

Introduction

Rich Barley in the Corn

Tucked into the corners of Minnesota are many green jewels. Amid biologically simplified acres of corn and soybeans in the southwest, on the steep karst slopes of the southeast, or perched on thin rocky soils near Duluth are the gems of small creative farms. Some call themselves *sustainable*, some “CSA,” some *organic*. Some farms sell shares of vegetables. Some are creameries or dairy farms where cows eat grass. Most families on such farms, however, would agree about one diverse crop they have raised in the past twenty years—their children. The children of those families who have made the shift to sustainable agriculture reflect the plant varieties, the soils, and the imaginations of their parents. These are the young people about whom (and *with* whom) I write.

I met their parents first, and I met them mostly in the meeting rooms of St. Paul or Minneapolis. Patient men and women, they explained the choices made on their farms and they taught hundreds of us—urban workers in an agriculture movement—about farm economies and farm life. Endless meetings (and uncounted hours on the road surrounding each meeting) might have sucked the creative energy right out of this group of individuals, but not so. Now, at least a quarter-century after the words “sustainable” and “agriculture” were put together in Minnesota, many of these farmers are thriving. They sell quality yogurt at farmers’ markets in the Twin Cities. They sell squash stored for winter to members of a community-supported agriculture (CSA) group. They distribute quality meats directly to local restaurants or



even through churches. All the while, they have created a movement and helped to sustain the land while they create and sustain a half dozen distinct nonprofit organizations and an institute sitting on the University campus. And all along for the past couple dozen years, children of these leaders were growing up, making hay, arguing at dinner tables, and forming lifelong values.

Deb Lentz

Who are these children? I asked myself this past year. Where do they now live? Did they go to college and what did they make of that experience? Did they stay with the principles of sustainable agriculture once preached around their kitchen tables or did they reject them? Did they burn out on farm chores or do they want to farm as adults? Do they live in the country or in cities? Perhaps they took their values and mixed them in a whole new alchemy, as each generation is bent on doing.

One thing becomes quite clear, after fourteen interviews and hundreds of miles traversing the state of Minnesota. The crop of children raised by these creative farm families mirrors at least one of the principles of sustainability—diversity. They are a testament to diversity, and a testament to fair mindedness, foresight, thoughtful transitions into and out of college years, and leadership—yes, the clear beginnings of a diverse new leadership in our state.

A Sustainable Agriculture Movement

For the past two or three decades, individuals on the land, in towns, or within organizations have been creating and then working inside a movement that verifies the word “sustainable.” To clarify this term, I quote Paul Gruchow, a Minnesota writer who died in February of 2004. Said Paul, from *Minnesota: Images of Home* (1990):

“It is no more possible to plunder the earth, as we now do, and to make a home here in the long run than it would be for us to heat a house by burning its shingles and its siding and to stay warm and dry for long. Our farming has to be sustainable—it has to honor, to preserve and protect the biological house in which we live—or it cannot possibly sustain us in the years to come.” (page 82)

Farmers and farm organizations, butchers and grocers, academics and scientists have taken on the principles of this movement for sustainable agriculture. As urban eaters we also have recognized—shocked one day looking in the mirror in the morning—that our *own* lifestyles must change. Our own eating habits and buying habits

must change if we are to stop burning the shingles off of our very own homes.

It was in the 1970s or early 1980s that the words “sustainable” and “agriculture” were first put together. This phrase basically means farming in ways that don’t burn those shingles one by one, that don’t foul our own nests—choose your metaphor. It means farming (and eating) with the health of the land in mind, leaving it better than when you started, farming (and eating) with the future in mind.

A belief that this style of farming was preferable followed land reform and back-to-the-land movements that spoke of “regenerative agriculture” and began with the words of writers such as Liberty Hyde Bailey, Louis Bromfield, or Rachel Carson. The movement was later spurred by writers and leaders such as Wendell Berry, the Rodales with their *Organic Farming* magazine in the 1970s, and Wes and Dana Jackson at the Land Institute in Salina, Kansas.

By the time I entered this movement, a cadre of nonprofit organizations was forming, fed on abundant local and regional philanthropy of the 1970s and 1980s. Included were the Land Stewardship Project, the League of Rural Voters, the Minnesota Project, the Minnesota Food Association, Organic Growers and Buyers Association, the Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy, the National Campaign for Sustainable Agriculture, and others, some that did not fall in my path, or some I may have forgotten. Then MISA (the Minnesota Institute for Sustainable Agriculture) was crafted as these organizations strode into the halls of the University of Minnesota asking for new research and curricula. There

were joint programs like the Sustainers' Coalition representing the community side of MISA, and projects that became organizations, such as Clean Up our River Environment (CURE) with its focus on the Minnesota River, or the Sustainable Farming Association of Minnesota with its focus on quality small-scale farming.

