

The Meaning of Work

Certainly in the Midwest, if not all across America, our work defines us. “What do you do?” the new person at the party will be asked. We work early and often and into the late hours and late years of our lives. This theme arose in all the interviews—a theme about work—kinds of work, attitudes about physical work, and lessons learned while working. I noted that these young people, when asked about their growing up years, would begin with stories of work. It often seemed the most memorable moments were working ones.

“First thing that comes to mind about growing up in our family is all the chores we had to do,” says Connie (Fernholz) Carlson, who grew up near Madison, Minnesota. **“I remember distinctly complaining about it, and getting my siblings to do it for me. We pulled weeds, gardened, put up food . . .”** ❖

“Back then, we had an idea that you had to feed cows, fix fence . . .” recalls Deborah Lentz. **“You had to do chores or else the world wasn’t running. It was real life.”** ❖

Life on MeadowLark Farm was incredibly varied, as Heather Benson remembers it. **“My favorite times were in summers, even though it was all really really hard work. I have fond memories of when we still gathered in loose hay on the hayrack and brought it into the barn. My grandfather was working, plus the older cousins. We had a team of horses and we’d hook up this elaborate pulley system. It**



Ralph Lentz herding in the cows

was dangerous, at least my grandfather would always tell us stories about when he nearly lost a finger from a different machine. But I remember the smell of the fresh hay and the tension in our work as we tried to pull it all in before a thunderstorm. As kids, we would relay instructions from the inside team to the outside team. It was so great to get to work with the workhorses.

“Then I also remember riding with my Grandpa on the manure spreader. Here we also used the horses and it was so quiet and fun, even though you’d occasionally get splotted with a cow pie!”

Now, Heather realizes, **“It seems I’m always working on projects inside intense community.”** ❖

“Once you start, you finish.”

Colin King reflects on the meaning of work. **“It’s more of an ideology, and the core of it is—once you start a project you have to finish it.”** Growing up on a farm and often with three generations on the land, work and learning



Heather Benson, age 4 or 5, on Meadowlark Farm with father David and workhorse Percherons, Molly and Nellie

new skills went hand in hand. Colin continues, "In varying degrees my grandparents influenced my concept of work and what 'good work' is. I spent a lot of my childhood working on my grandparents' dairy farm and watching my Grampa work with his hands. I learned a lot. It took awhile, but as a result of watching him and being around a person who had the confidence to take a machine apart, I taught myself auto mechanics." ❖

Brandon Rutter's folks brought two boys up in their own back-to-the-land lifestyle of the mid-1970s, in southeast Minnesota. Brandon describes differences in their life and how work wove its way into all of it. "Well, let's say it was a while before we discovered Saturday morning cartoons. We were rather off the grid. We had kerosene lamps until I was three or four and by the mid-1980s we had solar panels on the roof with lights and a TV—a nine-inch black and white," Brandon recalled. "We learned the trade-offs. For

instance, if you watched too many cartoons on a cloudy day, you'd have to go to bed early because you had run the house batteries down too far. We pretty much worked together outdoors. I remember when I was quite young playing in the dirt near the garden while my parents worked. Later, we weeded and we were always helping out. I loved everything and I worked a lot. We were quite grown up by the age of 14 or 15, compared with my peers." ❖

Farm life has a way of redefining ages and stages of a child's development. Craig Fernholz spoke at length about the work he did on the Madison, Minnesota, farm. It both taught him and had the potential of driving him away from farming. "Well, I was the youngest, so basically I could let everyone else go before me, and see what they'd done. My brother, Chris, worked on the farm . . . Chris and I . . . well, I first started working out in the barn when I was six. Chris and I worked together in the barn for about two years only, and then he graduated, so then basically it was Dad and I. By the time I was eight I'd really been involved in the whole goings on about the farm and everything. In fact, when I was nine, Dad took a job down in St. Paul as committee administrator for State Representative Glen Anderson so Dad was gone during the weeks and came home on weekends—for a whole year—and Chris was gone and my two sisters did not do barn or field work, so . . . sometimes I look back and ask, 'How did I do that?' Nine years old and here I am making sure everything's going through the barn all right.

"I didn't really have to worry about crops all that much, but the pigs . . . at the time we had a 60-sow farrow to finish operation. I think there's a reason why I never took a job out in the real world until I was a sophomore in college,

because it felt to me that since I was eight I'd been working the whole time! Looking back, I wonder how the heck I managed to get through all that.

