

# **Generational Issues in Iowa Farm Communities**

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## **I. Introduction**

Iowa has been an agricultural landscape for the last 150 years. The Iowa farm landscape is currently managed and inhabited by farmers who cultivate the land and further enliven and enhance rural communities throughout the Midwest. However, this farm force is not only dwindling in number but also increasing in age. According to the 2007 U.S. Census of Agriculture, a study completed by the United States Department of Agriculture, the average age of farmers in the United States in 2007 was 57.1 years (Census of Agriculture: Iowa Count 2007). In Poweshiek County, the average age of farmers is even older: 58 years (Census of Agriculture. County Profile: Poweshiek Count 2007: 2). Nationally, between 2002 and 2007, the number of farmers seventy-five years or older grew by 20 percent and the number of farmers under twenty-five years of age decreased by 30% on the national level (Census of Agriculture: Demographics 2007:2). According to the Iowa State Extension Service, in 2002, there were only 54 people under 35 years of age who worked as principal farm operators in Poweshiek County and further, there were 249 farm operators who were over 65 years of age. In Iowa as whole, principal farm operators under the age of 35 numbered only 6,151 people while those over 65 numbered 22,391 people (Iowa State University Extension Service 2002: 1) According to Fred Kirschenmann, Distinguished fellow at the Leopold Center for Sustainable Agriculture, in the United States, thirty percent of farmers are over sixty, while only five percent are under thirty (Census of Agriculture Demographics 2007:6).

Several sociological studies report that older farmers are discouraging their children, who have inheritance rights to their land, from pursuing farming (Bell 2004: 52; Keating and Munro 1989:216). Michael Mayerfield Bell notes that some farmers he has interviewed in his research in Iowa have said that encouraging their children to get into farming is “a form of child abuse”

(Bell 2004: 52). Such sentiments reflect the common fear of older farmers that young farmers will not find financial or social success in farming.

Iowa demographics indicate that farmers are an aging population of workers who are not being replaced by young people. This phenomenon of aging farmers threatens the foundation of family farms that Iowa has depended on throughout the past century. The family farm may continue to decline in prevalence given the increasing number of aging farmers in Iowa and the small number of young people entering the field. If Iowa is to maintain the identity of its farm communities, public policy and non-governmental programs must incentivize the farming profession by granting resources to young people who do not have access to land and capital so they can start farming. Ultimately generational issues are tied to systemic issues which are a part of the American farm system. Combating generational issues, in the end, will require the revitalization movement that changes the way that America farms.

This topic of generational transfer in Iowa farm communities raises significant cultural, economic, and political questions. As fewer young people return to conventional farming, farms will likely get larger and more consolidated, which will bring about greater industrialization and the potential death of the family farm. Additionally, young people who are interested in farming but do not have inheritance rights to land face a situation where it is nearly impossible to enter large scale farming without significant capital and credit. Because of the large financial roadblocks inherent in entering large-scale farming, Iowa may see conventional, commodity based farming getting larger with consolidation while some young, land-less people enter farming through alternative farming routes. Regardless, the issues of aging farmers and a lack of a land-rich young farm force raise significant concerns in terms of the cultural reproduction of Iowa agriculture as we know it. In this paper I will address issues of generational transfer in

Iowa farm communities based on interviews I conducted with Grinnell area farmers, the children of farmers attending Grinnell College and Iowa State University, and telephone interviews with others around the state. I bring to bear on this evidence the analytical tools of Marxist analysis, cultural reproduction theory, post-modernism, and Anthony Wallace's revitalization theory..

## **II. Methods:**

I conducted twenty-two interviews with people living in the Grinnell area. I interviewed ten farmers who work in or around Grinnell, Iowa. I spoke with ten Grinnell College students and two Iowa State University students who are children of farmers. I also spoke with Fred Kirschenmann, Distinguished Fellow at the Leopold Center for Sustainable Agriculture at Iowa State University who is himself a farmer in North Dakota as well a policy expert and academic. I also spoke with Luke Robert Gran, the manager of new farmer programs at Practical Farmers of Iowa. Profiles of my informants appear in Appendix I. I located my informants through connections that my adviser, Jon Andelson, and I have within Grinnell, Iowa. My interviews were informal in nature and lasted approximately thirty minutes to an hour and a half. I conducted interviews with my informants at their homes and at various public places in the town of Grinnell. I also conducted four telephone interviews with informants who live in other areas in Iowa. The interviews, revolving loosely around a set of interview questions found in the Appendix II, focused on the consultant's experiences with agriculture, their opinions about generational transfer in Iowa farm communities, and their prescriptions for the future of agriculture in Iowa. All of my informants signed an informed consent form or, in the case of phone interviews, went through a verbal consent process.