Because of the location of funding or research or an educational audience, this was sometimes an urban-based movement that demanded much time of Minnesota's farmers. Overlapping segments of the movement needed farmers who would listen and lecture, design and advise. It requested field trip experiences for students, trips to Washington, DC, and on-farm field days teaching other farmers. Within a decade, more was probably asked of Minnesota's creative farmers than ever before, and their farm operations, their chore schedules, even their kitchen-table conversations reflected these demands.

Who Were the Children?

I worked in St. Paul during the 1990s, often calling meetings that required farmer involvement. We tried to consider harvest schedules and daytime driving schedules, but few of us asked about the children. We were ever so appreciative when Dave Minar or Dwight Ault or Ralph Lentz or DeEtta Bilek or Carmen Fernholz would show up for a meeting, speak wisely as always, and still be able to get home to do chores. But how many of us actually imagined families eating dinner with one parent while the other one drove dark highways? Did we imagine hungry animals or chores done at ten o'clock? How many of us actually considered who *was* doing the chores? Was it a spouse or sons and daughters? In short,

the sustainable agriculture movement demanded a lot from farm families and may not have given enough back.

The *Time, Soil, and Children* project idea was born in late 2002. I had had the pleasure of writing a chapter for Dana and Laura Jackson's book, *The Farm as Natural Habitat* (Island Press, 2002). My chapter (16) is called "A Refined Taste in Natural Objects" and it addresses the underlying issue of motivation—why some restore the land while others do not. When reading from this one evening at a public gathering, I was asked about the next generation. It all comes down to loving the land, I dared to state in the final paragraph of that chapter: "Can we refuse to diminish this powerful word (love) as too soft? Can we nurture elements in our own lives or our children's lives that become the foundation for a loving attachment to the earth?" A colleague then asked a question that took it deeper: "What about the foundation under that attachment? What *about* the children of the sustainable agriculture movement," he asked. "Do they carry on their parents' commitment and creativity with the land? If they do, why do they? Is creativity something inherited or contagious?" We talked about the ways that children were motivated by or maybe were motivators *within* the movement, and I determined this would be a key question for the future of the land, and one to explore further. The next January, with the help of the MISA grant through the Endowed Chair project, this book idea was born.

"MISA" is the Minnesota Institute for Sustainable Agriculture. The School of Agriculture Endowed Chair in Agricultural Systems was created in 1995. The Chair

identifies major issues in agriculture and selects individuals and teams to occupy the chair for varying lengths of time. Actually, it's more of a "bench" than a chair each year. During 2003/04, the group included Jim Riddle, working to address challenges faced by organic livestock producers, Debra Elias Morse and Steve Morse, working on perennial cropping systems, and me.

The Families Involved in This Project

The following list evolved naturally from my own Rolodex, with generous help from Dr. Mary Hanks of the Minnesota Department of Agriculture Energy and Sustainable Agriculture Program and other colleagues. In each case, a family made choices to stay on the land and farm it sustainably. I met with the second generation of these farm families:

★ **Audrey Arner and Richard Handeen**, organic beef farmers on Moonstone Farm, Montevideo, Minnesota. For two decades, Audrey also worked with the Land Stewardship Project in Montevideo. I interviewed their daughter, Malena Arner Handeen and Malena's husband, Mike Jacobs. They run *Easy Bean Farm*, a CSA near Milan, Minnesota.

★ **David and Sally Anne Benson**, organic crop farm called MeadowLark Farm, Bigelow, Minnesota (near Worthington). David has been County Commissioner for Nobles County for some time. I spoke with their daughter, Heather Greeley Benson, now teaching environmental education and gardening to children in San Francisco.

★ **DeEtta and Tom Bilek**, Aldrich, Minnesota. DeEtta spent years as the sole statewide staff member of the Sustainable Farming Association of Minnesota. Theirs is a diversified crop and livestock farm, certified organic. I interviewed their daughter, Amanda Bilek, on staff at the Minnesota Project.

