigger, more efficient.'"

"When you did purchase that piece of equipment," said Gordy, "you had to get bigger to justify the purchase—you had to pay for that piece of equipment. You had to get big, okay, and then the young fella starting out, he had to get big in order to generate enough income to survive . . . Nowadays you couldn't start with 25 cows. You'd go broke."

"There's no way I could start now," Denny agreed.

"You see," added Kenny, "your margin of profit got smaller each unit you produced. Whether it was a bushel of corn or a pound of milk. And then you had to increase your volume. And that's when you go back to the 40s . . . when we had 100

percent parity, then you could sell a certain number of bushels and get what you wanted up-town. As parity dropped, farms got bigger. Instead of milking 25 cows and making a living, you doubled, because the margin got smaller per unit. Then you started talking about buying out

your neighbor. I'd say the average farm milked 18-20 cows back in 1947."

Bill: "Kallman, he had a barn that held 14 cows and that was considered big back in 1947. I don't think you had any with 30 cows. That would be a very few farmers."

Kenny: "Oh, butter was always big in those days, every little creamery churned butter, and they sold butter, and there were so many little creameries you had little farms scattered all over the United States. The entire western half of the county . . . maybe you got \$2.00 per hundred for milk, but maybe 30 percent of it was profit. Where now you milk at \$12 or \$13 per hundred, 5 percent of it is profit, if you're lucky."

"I can remember when I went to the first district meeting of Land O'Lakes back in 1961. Was Fred Stone the big shot in Land O'Lakes yet? The Minnesota president of Land O'Lakes any-

way, and he was one of the founders of the co-op, too. The price of milk was less than \$3, and farmers were really starting to take it on the nose with the price of milk. And Fred got up there and he just preached big, big, big. Big dollars. And one little farmer was sitting in the back row, and he said, 'Say, Mr. President . . . and I don't think the guy was educated at all, just an ordinary little farmer. He said, 'What you're really saying is you might lose money on every unit, but the volume will make up for it, is that right?' And Mr. Stone said, 'That's right!' And the crowd stood and gave him a standing ovation. I couldn't believe it. I was just shocked. 'You might lose a dollar on every item but the volume will make up for it.' Mr. Stone said, 'That's right!' To

“You might lose a dollar on every item but the volume will make up for it.”

encourage bigness. Oh, they had 'em brainwashed.”

Gordy: “Once you get big . . . Well, a big amazement in my life was when I was right out of high school and I drove down to Kansas with some friends to look for work on the wheat harvest. We drove past this this valley and I said, ‘My God, what is that?’ There were 38,000 steers in a feedlot down there.

We went and I talked to one of the owners. He said, ‘If we can turn \$5 a head of profit, then we make money.’ With 38,000 cattle, sure they made big profit. If the average farmer was gonna keep fifty or a hundred head, he'd make \$500. He wouldn't survive. Where this guy made a profit of over \$100,000. I was just flabbergasted.”

Kenny: “You're talking about return on investment, though, because there, one individual may have owned and operated that, but behind him was one of the packing firms. Armour or Swift or something like that.” Not all farmers were forced out by bigger operators, though. Some farms were just never passed down to the next generation.

Gordy recalled, “One of the reasons these farms weren't

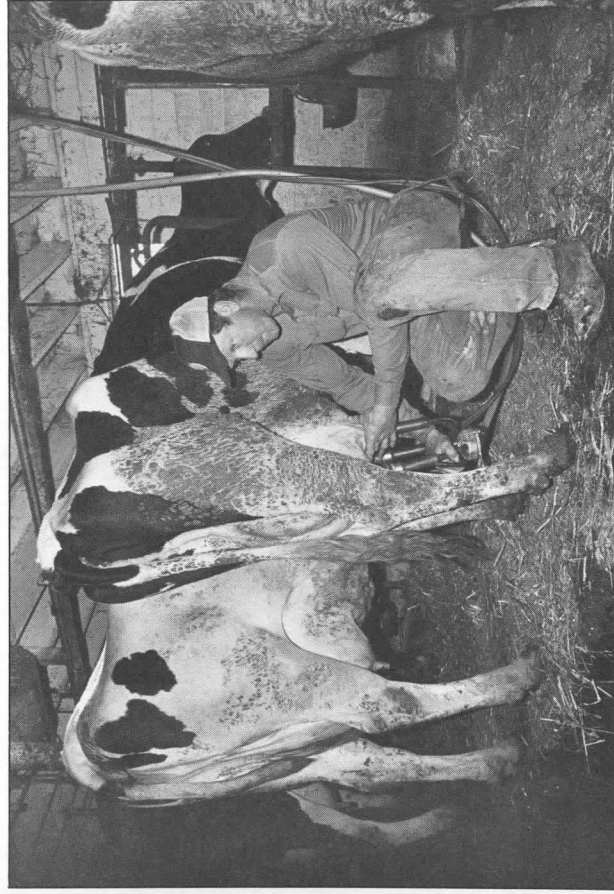
working 80 to 100 hours a week when they could work 40 hours a week and earn twice as much money?

“Another thing was, you couldn't borrow money. I think that was the reason a lot of young fellows left the farms.” Kenny: “You hit upon a point that I always get back to. You

living . . . and parity was dropped by the government because of pressure by big business.”

Bill: “The families that were fortunate, they accumulated wealth during the two wars, when prices were high. Those that had the labor.”

“The war also took its toll on the farm community. The



Gordy Bates

see, when you hit 100 percent of parity, you can keep the kids going. But, like Gordy says, it was greener on the other side of the fence. When parity started dropping, that's what made Gordy or I or anyone else look for a job down the road. As long as prices were in line with the rest of the economy, then you could keep the sons on the farm, because they had a real good

defense plants spoiled a lot of us,” Kenny recounted. “Charlie Roentgen went to California . . . people went all over the country, because the wages were fantastic. They were paying \$2 an hour where back home it was only 35¢.”

“We did have Lend Lease, our foreign aid, and we really were feeding the world during the war, but that was really overplayed,

and that was when they were encouraging everyone to plow up everything they could—it was a psychological thing that worked with every one of us.”

Bill: “That brought more land into production prematurely.”

Gordy: “There was this force out there to produce more, or to bring the price down, and that gave the consumer cheaper food, more money to spend on cars, things that used energy. Way back then already. You see, if a greater share of your income was used for food or the essentials of living, there would have been

absolutely have to. That brings unemployment. That’s planned.”

Kenny: “Because we’re not paying off our indebtedness, there’s less money available. If interest was lower, we would be paying it back. The powers that be, the people who are controlling this wealth, they demand this interest on their money. And they’re not contributing a damn thing to the economy, because they can only buy so much food, so many cars, and so forth. If money was available out there, every one of us would buy that new car. Chrysler wouldn’t be in

“That time when prices were so low, there was a guy who shipped a carload of sheep from Montana to South St. Paul. And the sheep did not even pay for the freight. So the company sent him a notice to pay for the rest of the freight. And he said, ‘I have no money, but I have another carload of sheep!’ That’s a true story.”

you can’t eat it and the only way you get anything out of it is if you sell your land.”

As a result of mechanization, government policy, and the War, farmers get squeezed off the land. Because the price per unit drops, those who survive are those who get big. Bill has a story that sums up the bind of the farmer who is losing on every unit.

“The war also took its toll on the farm community.”

less for the businesses. Big business saw that if less money went for food, there’d be more money left for these other things.”

The government consciously adopted policies to keep farm prices low, to force farmers off the land.

Bill: “This is what was starting to happen out here, you see. We were retiring some of our indebtedness, and they didn’t want that to happen. Let’s say the seven of us here pay off \$200 on our debt, the next time the milk check comes. That makes \$1400 available for somebody else, \$1400 of purchasing power on the open market. Where now, that \$200 is going to pay interest. Now, we’re all clamming up. I’m not going to spend unless I

trouble. But they won’t listen to us. Until Jim gets to be President and I get to be Vice-President, and the odds against that are pretty damn slim.”

“We don’t generate new dollars. All of the wealth comes from one of three places: the air, the sea, or the land. All of the wealth. We’re no longer generating new wealth. All we’re doing is paying interest.”

“The land value increase, because of inflation, gives you more borrowing power.”

Bill: “That looks good on paper, this borrowing power.”

Kenny: “Sure, you get a financial statement at the bank that staggers the imagination compared to twenty years ago, but it doesn’t do you a bit of good,

Not by Accident

The price per bushel of your crop is whittled down to nearly nothing. The costs of production escalate. More and more, your income is sucked away to pay interest. The rising price of land gives you false power at the bank, but no wealth you can use. You are pressured to expand.

Economic Development, had decided in 1962 there were "too many" farmers in the countryside. The CED was at the time a well-respected source of policy analysis. When the CED said one-third of all farm families should be forced off the land within five years, government

"The movement of people from agriculture has not been fast enough." —CED report

For years, farmers thought they were victims of coincidence. Because they believed in the free market, farmers felt market pressures were just stacked up against them, that they just had to reorganize to be more efficient. But the more effectively they worked, the worse straits they were in.