## **III. Theoretical Perspectives:**

This paper utilizes multiple theoretical perspectives to unpack the issues involved in the

generational transfer of the Iowa family farm. In this section, I will provide a brief background about these various theories to help the reader understand the context of this paper.

Marxism analyzes society via the modes of production that make a given society function. In Marx's view, "the holders of wealth control the means of production, and the greater the capital at their command, the greater their ability to raise productivity and, hence, the greater their ability to accumulate further surplus for additional expansion of production" (Wolf 343). In the capitalist mode, the capitalists control the means of production and the laborers are denied independent access to the means of production (Wolf 1993:343). Commenting further on Marxian analysis, the anthropologist Douglas Foley notes: "Capitalist rulers and their cadre of intellectuals create explicit, conscious sets of ideas about politics, economics, aesthetics, and all aspects of social life. They portray capitalism as the final or universal solution to humanity's problem of materially surviving and prospering" (1990: 168). In this paper, I use Marx's perspectives to discuss the way that agriculture has become entrenched in the capitalist system and to illuminate how the capitalist system makes it difficult for farmers to both enter and exit the field.

Issues of power, so central to Marxist theory, are quite integral to postmodernist perspectives as well (McGee and Warms 1996: 354). Foucault discusses "discourses of power" and draws attention to the inherent power dynamics involved in all spheres of culture (Foucault 1982: 778; McGee and Warms 1996: 355). Generational issues in agricultural communities and concerns about the future of family farms call on issues of power. Who controls agriculture? How much power do farmers have? What systems of power are influencing farmers to discourage their children from entering the profession? And, who has power to decide what the next generation of Iowa agriculture will look like? I use the postmodern perspective to look at how power is

woven into the fabric of farming. The power structures inherent in government farm subsidies, consumer choice, and corporate agribusiness are central factors in this social phenomenon of an aging farm population combined with a small cohort of younger farmers. These power structures will play a large role in determining the future of the farm sector.

Cultural Reproduction Theory draws on Marxist theory and has traditionally has been used to explore the ways that class distinctions are reproduced from one generation to the next. Marxism examines economic reproduction while cultural reproduction theory focuses on the way that culture and society reproduces itself from one generation to the next. Douglas Foley writes in his book *Learning Capitalist Culture*, “reproduction refers to the perpetuation and expansion of a particular kind of society and production system over time” (1990: 188). In this paper, I turn classical cultural reproduction theory on its head by discussing what happens when cultures and societies fail to reproduce. In the case of Iowa agriculture, the current cultural framework is in danger of deterioration. The cultural reproduction of hegemonic identities is problematic, but, in this case, the lack of cultural reproduction is also problematic and causes great sadness and stress on the part of those who are a part of Iowa farm communities.

Revitalization theory helps define the ways that society changes when it experiences stress. The theory was defined by anthropologist Anthony F. C. Wallace who published an article called “Revitalization Movements” in *American Anthropologist* in 1956. Wallace defines a revitalization movement as a “deliberate, organized, conscious effort by members of a society to construct a more satisfying culture” (265). A revitalization movement has four stages, the first being the steady state, in which there is little stress about the society’s identity or trajectory. Second, there is the period of individual stress in which individuals start having greater and greater concern about a society. Wallace writes: “the culture may remain essentially unchanged

or it may undergo considerable changes, but in either case there is continuous diminution in its efficiency in satisfying needs” (269). Third, the society faces a period of cultural distortion in which “the culture is internally distorted; the elements are not harmoniously related but are mutually inconsistent and interfering” (269). Finally, after this internal and external stress, the society reaches a “period of revitalization” in which the society either deteriorates or becomes revitalized and reformulated. I use Wallace’s theory to help elucidate the feelings of many of my informants who believe that the current agricultural system has created an unsatisfactory society in rural Iowa, and further, that there is need for substantial political, economic, and cultural change to make both small town America and our society at large more effective and just.