"The hardest thing was to guess when to bring the pregnant sows in . . . you had to closely watch them. Dad had taught me that they start making their nest and such. As soon as they start doing that, you get them into a pen where they can have the piglets by themselves. I'd say 75 percent of the time I was right on. I'd put them in and maybe two days later they'd give birth. But there'd always be a couple times where you'd finish up chores that evening and the next evening here's all these little piggies running around and 'Oh no!' And there's the rush to grab them all and put them in a bucket and put them in the pen and get the mother in there . . .

"Sure, we lost some pigs that way. Some would get stomped on . . . a little piglet about this big among 400 pound sows and boars? That's why you'd always want to watch them really closely.

"I actually did come to hate it. I dreaded going out there every single day. I remember one time, for some reason I didn't do chores until after dark, and heck, I was nine years old, still kinda scared of the dark you know, and I did not want to go out there at all because in one section of the barn none of the lights worked, so you had to go in there with a flashlight. There would be all these pigs running around making noise . . . your mind starts working overtime. I did not want to go out there—fastest chores I ever did on record.



**Brandon and
Perry Rutter
digging in field,
summer 1989**

"But looking back, it's really not as bad as I remember. If anything, I'd say . . . well, I was nine and already learning about responsibility. If it needs to be done, get it done. Maybe I had to grow up a little bit quick?" ❖

Melissa
MacKimm
and her
cousin Sue

“One summer we did almost a thousand chickens.”

“We’d get up and get started on Saturday about seven o’clock in the morning,” remembers Amanda Bilek, “and my dad was always the executioner, I guess you’d say. He had a contraption we called the ‘Wheel of Misfortune’ with ten metal cones hanging upside down. You could put the chicken in there and the opening at the bottom was wide enough so their head and neck fit through. All you’d do is just slit their throats and the blood would run out of them a lot quicker; we felt it was a more humane death. My dad also has a chicken plucker and we’d do the wing feathers and my mom would do the pinfeathers. We had about three or four stations set up. My Great Aunt Ida would dress and gut the birds and then they’d soak in a bulk tank full of cold water. One summer we did almost a thousand chickens, which was bizarre for that time. We didn’t have to pay help, the Great Aunts seemed happy to just come over and visit and help out. This was nice for me too because my grandparents on both sides died before I was five, so it was nice to be around those elderly people who had ties with my grandparents and I really got to know them.”

Amanda remembers more hard work: “Baling hay was a lot of hard work,” she recalls. “One summer I remember we put up about 10,000 bales of hay!” ❖

Inga Haugen’s Saturdays on Spring Side Dairy farm were workdays too, but like Amanda and Heather, Inga speaks of them fondly. “A typical Saturday always involved work, determined by that day’s weather. We would have breakfast together as a family and plan out the day. Was it time to make wood or time to plant? —lots of communication as



we ate. I was often the one to make runs to town and pick up all the stuff needed for that weekend’s projects.” ❖

“I couldn’t go to school smelling like a barn.”

“Mornings were madness,” remembers Melissa MacKimm of her years growing up near Austin, Minnesota. “I’d be complaining that it was 6:30 and we had to get up in the middle of summer to go bean-walking. Furious that it’s summer, and the kids in town get to go swimming and this is what we have to do. There also were often chores before school started in the mornings. I remember that I had to make sure I had enough time, because I couldn’t go to school smelling like a barn. My world would fall apart if that happened.”

Remembering the summers— “I’m the youngest and only girl with three older brothers.” Melissa continues, “We were closer to Austin and 15 miles away from Blooming Prairie where all my school friends were, so when school got out for the summer, I didn’t see them for three months. Oh there might be a miscellaneous birthday party or something, but for the most part, I didn’t see my friends for three months. For that period of time, my brothers were my family and my playmates, and that was unique, I think. We just entertained ourselves. And summers were not all fun; they were a lot of work. That’s when a lot of stuff happened.”

Like Amanda, Melissa remembers haying: “The hardest work was baling hay, yet we still do it. It is still fun, hard, and sweaty—long days and you feel so good when you’re done. Walking beans was hell, everybody just hated it. Walking through fields and pulling weeds. And we were pretty old fashioned in that I probably got off fairly easy being the only girl in the family. I helped my mom with a lot in the house. There was a lot of cooking to do for four kids and usually a farm hand or two.

“Once in while I had to put up fence. That was hard. Oh, and castrating pigs. Before we made the transition into animal welfare protocol we had to castrate pigs and that was hard work. It’s a unique experience, especially being a kid and not really fully comprehending what’s actually happening to that poor animal. Just last weekend, my niece who’s twelve was down there. My brother and I were laughing about when we used to have to do that, and she said, ‘What’s castrating pigs?’ And Dave looked at me like . . . how do I explain this? So we changed the subject.” ❖

“We had a car seat on the fender of the tractor.”