In 1979, Mark Ritchie, an independent researcher, uncovered the reason why. Government policy had consciously and systematically been chipping away at farm families. Ritchie published his findings in a small booklet, "The Loss of Family Farms."

Ritchie found documents which showed how a high level think tank, the Committee for

policy followed close behind. "The movement of people from agriculture has not been fast enough to take advantage of the opportunities that improving farm technologies, thus increasing capital, create," the 1962 report said.

"(Our) adaptive approach utilizes positive government action to facilitate and promote the movement of labor and capital where they will be the most productive and will earn the most income."

The mechanism for this forced migration of the land was simple: a conscious effort to keep prices low.

"(Government) support of prices has deterred the movement (of farmers) out of agri-

culture . . . Price supports for wheat, cotton, rice, feed grains, and related crops now under price supports (should) be reduced immediately."

Twelve years later, the CED published a follow-up report to show their policies had been implemented: "The farm population (4.5 percent) is now so small in relation to total population that further migration from farms will not be substantial. Annual agricultural employment, which was 4.5 million persons only ten years ago, is now about 3.5 million persons, or only 4 percent of the total labor force, and it is still declining. It represents approximately the optimum farm labor force that this committee envisaged for the 1970s in its statement, An Adaptive Program for Agriculture (1962)."

Farmers were told, as in Kenny's story, that they could compete if only they would get big enough. Those who expanded would be rewarded financially. Those who stayed small, or those who took the time to know their neighbors, would be forced out.

The pressure to produce more from the land would reach every small community, just like it reached to Green Isle. The plan was laid by a small group of men who were academics and executives of major corporations.

There was one additional reason for U.S. policy makers to attempt to keep grain prices low—in order to dominate the world market. By shipping large volumes of grain at a low price, traders would ensure that producers in other countries could not compete with U.S. grain. As a result, third world nations were persuaded to purchase food rather than to produce their own. Often, however, the food did not get through to the hungriest people. And the skills of farming were not developed in the poorer country. The bureaucrats who controlled the supply of food became more powerful, but people still went hungry. Food became a military and diplomatic weapon. And the handful of traders continued to dominate the world market.

But this low-price policy vision collapsed for internal reasons. This scam could survive only if export markets always expanded, and only if the United States land prices always increased. For, under low commodity prices, farmers were banking on high volume sales and an increase in the paper value of their farms. If either diminished, the farmer was left with no opportunity to pay off his loans.

In 1980, as the world-wide depression took hold, both of these assumptions collapsed.

Grain importing countries had little money to buy grain with. And land prices levelled off. The PIK program could forestall the impact of this blow to

the farm economy, but could not prevent a major credit shortage—which is inevitable unless the basic structure of the economy is altered.



Green Isle Feed Center

Does Bigness Hurt the Soil?

Federal statistics show that 5.2 billion tons of topsoil are lost to wind and water erosion every day. In some parts of Iowa, half of the topsoil has eroded away. Two bushels of soil are lost, on the average, for each bushel of corn we produce in this country.

For this group of farmers, erosion is not merely a statistic. It is a measurement they take every day, in the sound of the engine lugging, in the appearance of the roots of their crops, in the colors of the spring drifts, in knowing the corners you have to

cut to compete. In the room is a dairy farmer who uses no chemicals, a dairyman who uses them sparingly, a grain farmer who says you can't make a living without them, and farmers who raise hogs and steers. Although each man farms with a distinctive style, the six of them speak of the soil with one voice. Bigness has hurt the earth they survive from. Bigness has hurt the earth we all depend on.

Bill: "To get back to 1948. We didn't buy fertilizers, we didn't buy grain, we had crop rotation, the county paid us for plowing down green manure crops. We were reimbursed, not much, but Terra Verde was popular at that time."

Kenny: "You were increasing

the fertility of the soil without using chemicals."

Jim: "But the chemical companies weren't making any money."

Bill: "Then we threw away the corn planter cable (which allowed the farmer to control weeds easily by tractor). You see, we needed 'more plants per acre' because we were 'short of food,' you know?"

Jim: "And then you couldn't control the weeds in your rows and you had to go to chemicals."

Bill: "And then when your acres got that big you couldn't afford to spend that much time out there with hand labor or anything else..."

Gordy: "And you couldn't get around to using legumes (such as alfalfa, which put nitrogen back in the soil)."

Kenny: "So you had chemical fertilizers."

And the use of chemicals hardened the soil. "We had an H tractor," said Gordy. "I'll make you a bet if you were pulling a two-bottom plow through this land with an H today..."

Bill: "It's so damn tough..."

Jim: "I don't know what we'd do..."

Art: "In some years, any-way..."

Gordy: "... you couldn't

get through. It takes more power.”

Kenny: “Which uses more energy.”

Art: “But you remember, that was pretty slow.”

Kenny: “But now we’ve hardened the soil, compacted it with machinery. We’ve added the chemical fertilizer, the big machinery . . .”

Bill: “Of course, there would be some times, when the moisture is just right (you could still plow easily).”

Kenny: “Oh, yeah, under ideal conditions.”

Art: “And you had last year, Gordy couldn’t plow his land with his tractor, he had to come in with a four-wheel drive.”

Jim: “What do you suppose would happen if I’d pull out with that little Ford and a two-bottom plow, and I started plowing?”

Bill: “You wouldn’t be able to go through your land.”

Jim: “Next, my neighbors would have me committed.”

with 14-ton manure spreaders, and 20-ton silage wagons.”

Kenny: “And there again, bigness hurt.”

Gordy: “That’s right.”

Denny: “The fertilizer itself did something to the soil, to make it hard. It makes the ground harder along with the compaction.”

Kenny: “Thirty years ago, if you grew alfalfa, your root system went way down, and you cut off the root with the plow and left the rest down there, to perforate the soil, which absorbs water. Now, you’re substituting humus with chemicals. You dairy farmers get around pretty good with a (manure) tank, but the guys who are pretty much cash farming . . .”

Art: “Anyone without livestock, that is, . . .”

Kenny: “. . . all you’re doing is hauling rock on it. Lime, and so forth.”

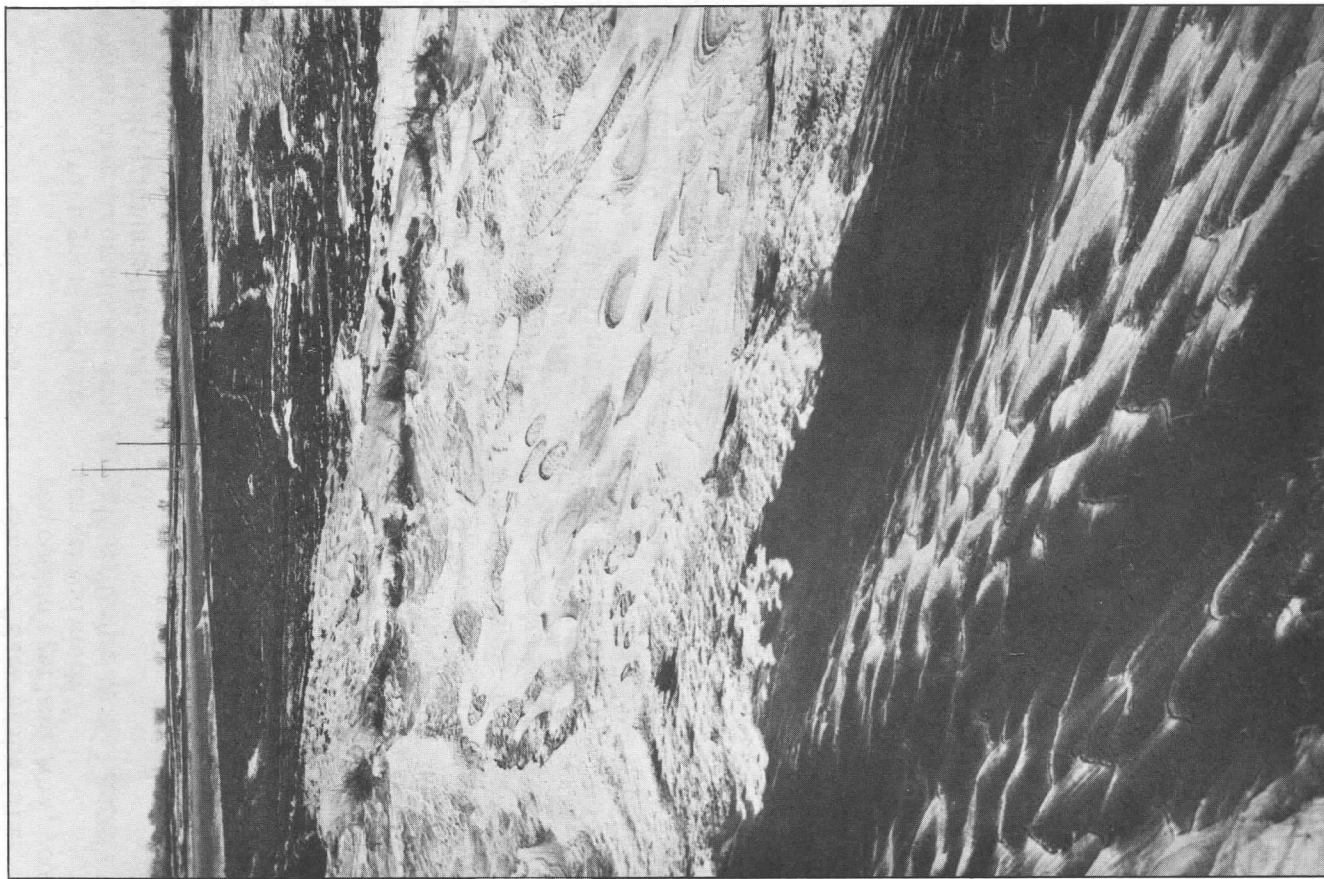
Bill: “The only thing now is, Kenny, and Jim too, you both plow a lot of stalks down. With the rest of us, we take it all off

“Do you realize how much easier it is (for the banker) to take one big guy with 1,000 acres than to take 10 little ones with 100 acres apiece? What’s gonna happen? This does not make for a strong community.”