#### **IV. The American Agricultural Landscape:**

Rows of corn and soybeans typify the landscape of the American Midwest. One of my informants said, “Driving through Iowa gives you a sense of how many corn and beans we have here. Just look around you. It’s corn on one side, beans on the other almost everywhere you go.” Iowa was once covered with prairie, but has been cultivated during the past 150 years by farmers. Originally, many farms in Iowa produced vegetables and other products on a small scale. Currently, the most common farms are large scale (500-3,000 acres) and produce corn and soybeans. While there are also small-scale, more alternative farms in Iowa, the majority of Iowa land is concentrated in corn and bean production. Gene<sup>1</sup>, a Grinnell area farmer says, “The Iowa landscape has changed a lot over the past one hundred and fifty years. We’ve gone from prairie to agriculture, and now to a new, more industrial form of agriculture.” Indeed, the current Iowa

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<sup>1</sup> In this paper, I use pseudonyms for each of my informants to preserve their anonymity. Please refer to Appendix I for a full list of the informants. I will not be using in text citations in this paper, but the dates of each interview conducted are in Appendix I. All interviews were conducted between January 27<sup>th</sup>-2010 and April 22, 2010.

agricultural system is concentrated in large scale, conventional farms that usually grown corn and soybeans (Holthaus 2006:206). For instance, in 1995, Iowa farmers produced 1.4 billion bushels of corn on 11 million acres and 398 billion bushels of soybeans on a little more than 9 million acres (National Resources Defense Council 1998).

The Marxian perspective can shed some light on the American farm system. Marx writes that the holders of wealth control the means of production. In the American agricultural system, various entities including the U.S. Government, national agribusiness companies, and the banking system work to control the means of food production. Federal farm policy and agribusinesses govern the farming system. The Farm Bill authorizes the subsidization of some commodities, and as such, fundamentally distorts the market. While various crops and goods receive subsidies, in Iowa, corn and soybeans are subsidized at high rates, making them the most economically viable crops for Iowa farmers to grow on a large scale. Subsidies allow farmers to receive government payments for goods like corn and soybeans while consumers pay lower than market prices for these goods. Neil, a Grinnell vegetable farmer who does not receive subsidies for his produce notes, "It's crazy! Because of subsidies a Twinkie [made using subsidized corn syrup and grain] costs less than a carrot. There's no reason why processed food should cost less than fresh food." The subsidy system dictates what farmers grow. Clare, the daughter of a Nebraska farmer, told me "corn and beans are the crops that allow [you] to make a living." Other farmers told me that they might grow different crops but the government makes it easy to grow corn and beans. In short, the government holds great power because it operates subsidy programs which distort the market, and influence the what farmers grow.

Another important player in Iowa agriculture and the system of commodity agriculture is agribusiness. Companies like Monsanto and DuPont aggressively market genetically modified,



disease- and pest-resistant corn and soybean seeds to farmers. Additionally, organizations like Tyson, Smithfield, and Hormel have great influence in the livestock markets. Not surprisingly, these companies have a large presence in the agricultural lobby on Capitol Hill and work to keep the interests of large-scale, commodity agriculture as the backbone of the Farm Bill when it is renewed every five years. In the Iowa agricultural system, Federal farm policy and agribusiness influence farmers, their business choices, and the farm landscape. Such factors bring to mind the Marxian perspective. In Iowa agriculture, while farmers do hold land and assets, they are not necessarily the “holders of wealth” in this system and do not control the means of production. Indeed, their wealth may very much be controlled by other parties, such as the government and agribusiness companies.

Federal policy, which is influenced by the agribusiness lobby, necessarily limits many Iowa farmers to grow certain commodities, most notably corn and beans. In order to financially survive as a corn and beans farmer in Iowa one must have a significant amount of land. According to several of the farmers I have spoken with, in order for farmers to run a profitable commodity crop operation they must have at least 500 acres of land in production; many farmers have significantly more. Dana and Clare, two sisters whose father farms in northeastern Nebraska, said that, at slightly more than 500 acres, their father’s farm “is too small to make much money.” Bill, a Grinnell area farmer said that his 800 acre corn and beans farm is “pretty small.”