The stories about work went on in some detail. Maybe it’s unfair to ask a young person to reflect on the meaning of their lives—have enough experiences and comparisons gone by to make it possible? Yet I firmly believe it’s equally unfair that our culture *forgets* to ask young people to reflect on the meaning of their lives. They are close to the memories, and meaning comes in the telling. At any rate, on the question of work, some of those whom I interviewed could barely imagine the boundaries around that issue. Says Janaki Fisher-Merritt of Wrenshall, Minnesota: “Farming is such a frame of reference for me. It’s hard to call it a value or even an occupation. A lot of what I do applies to living here. This is what you do.

“At about age 14, the farm became my positive obsession. I’ve been totally curious about this for as long as I can remember. It’s hard to imagine something else. This is land management in the personal sense.

“When I was younger, my parents both worked in town. But all my life it’s been this—we had a car seat on the fender of the tractor. I’d fall asleep there.

“I don’t know what it is, but I’ve totally bought into the whole thing. I’ve taken ownership in that sense. It’s hard to separate me *buying into* Dad’s vision and me *affecting* his vision or this operation. It was not an intentional plan by my parents to involve me. But my parents did a good job of minimal affirmation.” ❖



**Inga Haugen
and dog in
pasture**

I'm sure Inga Haugen would agree that she also both bought into and affected the whole thing about Spring Side Dairy Farm: "I take pleasure in reading," says Inga, "but I must have dirt and animals. I must have my hands in dirt. I can feel the effect of the weather. You need to know how to work with the seasons. In town you get so disconnected. I'm into the smell of green growing things, a responsibility and respect ingrained . . . it makes me feel good." ❖

Work: One Rhythm in Our Lives

A small and less known book by Wendell Berry has stuck with me for over a decade. In the early 1990s, I picked up a copy of *The Hidden Wound*, then lost it. Recently, I bought a replacement. The message that sticks in my memory is Berry's way of talking about work.

In the late 1960s, Wendell Berry wrote this small book to trace, from the influence of two black people he grew up with, the development of his understanding of the damages of racism. He names one such damage as our separation from work and the meaning of work. I quote here from his Chapter 12:

"As the white man has withheld from the black man the positions of responsibility toward the land . . . so he has assigned to him as his proper role the labor, the thousands of menial small acts by which the land is maintained, and by which men develop a closeness to the land and the wisdom of that closeness. For the lack of that closeness and wisdom the white man has suffered and is suffering more than he has admitted, more probably than he knows . . ."

Berry continues to describe the dual relationships to the land and to work. One was abstract, the other physical, and the laborer "developed the emotional resilience and equilibrium and the culture necessary to endure and even enjoy hard manual labor . . ."

Those passages stuck deeply with me, and I have dog-eared the pages and underlined the words that first surprised me. I had not fully understood what we gave up as a race when we gave up menial work. Much of our culture systematically lost the equilibrium of work and the culture to endure manual labor. Had we given up one of our deepest connections to the land itself? It seems we not only gave that up, we institutionalized the disconnection.

As I relate this to Inga Haugen's words, I'm struck that the farm families whom I was privileged to meet this past year have *not* forgotten that culture of connection to work or connection to land.

An idea coming to me in part because of Berry's book and in part stemming from my own life experience is that this connection is not intellectual, but is one that is buried somewhere in the body. By putting the rhythm of real work—farm work—back into the picture, we restore one honest body connection to all life. We create muscle memories. The hands know how to hold a hoe; the feet know how to spade soft soil. It is possible that the work itself—the rhythm of daily chores, seasonal rhythm of planting or harvesting and birth to death rhythm of the animals—creates in a young person an inner reality that must then *always* be dealt with. Later, those urges we refer to—the seemingly inexplicable urges—may instead be simply the harvesting of this muscle memory, an inner connection ensured by work.

"If I don't have some connection to the dirt, I'll go nuts!"
declares Inga Haugen. ❖

Seeing Changes on the Land

Paul Gruchow, hailing from Worthington, Northfield, or Two Harbors, Minnesota, once painted the picture of rural education and "what we teach rural children." An essay by this name, first a 1990 lecture at St. Mary's College in Winona, was published as a chapter in *Grassroots: the Universe of Home*.

"The point is that rural children have been educated to believe that opportunity of every kind lies elsewhere and that the last half century's rural experience of failure and decline has been largely due to the incompetence, or irrelevance, of rural people."

Gruchow wrote against "any economy that sees people as an expendable resource," and exposed any number of myths driving such an economy. He may have shocked the audience at St. Mary's College in 1990, saying "These are lessons we teach our rural children today: that their parents were expendable and that their duty is to abandon their dreams and become cogs in the industrial machine . . . [furthermore, that] if they expect to amount to anything, they had better leave home."