Bill: “The other thing is, Gordy, while we’re speaking of that, we also didn’t go out there

for silage, or straw, but the stalk in itself should do a lot.”

Kenny: “But bigness hurts the



Soil blown over snow

soil, there's no question about it."

Gordy: "This bigness, and this 'progress' have accomplished one thing. That is, it hurts the land. And that's the only thing it did accomplish."

Bill: "And bigness is almost a symbol of food now..."

Kenny: "Yeah, a big Steiger..."

Jim: "There are a lot of farmers who wouldn't have to run near as much land but there's a lot of pride and prestige in being a big operator. Don't you think? Especially when you run, like, a couple thousand acres. You don't need that much to generate a living."

Bill: "But it's *nice* to sit up there with a big Steiger."

Jim: "I mean, really."

Gordy: "Back in the fifties, you couldn't get land. Now, you can get too much."

Jim: "Isn't that the heck of it? ..."

Kenny: "Yeah, and the reason we can get too much, Gordy, is the artificial price of the land. You know, Dad and I can go and borrow and borrow and borrow until it's coming out of our ears."

If bigness hurts the soil, it also hurts the people who live on the soil. As Bill added: "Do you realize how much easier it is (for the banker) to take one big guy with 1,000 acres than to take 10 little ones with 100 acres apiece? What's gonna happen? This does not make for a strong community."

Free Time on the Farm

The Bates family strides through the barn like clockwork. A square shaft of light slices in from the east, and rebounds off the black and white spotted ribs of the herd. Straw is piled among the stalls, golden, inviting. But there are 90 head left to milk.

tubing. She stops, begins to turn away; her eyes focus on the far door. Gordy rises deftly, thrusts an arm into the air, draws his body toward the milker. His free hand moves in precision to grasp the plastic tubes. Suddenly she is halfway down the barn and he is halfway to the next cow, the

The advantage of milking ninety is that the farm becomes a family operation. It's clear that everyone has to pitch in or the work will swamp them.

A mechanical undercurrent resonates through the moist air. Milking machinery. The news spills in faintly from the radio. Gordy and Sherry add nothing to the din. He plants a milker on four ready teats. With an awe-some sucking sound, the vacuum traps the delicate skin in the rubber sleeve. Down the line, Sherrie inserts a stainless steel connector into the stainless steel line. Once again, a brief rasp. On to the next cow.

Eight milkers are spaced strategically among the stalls in a rigid pattern. Sherry and Gordy move steadily. Not a word is spoken. They trade milkers with the ease of gears meshing; Sherry walks behind Gordy, her hands held high balancing the ungainly

milker holding its same shape but moving in the opposite direction. The pulsator still ticks off the seconds.

Barbie and Heidi, both in their teens, also move silently through the barn. Barb rations corn to the eager, dripping mouths; fifty scoops into the feed gutter from a small cart loaded at the silo. Heidi draws small pails of milk for the calves in the next shed.

A little before eight, each one says a simple goodbye to her parents, and heads out the door to get ready for school. Barb adds a comment to me as I focus my camera: "Good luck on your story." She disappears into the milkhous.

Later, standing by the feeder, Gordy grabs a free moment to

talk. He speaks slowly, drawing stories out of his memory crisply, patiently. Gesturing quickly with massive arms, his eyes glimmer and inspire. Gordy will weigh a 30-second news item silently for hours, and compare it to something he read several years ago. He digests and analyzes the way a cow must set out to transform alfalfa. The milk of Gordy's intellect comes out in jokes or parables, words weighed for the proper impact in the lull of dinnertime conversation.

Gordy would just as soon milk about 25 cows. But with a son studying farm management and three sons and three daughters at home, Gordy and Sherry pack ninety cows into two shifts through a barn meant for fifty. Fully four hours of chores, twice a day, at precise intervals. That's just the milking. Then, there are 400 acres of land to tend so the cattle can be fed. And machinery to maintain, a house to keep, and glimpses of time with the family.

The advantage of milking ninety is that the farm becomes a family operation. It's clear that everyone has to pitch in or the work will swamp them. To keep the moments stolen from school and homework from becoming drudgery, Gordy has encouraged each child to own part of the livestock. At a certain age, each child was given a calf to raise. In exchange for their work, each gets a percentage of the milk check. With this income, the kids have invested in more animals, or

other things they wanted. As Gordy sees it, this has helped the kids feel they are part owners. Both sons plan to be back to work on the farm at some point.

None of this workload would be possible without the advanced machinery which the Bateses have installed on their farm. An intricate conveyor system which unloads silage from two sealed silos. The network of stainless steel piping which sucks milk out of the udders into a large tank. Immense tractors, cultivators and balers.

At one time, this equipment was billed as "labor-saving." To be sure, the Bates family can milk more cows now with less physical risk and less physical exertion. And the farm would not have survived financially in the competitive farm economy if the investment hadn't been made.

But, far from producing an explosion of leisure time, the equipment has chained these farmers even tighter to their homesteads than ever before. Family time is a half hour seized after the evening chores are done, Sundays after church. Seldom are there occasions to gather with neighbors to relax, share stories, play cards.

When I came around hoping to talk to a group of neighbors about farming, Gordy was enthusiastic. He promptly offered his home for the gathering. Sherry baked a midnight lunch. I needed only to make three calls;



Sherry Bates

six men showed up with an afternoon's notice. It was clear from the talk that this group of men hadn't relaxed together for several months. One suggested to me later, "I wish we could get everyone together like that once a month to talk like that. Later, we could break out the cards or something."

That evening, I asked the group what their workday was like 30 years ago, before the equipment became so immense.

"I'd say it was a hell of a lot less than what these guys are putting in, the guys who are really milking cows. I know damn well enough it was," said Kenny. "Well, I can remember my grandfather, when it came to be six o'clock in the evening, the horses were put in the barn. Every dang night, that was it." Your work earned you time with your family, or an evening with your neighbors.

Seated now in a reclining chair, Gordy eased back and slipped one of his stories into the room. "I can remember when I

was a kid," he began, "if she rained, there wasn't a single farmer in the whole neighborhood who wasn't out on the lake at seven o'clock in the morning, and you fished all day. If it rained five days straight, then you fished five days straight. This was in the lake country. If a farmer wasn't out on the lake, you figured he had pneumonia or something."

Once, there were sunsets and rainclouds which told you that you had worked enough. Once, a timepiece was something you used to choose how to spend your time. Work was a limited part of life; it was only one way you participated in the community. Now, this seems to be a farm community of people who move like clockwork. Rather than becoming freer to spend time together on account of our machines. In a way, we have come to resemble our machines.

"George Janke used to say," Gordy joked, "any cow that can't hold its milk for two days ain't worth keeping."

Scaling Down

These men did not expand to suit their pride; they did so out of economic necessity. That fact was driven home when I asked them how they would redesign their farms if they had the chance to do it any way they wanted.

"Bill always has the best answer to me," answered Kenny. "You wouldn't hire any outside labor, because you could handle it yourself. Without all the manual labor like our fathers had or our grandfathers, you could handle 25 to 30 cows so you could have these Sundays off, so you could have free time."

it and you can operate those things together."

Kenny: "And another thing, I can remember when Martin Jahn had every cow freshen in September."

Bill: "That's the secret there." Kenny: "And that guy, from the middle of July, he had six weeks when he didn't have a cow to take care of. If a cow didn't settle, then she got shipped."

Bill: "You remember the time at Richard's auction next door, and the day of the sale Clarence Walker and Bill Riebe come in and they got the bib overalls on and they came in here and they

"We started back in 1952 on shares. And we had a little over 300 chickens, and we sold candled eggs. When we finally left there, we'd put money in the bank. I'm not kidding."