In order to own such a large farm, one must own a great deal of machinery in order to plant, maintain, and harvest the crops. Thus, high levels of mechanization characterize large-scale, conventional farms. It is also difficult to maintain such a large farm without significant inputs. Thus, these farms also usually are input intensive, requiring applications of fertilizers,

herbicides, fungicides, and insecticides. Such inputs include fertilizers, herbicides, fungicides, and pesticides, which allow for the crops to thrive.

Land, machinery, and inputs are all expensive. Thus, the banks are also involved in the American agricultural system. Karen, the wife of a farmer who grows 1400 acres of corn and beans in Grinnell, tells me “farming is an exercise in being in debt.” Henry, a Grinnell area farmer says, “ The banks enable this kind of farming, because you can’t just afford to buy a \$750,000 combine or a few hundred acres of land. The bank gives us loans—they are an important part of this process.” Indeed, debt is a large part of the Iowa farm experience and without banking systems that give out farm loans, we would not have the agricultural landscape we have today. The banks had a clear role in the Farm Crisis of the 1980s where the government encouraged farmers to expand their landholdings, which lead to larger loans at the banks. Later, when commodity prices plunged, it was impossible for farmers to manage their huge debts, and the banks foreclosed. Scholars note that during this period, many farmers went bankrupt and had to lose their farms. The devastation of these events caused some farmers to hang themselves in their barns. (Ortega et al. 2010: 600) Several of my informants also mentioned the farm crisis. Dan, a contract hog farmer near Grinnell lost his family farm to the farm crisis. He notes, “My family felt a little betrayed. We lost our land because we were forced to get bigger and take out more and more loans.” Dan’s wife, Mary added: “The debt almost killed some people.” Indeed, the banks, so crucial to a capitalist system, have played a crucial role, both historically and currently in the functioning of the Iowa farm.

In addition to these players, Land Grant Universities are another part of the American Agricultural Systems. Institutions like Iowa State University provide agricultural education for young people interested in farming or researchers interested in crop genetics, agronomy, and soil

science. Many of these land grant universities receive funding from seed companies like Monsanto and DuPont. One of my informants said, “You might as well call Iowa State University Monsanto State University.” Funding from agribusiness corporations necessarily obligates these institutions to support and teach the agricultural practices associated with their products. Thus, these universities are yet another cog in the machine of agricultural systems, continuing to promote and reproduce the knowledge-base associated with this system.

In large scale farming operations, the government, agribusiness, the banks, and land grant universities control the means of production. Eric Wolf writes “the greater the capital at [the holders’ of wealth’s command] the greater their ability to raise productivity and, hence, the greater their ability to accumulate further surplus for additional expansion of production” (343). Indeed, in large scale, conventional farming, farmers have been driven to raise their productivity through the need to buy and maintain larger and larger farms and machinery. Additionally, the holders of wealth have dictated the crops that conventional farmers grow and the way that these crops are grown, since many seed varieties are coupled with pesticides and herbicides.

One of the tenets of Marxism is that the laborers are denied independent access to the means of production (Wolf 343). Mary, the wife of a hog farmer near Grinnell Iowa says, “We are a cog in the industrial machine. We don’t control anything.” Ted, a farmer from Marshall County agreed saying, “I receive government subsidy payments, I buy my seeds from Monsanto, I buy my tractors from John Deere. Everything is controlled by the corporations or the government.” Indeed, large scale farmers are a part of an industrial, corporatized system where their actions are dictated by forces larger than their own production.

These questions of control call to mind issues of power. Perhaps one of the most salient themes in the interviews was the issue of power. Who controls agriculture? Who controls our

food? Who controls land prices and machinery costs? These issues of power connect to the postmodern rhetoric, which astutely examines the ways in which power and bias enter the social frame. Issues of power are central to agricultural systems since farmers themselves control so little of agriculture. Mary, a woman whose husband does contract hog farming says, “ We don’t control anything. The government and agribusiness control agriculture. They control everything!” Additionally, agribusiness companies also hold a great deal of power. One of my informants says, “You could call Iowa Monsanto-ville if you really wanted.” Such sentiments reflect the power that entities like the U.S. Government and agribusiness have. Michel Foucault (1982) writes that those who have power define reality (780). Such is the case in agriculture where governmental entities and agribusiness help to define and control the reality of what it means to be a farmer in America.