★ **Carmen and Sally Fernholz**, Madison, Minnesota, organic small grains and farrow-to-finish hog operation. Carmen was the first chair of the MISA Board, and is a leader in the organic certification realm. I interviewed Carmen's two daughters, Katie Fernholz and Connie Carlson, and one of his sons, Craig. Connie works at Hazelden Publishing and is starting a small theater company called Theater Liminia. Katie now works with Dovetail Partners, Inc. on sustainable forestry. Craig currently builds sets at the Guthrie Theater in Minneapolis.

★ **John and Jane Fisher-Merritt** run an organic vegetable CSA near Wrenshall, Minnesota (100+ summer shares plus poultry/eggs). They are leaders in season extension using greenhouses. I interviewed their son, Janaki Fisher-Merritt, now working on the home farm and living in the area.

★ **Bonnie and Vance Haugen**, Spring Side Dairy Farm near Canton, Minnesota. Specialty cheeses and butter. I interviewed their daughter, Inga Haugen, now attending Concordia College, Moorhead.

★ **Tim and Jan King**, Long Prairie, Minnesota. I interviewed their son, Colin. Tim writes and raises garlic and was a founder of the Whole Farm Co-op in Long Prairie, among many other community and cross-cultural

projects in central Minnesota. Colin works as policy researcher for Nukewatch, working against nuclear proliferation.

★ **Ralph Lentz**, Lake City, Minnesota. Once an agriculture teacher, Ralph uses management intensive grazing for his beef herd, and is part of the SE Food Network. He also teaches streamside management. I interviewed his daughter, Deborah. She and her husband, Richard, run Tantre Farm, an organic CSA near Ann Arbor, Michigan.

★ **Dwight and Becky Ault** of Austin, Minnesota. Dwight was a founding member of the Minnesota Food Association and raises hogs using a modified Swedish system. I interviewed their daughter, Melissa Ault MacKimm. Melissa, married to John, is home raising son, Ian, at this time.

★ **Dave and Florence Minar**, Cedar Summit Farm, New Prague, Minnesota. The Minars went to grass-based dairying, and recently opened an on-site creamery. They also raise hogs for direct marketing, sell beef, and are in the process of going organic. I interviewed their son Mike Minar and his wife, Merrisue, both currently working in the dairy operation.

★ **Phil Rutter** of Badgersett Farm (woody agriculture) near Canton, Minnesota. Phil is a researcher and farmer, developing hazelnut varieties on his farm that are more suitable to Minnesota's climate. I interviewed Phil's eldest son, Brandon. Brandon and wife, Sandra, live near Cleveland where Brandon is finishing his Ph.D. in mechanical engineering, in bio-robotics.

★ **Jim and LeeAnn Van Der Pol** of Kerkhoven, Minnesota. Pasture farrowing, hoop buildings for hogs and a deep straw system for winter farrowing. Direct marketing through "Pride of the Prairie." I talked with their son, Josh Van Der Pol and his wife, Cindy, who live and work on the home farmstead called Pastures A Plenty.

★ **Marge and John Warthesen** of Wabasha County, Minnesota. Diverse mid-sized farm. Marge uses a small acreage intensively to grow vegetables. Her CSA produces food for friends and family and also sells to the farmers' markets in Wabasha and Rochester. I spoke with their son, Adam Warthesen. Adam is now working in agricultural policy with the Land Stewardship Project.

Adam Warthesen as a teenager





**The Van Der Pols,
ca. 2000**

There's nothing balanced or empirically verifiable about this sampling of interviews, except that I tried to interview as many men as women from age 18-35. Of course, my main criteria was that they were children of families who made the shift from conventional to sustainable farming in Minnesota. I know my process was biased— the process of finding these interviewees likely put me in touch with those in some way dedicated to the field of agriculture.

The beauty of this list, if you're like me and know these surnames, is how they sound so good on the tongue as they expand naturally into the second generation. And it does not stop, of course! I met Madeline Carlson, Connie's daughter and Carmen Fernholz's granddaughter. There is Ian MacKimm, grandson to Dwight Ault and son of Melissa. Then there are Hazel and Arlo, children of Malena and Mike—little ones who call Audrey Arner "Grandma." Or you hear the names Jacob and Andrew Van Der Pol or Nicholas Minar, and realize we are talking about active boys growing up inside the same strong families, inside the same strong values.

Kirsten Van Der Pol, age three at the time of the interview, knows that she was born inside a unique farm family. On Kirsten's bedroom wall hangs the Renewing the Countryside 2003 calendar, perpetually turned to the month of October, with its color photo of her with her family.

In all, from within the 14 interviews of the second generation, I already count 11 in the third generation. I witness values and experiences—a calling and a responsibility—extending gracefully on in time.