Jim objected. "You can't have Sundays off with 25 cows. How you gonna do it? You still gotta be there."

Bill: "When you get to that type of situation, it is much easier, and they did this years ago, they swapped chores with the neighbors. The neighbor may have a son on that 80-acre farm next door or your son can take

looked up on the chart, and Clarence said, 'Aw, she's coming fresh in March. He wants to milk her *all summer*?' And out they go."

"At that time you didn't have a \$400 electric bill to pay, we didn't have a \$1,000 gas bill. So the creamery would make the milk check out a little small in June or May."

Kenny: "We didn't have to get 17,000 pounds of milk out of a cow. We got back nine or ten thousand."

Bill: "It's all energy costs."

Denny: "And this farm that had ten cows and twenty sows and a couple hundred chickens, that's what I'd like to see. If one market goes down, you've always got a little bit in the others."

Kenny: "That's what we all had."

Jim: "I'll tell you something. We started back in 1952 on shares. And we had a little over 300 chickens, and we sold can-

dled eggs. When we finally left there, we'd put money in the bank. I'm not kidding. But eggs were around 50¢. Before the bottom went out. For two or three years we did that; every once in awhile we'd have \$50 or \$100 to put in the bank."

The hopes for the future come out of their experience in the past. But these men are not asking to turn the clock back, rather for a future where the machinery saves labor, a day when you can earn money easier than 30 years ago.

Harvesting Together

The chopper lies in the middle of the machine shed, dormant. On top of the sheet metal casing is set a grease-stained rag, a chain, and several washers and nuts. Gordy and I walk briskly to the machinery after breakfast; Kenny is coming soon.

Gordy peers into the corkings of the chopper, cleans off the gears buried deep inside the mechanism. Patiently, he checks for play in the gears, angles the sprockets into the chain. He is just pulling up the slack when Kenny drives up. The pickup off, Kenny bursts through the immense overhead doorway. He is sending a joke our way before we have time to turn to look.

Gordy tightens the last few nuts and moves to the tractor cab. He asks Kenny to give a hand. Kenny moves to the chopper silently, and makes a few quick adjustments. He turns and waves his arm, and Gordy starts up the tractor. Gordy squints from inside the cab. Kenny peers at the raucous gears and lets out a sharp yell. The clutch out, a few more adjustments, and the patient is diagnosed as healthy.

The clamor dies down, and Gordy walks up with a grease gun. Zerks are unearthed from under clods of hay and dust, while Kenny points out the next

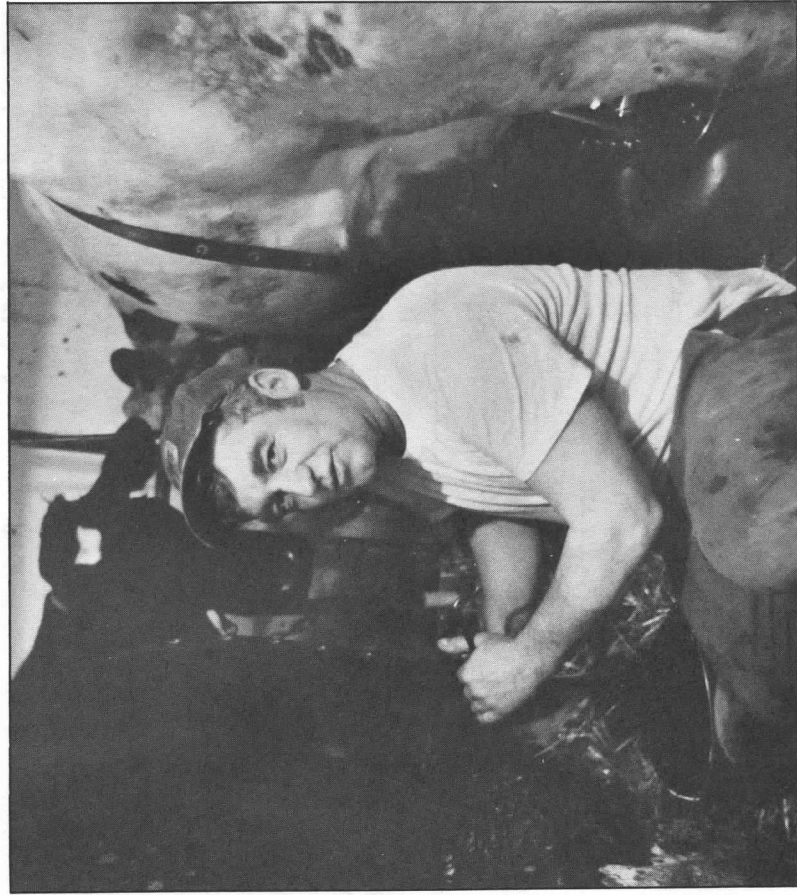
target for grease. A few short stories punctuate the silence. The baler ready, Gordy heads out to the fuel tank with a tractor. Kenny and I haul into his pickup to head for his cornfield.

Workmen are digging a cavernous county ditch which is about to devour over five acres of Kenny's land. A large crane and huge piles of earth loom over the far corner of his property. Although it is another month until harvest, the work crew wants to move through the land this week. Kenny is forced to harvest part of his field early to make room. The corn is a lush green, barely ripe, so he will chop it for silage.

Kenny's a grain farmer; this is a field he would normally combine after the stalks are brown. He hires Gordy to chop for him. What would have taken a half-hour of combining becomes a four-hour task for four people.

Arnie and Rollie Narr, Ken's father and brother, are waiting impatiently at the field when we drive up. Gordy is still lumbering along the gravel township road with the tractor. The three men plan their strategy for clearing the field, then wait quietly in sunlight for the tractor.

Gordy stays in the cab, and rolls onto the field after hooking up a wagon to the back of the



Jim Kregger

chopper. The front tires bend cornstalks to the soil, the diesel clatters, the chopper roars to the load of green stalks. This lush placid stand of corn, moist and resilient to the breeze, is diced into green fragments instantaneously. A rain of dusty green streams from the tall funnel of the chopper, and arcs into the wagon. Suddenly, the air tastes sweet. A sugary vapor lingers over the field as the machinery whines away. I walk behind the

well-orchestrated weaving of tractor and chopper through corn. Arnie and Rollie speed the wagons back and forth to the roadside. We hitch the pickup to two loaded wagons; I take that load back to the silo.

Kenny's mother cooks a meal for everyone. Exactly at twelve o'clock, all work stops and we pile into the truck to head to the house. It is the first time Gordy has seen Mrs. Narr for awhile. They chat briefly as she places

The three men plan their strategy for clearing the field.

procession, my feet stumble on five-inch stubs of stalk, protruding in neat rows: lane markers for this newly-leveled freeway. The moist earth winces from the sunlight; a dense forest of corn rattles on either side of me. As the tractor rounds the bend, the sun streams through the silence. The grasshoppers leap again.

Arnie guides an old, smooth-running tractor behind the chopper, bringing a fresh wagon into the field. He eases in behind Gordy as he turns around for the second pass, then follows him at a crawl until the wagon is filled. Wagons switched, the procession continues. Four passes in all, a

chicken, potatoes, and corn on the table. Everyone washed up, we dive into the food the way the chopper had moved through the corn. We share news about the neighbors, the price of gold, the business of farming. Linger-ing past one o'clock today, a few extra stories on account of the visitor. We finish and ramble back to the field.

I take the final load to Kenny's silo after Gordy finishes the final pass. Kenny and Rollie are already up the ladder, opening the entry to the silo. Arnie readies the blower. Gordy heads home in his tractor. Kenny descends, drives me back to my car.



Kenny Narr

Who Grows the Food the Farmers Eat?

The sun sets on a warm January day. Bathed in orange light is a sturdy brick store. The brighter story is crowned by a half-ornate carving near the roof. On the shadow side, "Lees Overalls" looms twice lifesize in mustard and blue. The awning above the picture windows says, simply, "Panning's Town and Country."

Wilbur and Myrtle Panning lean stiffly behind the counter, surrounded by watchbands, air fresheners, pipes, candy, herring and sausage. Their bright eyes move quickly to the door every time it opens. Wilbur extracts his pipe long enough to call out each new arrival by name. By the time the bells hang silent on the door again, two hellos have echoed, are swallowed by the socks and lettuce.

Almost six, almost quitting time. In spite of the weather, the townspeople cluster as if huddling near a woodstove. Last-minute hamburger meat, a pack of cigarettes, dog food, fresh grapes, a handful of bread loaves all walk out the door.

Companionship is in plentiful supply at Pannings, and seems to be more highly valued than the goods on the shelves. Leisurely, the weather is dissected. Five people compare their temperature estimates and conclude the

high was 49°. The radio, subtle in the corner, is not consulted. Soon, we're discussing how corn can be raised in northern climates as far as Alaska. A woman waits for a noisy moment and whispers to Myrtle about her husband's operation, upcoming tomorrow. A father waits patiently for his son to pick out a piece of candy from the rack behind the counter.

