

Rebels in Farm Country

Whether it was determined by chisel plows, chore schedules and daily decisions about the land, or food choices made at home, there was a difference in these sustainable farm families. The children knew it, and being different was not always easy.

Heather Benson, who recalled working with horses, again reflects on community: **"There was this intent in the Benson family—to stay with community. Maybe it was an economic factor in that we didn't have the money for separate machinery, but also the camaraderie and bigger meaning of it."** ❖

"We were not afraid of being poor," remembers Connie (Fernholz) Carlson. **"We never had *stuff*."** ❖

Connie's sister, Katie Fernholz, reflects on the whole picture of work, resources, pride, and what makes a family believe in itself. **"There's an obstinance to it. Mom sewed all our clothes [in the 1980s], and did our haircuts . . . and we grew to believe it to be the best. It's not different, it's *better*. We ground wheat into flour in our own basement! Picked strawberries, washed and sold eggs . . . It was a different world and we were raised to believe that this life was something to be proud of."** ❖



Says Malena Arner Handeen: **"I knew by our foods and such that they were so different from mainstream culture that I didn't know what was going on [outside of that]."** ❖

**Tom Bilek,
son, Joe and
daughter,
Amanda**

Amanda Bilek, the one who helped butcher 1,000 chickens one summer, simply understood a farm-based reality. **"At home there were always conversations about things like why was dad having this soil test done on the fields. I remember when I was in college and we were talking about the dead zone in the Gulf of Mexico and why it was a problem with all these fertilizers running off. There were about seven people in my class and no one got it, no one understood why or how it could be that fertilizer in which we grow our food could be causing such harm. It didn't make any sense to them. For me, it was just obvious. I've always known that fertilizers overused and not used properly are disastrous to the environment."** ❖

Early in life, Brandon Rutter learned about soils. "My parents' noting of the soil erosion on our land was one of the main things that led to the woody agriculture concept. They looked at USGS soil survey maps [mostly made in the 1950s], which reported around 12 inches of topsoil on some of our hills, and as they compared soil depth in the late 1970s, an alarming portion of that topsoil was gone. Then it seemed by reading later USGS soil surveys that, officially, soil loss was almost acceptable. When I found that out, we were appalled all over again; this showed a lack of thinking beyond the next 50 years, as far as our food supply is concerned." ❖

Craig Fernholz, the one who did farm chores at the age of six, describes his family's farm: "Even though organic has turned really big now, that farm is still unique. If you drive from Minneapolis out to Madison along Highway Seven, you see corn and soybeans, corn and soybeans, along the whole way. As soon as you get to about a mile away from our house, you see corn and soybeans, wheat, barley, flax, oats, corn, soybeans, wheat, barley—and alfalfa fields. And it is so different. I look for the change when driving home." ❖

Melissa MacKimm also notes the difference of her (Ault) family's land and lifestyle: "When our farm changed into a sustainable farm, there were hard moments . . . I remember initially when the crops didn't look as nice as the field next to them because of our different methods. Of course it was all new, the equipment was new, and the methods had not been tested all that much, and there was peer pressure coming from the outside. I know it was hard on my one brother [Grant]. That was tough on him for a long time; he wanted to be proud of what he was seeing. He was proud



of the sustainable part of it and didn't want people to say, 'see, it's not working.'

"And like I said before," Melissa continues, "being the rebel in this really conservative farm community . . . my dad always asked questions, and sometimes would do things, I think, to spite the conventional farming community. And now I so appreciate that, and I have that in me too. All of us have a little piece of that, I probably have the most. But at the time that was hard." ❖

Say Katie and Connie (Fernholz sisters) about their growing up years: "We've never given in to peer pressure.

Young Adam
Warthesen,
splitting
wood

We couldn't afford the latest clothing styles, but we had our way of doing things and never were much impressed with name brand items. We do what feels right." ❖

In every case, this difference led to a family pride. Adam Warthesen said it well when I asked him about his hopes for the next generation. **"One of the things I always think about as we bequeath this world on to the next generation, is it in a more positive light than the way we received it? You know what? On my mom and dad's farm, it is. On a factory farm in SW Minnesota? I don't think so." ❖**

Katie's voice again: **"We knew it was stubborn. Was it noble? We had a sense that our dad was a hero [his stories of France in 1987 . . .] Back then, we resented much of that, but he certainly gave us the idea that there were bigger causes out there." ❖**

For the record, Carmen Fernholz was part of a delegation of farmers traveling to Geneva in 1987. They met with a consortium of European farmers while the GATT talks (General Agreements on Tariff and Trade) were going on. Later Carmen also went to Brussels for a conference on biotechnology and to Paris, France.

Craig Fernholz reflects about changes in his family over time. **"I've been noticing in the last couple of years how our family members differ. Katie and Dad! Oh man, the discussions. Watching them talk about politics and forestry is like watching two boxers who really respect each other but have to fight it out 'til someone wins. Now it shifts some. Dad goes to Katie for tips about forestry, Chris about cars, and he talks to me about carpentry or furniture . . . or theatrical sets." ❖**