The odor of manure wafts lightly through the town. The heart of dairy country: a region of corn, beans, and beef. But in this farmland store, there is scanty trade in local food. Some farmers stock their freezers from their own herd, pantries from their garden. Many head for the supermarkets in the next town, or in the Cities. Factory workers head to a market near work.

"I'd say half—well, a good many people, anyway, go out of town to shop," Myrtle suggests. A lot of people just aren't happy unless they can go out of town. But we have customers come here from out of town, too."

So the Pannings handle the rush orders, the essentials you always run out of, the basic workclothes, housewares. The trade is more in news than food. This is a place to chat with your neighbor who works in the next town. A place to gather at a

"I'd say half—well, a good many people, anyway, go out of town to shop."

troubled moment. A quick stop for a single item.

The former owner, Spike Nevins, told me he used to sell potatoes, cabbage, onions, chickens, and bread from local producers. But the trade was

So, a parade of trucks crosses over the fertile prairies to Pannings. Wilbur's twelve-hour workday starts at 6:15 a.m. when the first bread truck arrives. Bread from Minneapolis and Glencoe. A Twin Cities



Myrtle and Wilbur Panning

slow; he bought in small quantities. The Pannings avoid local food. "No, you aren't allowed to sell anything local," Myrtle explained. "Maybe a few apples here and there. Everything has to be inspected. It's more of a nuisance than it's worth. They (the growers) expect a lot. We don't really get anything out of it."

produce dealer and a fruit broker haul in California, Texas, and Florida products. Meats come from a southern Minnesota packer, often at the end of a 500-mile journey from feed lot to farm table. Milk comes from a local dairy. Cheese is made at a creamery nearby.

Panning's is a small store, hardly a market with trade enough to support local growers. But the supermarket five miles away is serviced by the same trucks. In fact, if anything, a larger store is more likely to have more distant suppliers.

As a result, eating in Minnesota consumes a vast quantity of oil. Sixty percent of what we pay for food goes to buy energy, according to the USDA.

Although Minnesota is the seventh largest beef producer in the nation, half of the beef we eat is brought in from out of state. Ninety percent of the fruit and vegetables shipped to Twin City markets come from outside state boundaries. An estimated two-thirds of our food is not

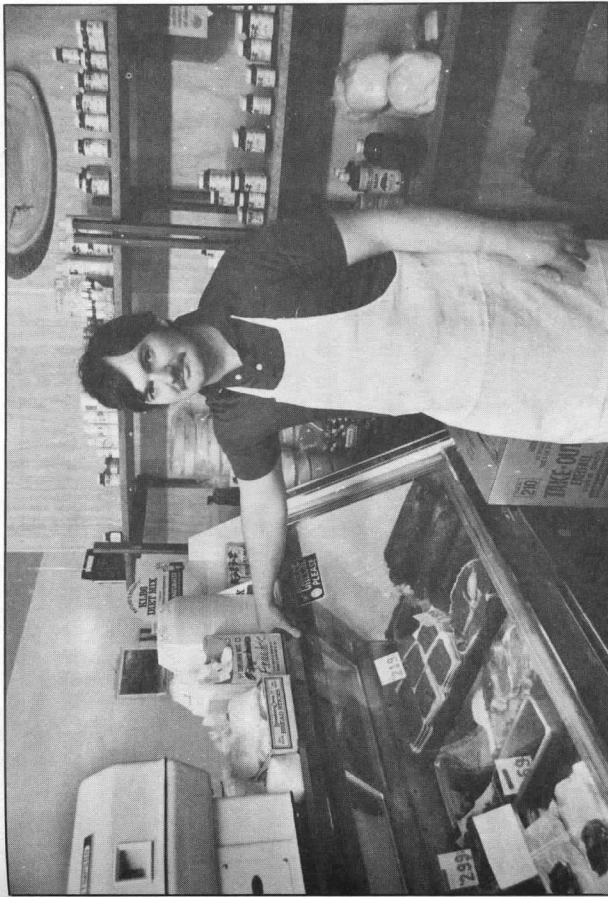
locally grown.

And, our land is devoted to feeding industry instead of people. Only five percent of the corn and bean crops are processed directly into food for humans. The wealth of the farmlands is exported at prices well below the cost of production—55 percent of parity for corn and 75 percent for milk.

So, from the wealth of this harvest, Green Isle gets very little money and scarcely a bite to eat.

As the sun sets on a warm winter day, Wilbur and Myrtle head upstairs to their apartment above the store. They listen attentively to the TV news, carefully gathering fuel for tomorrow's trade.

Local Food, Local Business



Joe Skelley

A small store lies on the edge of the next town to the South, five miles away. Several years ago, the couple who own the store introduced a new line. It is more expensive than a similar product available at supermarkets all over the area. It is identical in appearance. Yet, in a week, the amply stocked shelves had been cleaned out by customers of the new store. The new line? Beef. Locally grown, chemical-free beef.

Four local farmers supply the store, called Nature's Best, with the meat. It is sent to a butcher

shop in a nearby town for slaughter. Quarters come back to the store for final cutting and trimming.

"It's more expensive, but people are willing to pay for the quality. They like the flavor," Janet Skelley told me.

The beef is so well-liked that the store now arranges for all of the hamburgers sold at the 4-H building for the county fair.

"Mostly young people" come to the store, she added. "They seem to be more conscious of their food."

The new store does almost no advertising. "People have to want it for themselves. Otherwise, you might as well keep your mouth shut."

New Ulm, Joe brings milk and ice cream. Cheese is delivered from a creamery twenty miles the other direction. Beef, eggs, honey, apples, wheat, and sum-

"There is no middleman. We've eliminated that expense."

So, the Skelleys have carefully contrived a business to attract people to the store.

"Dairy brings them in. Most people come in here for the dairy products, and then they see the other stuff, and get interested. We have the lowest dairy prices in town—in fact, the lowest prices in the area."

How do you keep prices low? "My husband brings it in himself. There is no middleman. We've eliminated that expense."

On that 30-mile trek from

mer produce come from local growers.

Other staples like grains, nuts and whole grain breads, and snacks and dried fruits come from more distant suppliers. Sweets and soda pop continue to be big sellers. But the beginnings are here—of local people supporting local growers. Nature's Best may not offer the same tradition or friendship that Panning's does, but it is starting to funnel some business back to the community.

Breaking the Bread

Early in the wee darkness, a lonely truck halts outside the Oasis Cafe. The driver slides the door open, the morning paper leaps out of the van and scrapes to a stop on the concrete steps. Headline glaring back at the moon, straight-jacketed by a rubber band, it waits like money in the safe.

A pickup rolls in at six. The driver emerges, bends down for the paper, and heads inside. With a brusque toss, the paper slams down onto the horseshoe-shaped counter. A heavy parka is draped across the table nearby, and the man sits, one arm reaching for the warm coffee cup. The rubber is ripped off, the pages spread out flat by a large-fingered, roughened hand. His eyes gaze past the hot black liquid, scrutinizing the news.

If you don't have a family to join at the kitchen table, this is where you break bread in the morning. Men will linger here for two hours in the winter. The day's events are ferociously reheated. Here, you can raise your voice, you can say what you like. This is a family that many choose.

The Oasis is the other end of the food chain. Once the product of Green Isle's farms has made its way to market, to

processor, to warehouse, and back to town, this is where consumers gather. There are rituals on this end, too.

Dorothy leans on the work counter, smoking. Her right hand rests eternally on the handle of the coffeepot. When the newspaper reader asks for eggs, her only answer is the scratching of a pencil on the order pad.

A bell clangs mildly over the room. The screen door slams shut. A fumbling is heard at the door. One by one, men appear at the coat rack. Each man stiffens in a characteristic way just as he confronts the dimly lit room. For some, the jaw is set, a gaze hardens on the floor as the head ducks down, allowing a cap to be pulled off. Some send a joke bounding off the walls as their first step lands on the tile floor. Others just hitch up their belts and saunter in.

The newspaper is abandoned, each time, for a glance at the doorway. Occasionally, a retort is hurled at the newcomer.

Soon, six or eight men are scattered around the horseshoe, devouring the news and shoveling in eggs and toast. Dressed in an assortment of sweatshirts and coveralls, the men lean into the counter. One wears a stocking cap all the while. Another bears

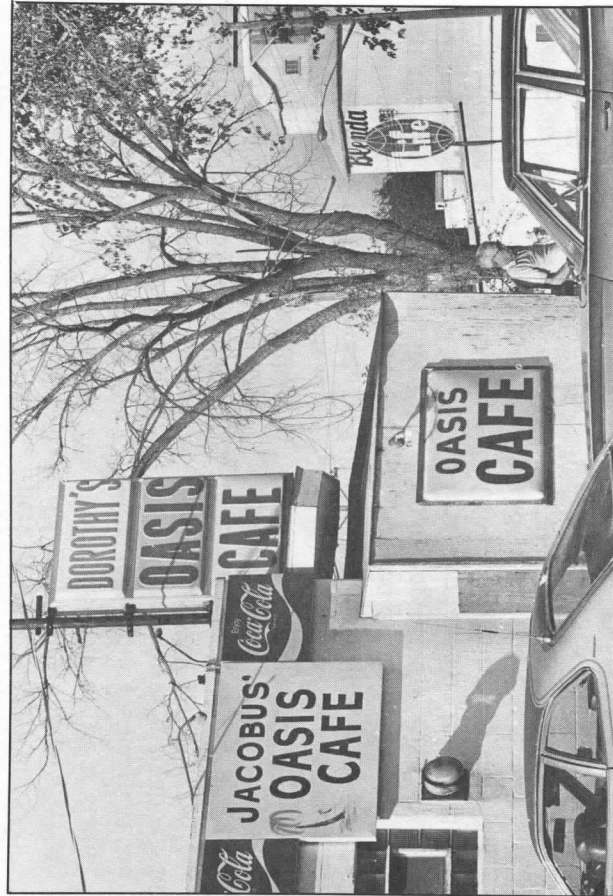
grease stains on his sweatshirt from hours spent under a tractor. A third wears a natty plaid shirt and jacket, large glasses.

One man sprinkles a large spiral of sugar on his oatmeal. Another bends low to his plate to bite off a piece of toast. A hog farmer arrives in his coveralls, and orders four pieces of bacon, toast, and coffee. Every day.

The newspaper is divided into three sections. Each part moves freely from one reader to the

spend long hours driving—delivering oil to the farm tanks, hauling saplings across the county, hauling manure over the fields, stocking the local bars—these men all meet every morning to dissect the day's events.

One article mentions that Shell Oil is considering pulling its gas stations out of Minnesota. The local franchise dealer has heard that, too. "I talked to a friend of mine who works for Shell. He says the major oil



Oasis Cafe

next. Stories rebound around the horseshoe. Dorothy hovers from plate to plate with her coffeepot.

The hostages have just been released, a new president installed. The economy seems to be disintegrating. These men who

companies are going to pull back, and only make bulk sales. They will own the pipelines, and sell to the co-ops, who will sell to the customers. I hear the station in Watertown is about to close."

Someone mentions that gas

went up 8¢ a gallon yesterday in California. The prices at all stations in a 50-mile radius are compared. The highest, 25 miles away on a major highway, is more than 25¢ a gallon higher than in Green Isle.

"The oil companies are saying, we have to have the same profit, so even though people are driving less, we'll charge more. We'll get the same profit off of one gallon as we used to get off of ten gallons. Right now, they get 60¢ a gallon." The current price (1980) is \$1.349.

A hog farmer pulls a newspaper clipping out of his pocket and begins to speak. Across the table, a new story bellows out. Something about an overcharge at the garage. The paper is neatly folded back into the shirt pocket.

A man and a woman walk in, slowly. Eyes cast on the tight circle at the horseshoe, they slide quietly onto stools at the other end of the room. Huddled together, they order coffee and sip it in tight, silent swallows. Their eyes remain glued to the circle of diners. The woman, with dark hair and brown skin, wears a seed company windbreaker. They whisper behind the mugs held in their hands. When they

are done, they slip out of the cafe quickly.

One man is talking about the hostages. He looks straight at the driver, but speaks loud enough for the entire cafe. He thinks the story is overblown.

One man declares that the U.S. should take all the Iranian students and ship them back. Then, he adds, "We should bomb the hell out of Iran."

The response is quick. "They were foreign service agents, most of them. They know there is that risk when they sign up for duty. It's not like they were tourists."

Another, nestled into his navy blue sweatshirt, says, "We should blow 'em right outta there." Finished, his face is wrapped in a smirk. His eyes glance around the table, tentatively. The men sip their coffees.

A payphone on the wall rings. It is the school, calling to let one of the men know his son is sick, needs to come back home.

8:15. One heads out the door. Soon, others begin to drift away. The sun now glows through the tiny windows to the East. The *Tribune* lies crumpled on the corner of the counter. The well-digested news drives around the country.

“I’ll Never Leave.”

Question: “How does it feel to be the one to bring these cows to slaughter every day?”

Answer: “Well, you got to do something with them animals.”

Wolfing down a roll, gulping coffee, Orlin Meyer barely sits at the counter of the Oasis. He is on his way in a minute, back to the service station next door to pay for fuel. His truck, a red monster, towers over the pumps. It is a huge step to the cab into a stuffed, springy seat. He turns the key. The motor erupts with a solid roar. Maneuvering a thick, long shift lever on the floor, Orlin eases his truck onto the highway.

Just before eight. The sun burns in. The Oasis group is just disbanding, heading for work, but Orlin has been going for two hours already.

A few miles down the road is a dairyman who has three cows to sell. Orlin backs onto the yard with barely a glance in the mirror. He is out of the truck and has opened a gate to the back of the box before the farmer emerges from his barn chores.

With a few brief words, Orlin, the farmer and his son chase the cows up the narrow metal walkway. Orlin prods each with an

electric stick. He yells at them; they bellow back. Locking the door behind him, he leaps to the ground. Finally, there is a minute to chat about the market, to examine the new calf barn. Soon, we are on our way to the stockyard.

Trucking is “just a sidelight” for Orlin Meyer, who has been hauling many of the county’s cows for 12 years. He also runs 400 acres, milking over 60 head, raising 150 hogs and 100 cattle. “And one chicken,” he adds.

Orlin took over his bother’s trucking business when he died of cancer. Since then, he has bought a second truck. He only drives when “the other truck is full.” In addition to hauling animals for local farmers, Orlin puts in double duty at county fair time, making sure each show animal gets to the 4-H barn. If you win the blue ribbon, you call up Orlin to haul your animal to the State Fair in St. Paul.

Orlin is a fixture in the community. He does an extra share to help out. “I’ll never leave Green Isle. You get used to something, it doesn’t bother you.”

Meat has been the business of Orlin’s family for some time. “My uncle ran a butcher shop in Green Isle, right on Main Street, right next to Clarence Herd’s.

He used to butcher in two rooms there. He closed down over 45 years ago. I don’t know when. That was before my time.”

“He used to go around to the farmers and buy an old milk cow for hamburger or sausage. He’d haul a couple of cows on the trailer behind his car.”

“Back then we had a little stockyard right along the railroad tracks. He’d make up a load on Friday, then put them on the train. They’d be at the market (in South St. Paul) by next Monday. He’d go in to meet them.”

hogs for awhile. Then everybody stops raising hogs and you can’t get any.”

The stalls are practically empty as Orlin’s truck pulls into the stockyards. He backs in, releases the cows into a pen, and walks through the pen to collect a receipt from the stockman.

“Workin’ hard, or hardly workin’?”

Three men happen along, a torrent of jokes erupts. Gazing over the immense yard of pens, they banter in well-worn, pleasurable phrases. Their eyes hardly meet.

“Well, you got to do something with them animals.”

Nowadays, that old style of marketing wouldn’t work. Prices change too fast. It’s strictly day-by-day, with the farmers sending a cow out after hearing the morning market report. They take a risk that the price won’t drop before Orlin arrives.

Bill Harjes once told me of a shipment he made when the price was up. “That made it O.K., but the cows had dropped \$5 by the time Orlin got back.” So, Orlin hurries.

Racing along the freeway, Orlin continues: “They should set a price and stick to it. If they’d keep the price of hogs at \$55, something you could make a few bucks, there’d be plenty of hogs. As it is, there are too many

Quickly, we are walking back to the truck. “Used to be a lot of guys who’d shoot the shit. Now, everyone’s on the go.”

Orlin is ahead of schedule, so he offers to show me the auction ring. We walk a quarter of a mile over a tiny wooden walkway, elevated over the pens. A score of men saunter below us, holding long whips and walkie-talkies.

We enter into a dark, cinder-block arena, sparsely peopled. Five or six men in suits are scattered near the ring. Each holds a telephone close, files a stack of papers. Cattle are led in, four or five at a time, to be auctioned. As they scramble in the pit, the fruits of years of daily labor and care are settled



Orlin Meyer

Farmers and Workers

When the produce of Green Isle's farms is taken to the city, whether in Orlin Meyer's truck, in a milk truck or grain hopper, there lingers a sense of loss. The community in Green Isle have witnessed a miraculous process of natural growth. Farmers have nurtured plants and animals through chancy weather, taking the best possible advantage of sun, rain and heat. From years of practice, farmers have shaped their activity down to essential operations. They have taken on more acreage, more animals and larger equipment than they would choose in order to provide for their families.

In their attempt to survive an economy which is consciously stacked against them, farmers have amassed incredible debt. They have been forced to abandon a position of strength—in which the farm community could produce credit for itself—and have become totally dependent on outside lenders. Rather than being paid a fair income for their labor, farmers have merely gained access to immense debt.

Urban dwellers, increasingly cut off from rural life, have examined the farm mainly through the unsympathetic eye of mass media. Urbanites have identified modern farmers with large tractors and vast acreage,

and have mistakenly thought farmers were wealthy. Obscured was the reality that farmers work intensely hard, merely to lose equity.

Stereotypes of laborers have also grown inside the farm community. Farmers who have seen some urban workers bring home larger incomes for only half the labor time have railed against the "privileges" won by unionists.

Now, as union members are forced to accept pay cuts and job loss, as farmers struggle with federal policies designed to extinguish the family farm, workers and farmers have begun to realize their common bonds. Increasingly, the economic distinctions have melted away. In 1982, for the first time in history, more than half of farm income came from off-farm sources. In poor urban neighborhoods, or working-class suburbs, or rural communities, a similar dynamic was at work: money that had been earned by residents was systematically sucked away by taxes, high interest charges and expensive services. More money was flowing out of communities than flowed in. Credit was not offered by a neighbor or local banker, but from centralized major banks. Harnessing the natural process of growth had become a losing proposition.

with the subtle flick of a finger. On this day, the man from the Farmer's Union is buying most of the feeder cows. "He buys them for McDonald's. They'll be shipped to Texas for fattening," Orlin advises.

We walk out over the yard once more. The vacant packing plant looms in the distance; the yard seems barren. "Used to be twice as big." Why did it change? "There's less farmers. Used to be you had all these guys farming 80 acres—everyone had 150 hogs, a few cattle. Now, you only got the big lots. You can get more with the small farmers."

The massive feedlots have been built to the south; non-union packers have pushed

Hormel out of South St. Paul. This skeletal operation is now the largest stockyard in the country—the free market sales pushed out by conglomerated feedlots.

Orlin washes his truck at a nearby lot. After an extended wait in line, he has to drop 26 quarters into the slot to get through the gate into a stall. We drive, dripping, to a nearby gathering place for lunch.

On the way back, we pass a small cattle yard. "That's the way I like to see it," Orlin says. "Twenty-five cows and enjoy your life a little."

We speed back to the afternoon chores.

If Farms Go Broke, The City Will Soon Follow

The farm family is a steward of this natural process of growth. Riding wonderful cycles of life and death, plants and animals harvest natural elements into food which sustains humans. They also replenish or deplete the soil, protect or threaten water resources.

Important to what humans call our economy, farm crops and animals can reproduce. Quite naturally, they increase their numbers.

Take a kernel of corn, for instance, and plant it in the ground. Nurture it well. Feed the soil so a sprout will grow. Pull the weeds away. If the summer is dry, water the plot.

Shake the tassels well as they ripen, make sure the tips of the stalk are covered with seed; you'll get an ear of corn. The seed will descend down the silk fibers, will fertilize a nest in the cob, one kernel for each silk strand. Hundreds of kernels from one. Several ears per stalk. One grain bears thousands.

Take a thousand grains of corn. Plant them in the ground in tight, even rows. Care for them well. In a season of favorable weather, with open pollen corn, you'll have a million fertile seeds.

That's production. A natural process: the seed martial's nutrients from the soil, water from

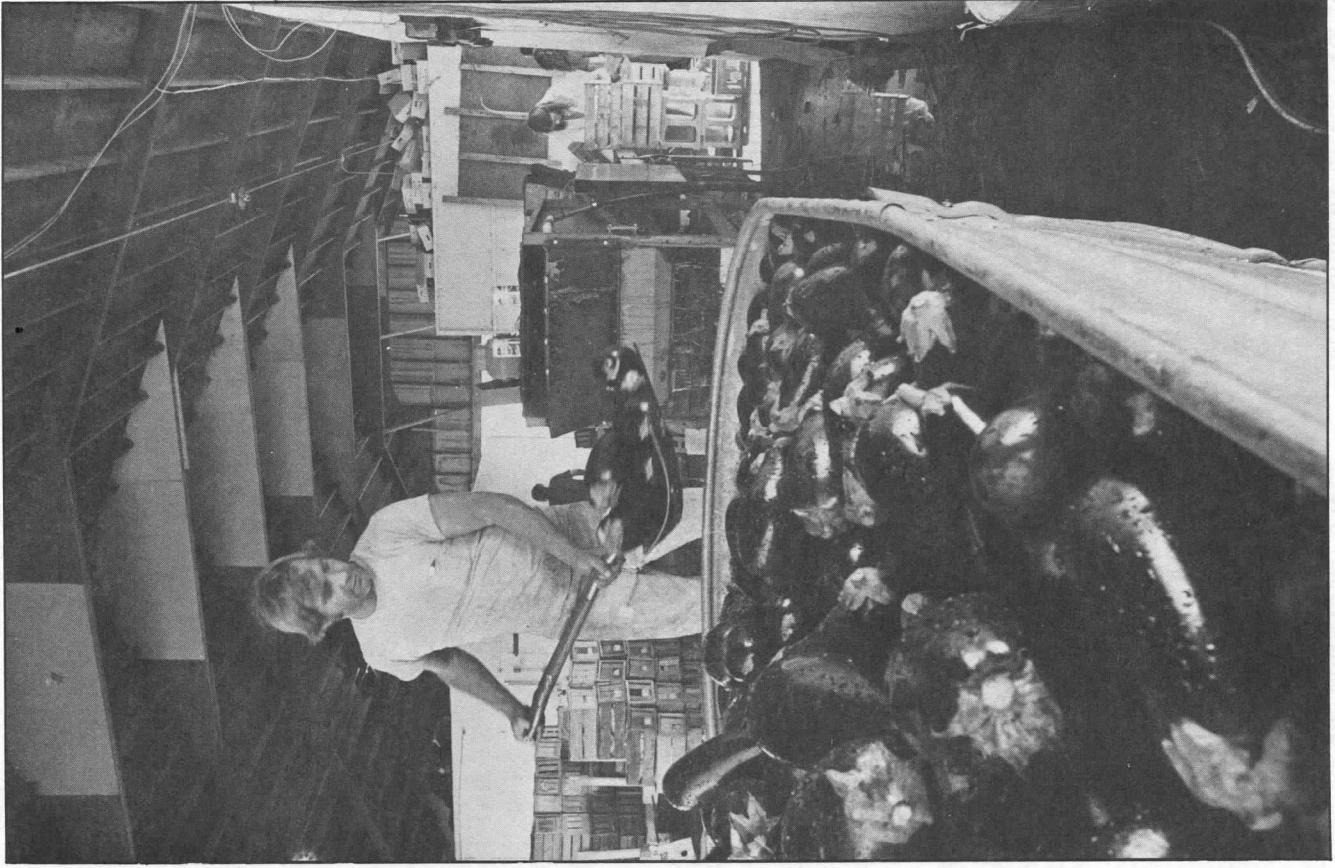
the rain, air and sunlight, and multiplies. Raw materials are channeled into usable energy. Labor transforms raw materials into more useful form.

A bin of corn can be eaten by humans. It can be fed to livestock. It can be ground into meal. Fermented into alcohol. Sugars extracted. Starch extracted.

All in all, corn is used for a multitude of products: syrup, resins, starch, paint pigment, fireworks, twine, and medicines. All of these products, all those factories, all of those workers busy because someone planted corn.

Take several million seeds. If you plant them, you'll want some machinery, a good tractor, a combine, a cultivating rig, a disk, a plow. A manure spreader perhaps, a truck for hauling the grain, a bin for storing it. An elevator in town, a barge or train to haul it to market. All of this set in motion because someone decided to plant a lot of corn.

All of these people grinding corn, making tractors, driving trucks. The chances are that none of these people grow their own food. Some farmer grows it for them. The money which goes to pay for building the combine could be the profit of someone's investment in a farm: the bank may take that mortgage



At a local vegetable producer.

payment and loan it to the implement manufacturer. Clearly, healthy farm production is critical to the rest of the economy. In no way is this to say farmers are more important than tractor mechanics, or teachers, or social workers. However, it is true that without the farmer, workers in these other occupations cannot survive.

Farmers also depend in turn on the tractor mechanic and the teacher and the social worker. But as harvester of essential raw materials, farmers are in a very special place indeed—just as for teachers who nurture the raw talents of their students, the value of what the farmer does spreads well beyond his own labor. The value of his work is “multiplied” as other workers make use of the raw materials the farmer harvested. Three to five extra dollars of economic activity are generated with each dollar of farm income. The injection of new raw materials into the economy helps offset inflationary pressures, by providing a tangible backing to new currency issues.

This means that federal farm support money has actually been fairly efficient in promoting business activity. In 1982, the year before the PIK program, \$11 billion of federal subsidy netted \$200 billion of economic activity. (Under PIK, costs tripled to \$32 billion, most of which was given to larger farmers and corporations—with little support to

the small farm.) This makes farm subsidies a far more productive use of federal funds than those military projects which create stockpiled or obsolescent weapons.

The importance of farming was understood by the CED policy writers who called for moving labor off the farm. (see page 23). Also, by holding prices low, and by raising interest rates, the government has diverted investment capital to urban banks and thus to urban or foreign industry. Money was, in effect, siphoned out of rural communities in order to finance industrial and service expansion, to finance war preparations.

Following the OPEC oil price increase of 1973, farmers were called on to bail out the rest of the economy. The sudden price rise meant the U.S. faced a staggering imbalance of trade—money was flowing out of our country as we imported vast quantities of oil. To offset this drain, farmers were told to plant “fence row to fence row” by Agriculture Secretary Earl Butz.

New foreign markets were opened, primarily in other industrial nations. Food exports leaped from \$9 billion to \$22 billion in two years, directly offsetting a similar jump in oil imports. It was a time of momentary good prices, but also of new, insurmountable debt on the farm.

Similar devastation hit the workers who mine or lumber.

Here, American corporations have invested in foreign production, undercutting the wages paid to U.S. workers. In spite of massive unemployment in Appalachia, western lumber fields, and the Minnesota Iron Range (where 90% of the steel workforce is unemployed in the fall of 1983), monopoly corporations are thriving. The risks of production have been displaced onto the workers and farmers, the profits are diverted to the processors, handlers, and marketers.

The money is siphoned off as high interest charges, in taxes, in

the worst, who risk their health the most.

Farmers in Sibley County, the county surrounding Green Isle, received \$105 million for their grain and milk and livestock in 1979. Counting the multiplier, about \$500 million of new wealth was created in this county in one year, just by farm families.

What's more, all of this farm produce was grown at prices ranging from 55 to 90 percent of parity. If farmers held the purchasing power their crops deserve, based upon their importance to the economy, then the

That's production. A natural process. Raw materials are channeled into usable energy.

high land prices and expensive equipment. It flows out of the county in transportation costs and oil charges.

In this economy, farmers grow corn and only get paid two-thirds of what it costs them to produce it. Appalachian miners contract black lung so that others will have coal. Navajo Indians develop cancer by working uranium mines. Migrant workers battle pesticides and low piece rates to bring in the lettuce crop.

In this economy, it is always the makers of value who get paid

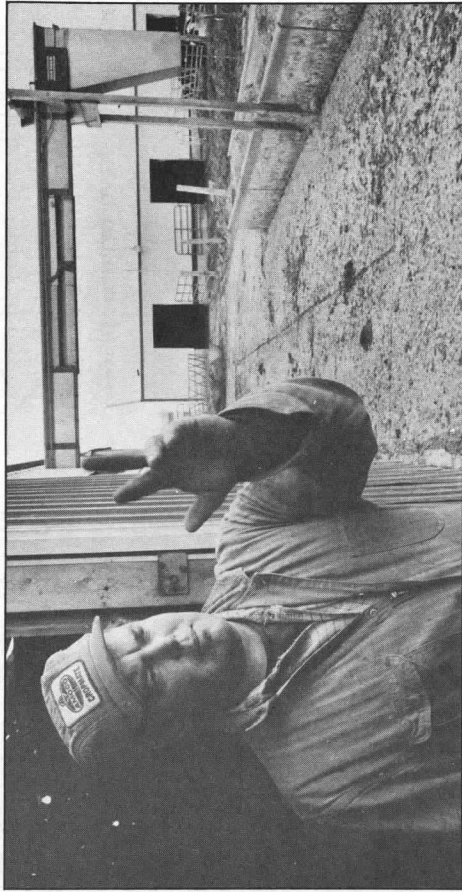
county would have generated an additional \$50 million of income from their farm produce. All told, that would come to three-fourths of a billion dollars value generated from one county—more than \$50,000 for each man, woman and child in the county!

The solution to the last depression came when the U.S. government discovered that national income could be boosted if people were able to consume more. By creating jobs for unemployed workers, consumption

rose and the economy slowly climbed back to health. Currently, the government controls consumption primarily through transfer payments and military contracts.

But when laborers are unemployed and farmers receive

back" to an ideal of "free enterprise" in the farm economy. Yet the tradition of farming in this country is much more a tradition of public support of certain farm businesses. As early as 1623, Massachusetts town governments hired shepherds to



Dennis Tuchtenhagen

low prices, consumption is too low to keep the economy afloat. Guaranteeing fair farm prices is the most effective way to bolster farm consumption.

The power of the monopoly interests is the single most dramatic difference between the depression of the 1930s and the depression of the 1980s. More than ever before, the solution to the economic crisis must be world-wide. At the same time, the solution must be local and small scale, and will rest in protecting the position of small and family businesses, of raw material producers, and of communities like Green Isle.

Some would have us "go

The Twenties and the Eighties

When the people who produce new wealth grow broke, the rest of the economy will soon follow. New wealth is forged when raw materials are grown or mined from the soil or the water. In Minnesota, farmers, loggers, and miners produce most of the new wealth. Yet these are the same groups who are losing the most jobs, losing their land.

Commonly it is believed that the depression is hurting farmers. Really it is the other way around. The farm depression is causing the broader depression. Just the same, the stock collapse of 1929 was preceded by nearly a decade of farm depression.

The European countryside was disrupted and devastated by the First World War. Nations that could no longer produce their own food turned to the U.S. for its exports. European investors loaned money to the U.S. to assure a supply of food. New tractors were manufactured—the number of tractors in use jumped tenfold, from 25,000 to 250,000. Prices were high because of wartime support payments by the government. To this day, the years from 1914 through 1917 are held up as the standard for farm parity pricing.

Following the War, as Europe replenished its own food supply,

demand for U.S. exports plummeted. Loan money was cut off. Farmers kept producing, taking advantage of the new technology. As industry expanded, urban areas became more prosperous. Price levels rose, boosting the costs of producing.

The price of corn dropped from \$1.50 per bushel to 52¢ between 1919 and 1921. Wheat fell from \$2.19 to \$1.03. Net farm income dropped from \$9.1 billion in 1919 to \$7.8 the following year. In 1921, farm income collapsed to \$3.4 billion.

Bernard Ostrolenk wrote for the *New York Times* in 1932 about a Minnesota farmer named Ole Swanson. The reporter said Ole was "not unlike hundreds of thousands of other farmers."

"By 1912, Ole, then 35 years old and a renter, had accumulated some \$2,000 in cash, two teams of horses, a reasonable supply of implements, a few brood sows and some cattle. He decided to buy his deceased father's farm of 160 acres in southern Minnesota for \$20,000. He paid \$2,000 in cash, gave an \$8,000 second mortgage to the estate and a \$10,000 first mortgage to an insurance company.

"Between 1912 and 1920, because of exceptional thrift



Art Berger

and competence, Ole was able to pay off the entire second mortgage of \$8,000, besides improving his barns, adding more cattle to his herd, increasing his equipment, building a porch to his home and making other improvements, as well as buying furniture, rugs and books, and giving his children adequate education.

"But between 1920 and 1928 Ole found that his expenses, because of the industrial prosperity, were increasing. He had to pay more and more for labor and for goods. On the other hand, because of the drop in agricultural prices, his income was constantly falling.

So, in those years, he was unable to amortize his remaining \$10,000 mortgage, and moreover, found that his standard of living rapidly declining. By 1925 his net income for his labor had fallen to less than \$400 annually. His 18-year-old daughter, who had become employed in town as a typist, with no experience whatever and without invested capital, was earning \$15 a week, or nearly \$800 a year, almost twice what Ole was earning for his labor during that period."

Wealth was being stolen from farms, and was diverted into the industrial economy.

Capitalists were amassing vast

paper fortunes through stock transactions. Industries were pyramided atop each other. New trusts coalesced. Huge manufacturing enterprises were created on paper with no assets to back them up.

mense interests debts. They are forced to sell corn at half of what it costs to produce.

Farmers have been able to expand since 1974 only when the price of land has increased—a paper rise. Their equity has

The stock collapse of 1929 was preceded by nearly a decade of farm depression.

Wealth had become abstract. The industrial economy believed money could be made from paper. To finance this myth, wealth had to be stolen from someone else. Wealth was stolen off the farms.

Now, the same processes are at work. Corporations are merging with each other, producing paper growth with no increase in productivity. Farmers toil long hours just to pay off im-

been dwindling away.

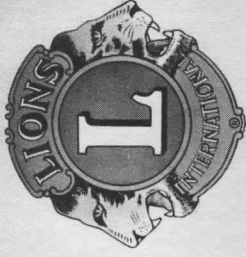
Farmers are now raising more debt than food. When the producers of wealth go into debt, everyone suffers. Small towns lose their economic health. Forty percent of Minnesota's economy is based in agriculture. When farms slide, the rest of us are in jeopardy. Grassroots health needs parity prices.

This is certainly not a complete account of the rural community around Green Isle. These tales focus on certain groups of neighbors and not others. In particular, this centers on the men who have farmed in one neighborhood, who come together even though they are members of different churches and different farm organizations. The women of this neighborhood play an important part in the farm economy, one that is only suggested here. But that is another story—one which deserves telling in its own terms.

The

Green Isle

Lions say:



PAIN PROVES

YOU ARE ALIVE



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