#### **V. Concerns with Large-Scale, Conventional Farming:**

Though large scale, conventional farming is the modus operandi for agriculture in America, it is associated with a number of problems. My informants, consisting of both conventional and non-conventional farmers, were quick to note the environmental, health, social, and generational concerns inherent in large scale, conventional farming. Several people expressed worry about environmental issues since large scale farming often prioritizes high production over conservation of soil or water resources. Neil, a Grinnell area vegetable farmer says:

Right now we’ve only described efficiency as how many acres can one person cultivate or farm. But we don’t look at all at the environmental impact, we don’t look at all at biodiversity, we don’t look at all at issues affecting water quality, or what it looks like downstream. We also don’t look at all the calories of input for calories of output. So we burn ridiculous quantities of oil to produce quite miniscule quantities of food. Really, agriculture should be that you put a little energy in and you get a lot of energy out. We need to redefine efficiency.

Indeed, in a quest for economic productivity and efficiency, environmental care is sometimes lost. Ray, a Grinnell livestock farmer commented: “There are just a slew of environmental problems with industrial agriculture. There’s erosion, water pollution, soil quality issues.” Another informant said, “Conventional agriculture uses the ground like it’s replaceable.” Iowa farms are at least partially responsible for the hypoxic dead zone in the Gulf of Mexico. This dead zone, an area that is unlivable for many organisms, was created by runoff of nitrogen and phosphorus fertilizers from farms in the Midwest. (Malakoff 1998:1) Additionally, while my research has predominantly focused on crop farmers, many of my informants have noted the environmental and ethical issues inherent in large-scale animal production, noting that keeping animals in Confined Animal Feeding Operations (CAFOs) creates stress on water systems and does not create a satisfying life for the animals.

Second, several of my informants note that they have concerns about health because of large scale, conventional farms. Corn and soybeans are commodity crops—they are not produced for direct human consumption. Much of the corn and soybeans grown in this country are produced to feed animals. Much of the corn is used to produce high fructose corn syrup. Some worry that our reliance on these crops helps to encourage Americans’ meat eating habits. Additionally, high fructose corn syrup, an ingredient in many processed foods, is not healthy and can be a cause of the high obesity rates in America (Bray, Nielsen & Popkin 2004: 537). One of my informants, a Grinnell area farmer, says, “There’s no question why America is such an obese nation. High fructose corn syrup is in everything.” Additionally, others worry about meat and dairy production in America, worrying about the health effects of the hormones and antibiotics that many meat and dairy products contain.

Though there are several significant concerns with large scale, conventional agriculture, this paper will focus on generational issues in farming communities. As noted, Iowa farm communities are facing significant demographic change due to the increasing age of farmers and the lack of new farmers. Many children of conventional farmers are hesitant to return to farming for various reasons and because of the size and scale of farms in Iowa, it is hard for young people to enter the farm work force. Because of these challenges, Iowa farm communities are facing a lack of cultural reproduction of the family farm and agricultural lifestyles, which creates stress and sadness on the part of farmers, children of farmers, and small town residents.

## **VI. Generational Issues in Iowa Farm Communities**

The current age asymmetry present in Iowa farm communities has several origins. First, the increased mechanization of farming has allowed farmers to work later into their lives, which means that fewer workers are needed on a day to day basis. Second, many children of farmers, the traditional heirs of the profession, are looking towards other career paths due both to parental discouragement and to the perceived financial and physical burden of farming. Third, some young people are not interested in farming because the field has become less independent and less enjoyable, “knowledge intensive”, and finally, some people feel implicitly and explicitly discouraged from entering farm life because of the gendered nature of the profession.

Farming was once a labor intensive occupation. Gene, an Iowa farmer in his fifties told me, “farming has killed a lot of people—it’s worn a lot of people out”. In the past, it would not have been possible for people to continue farming thousands of acres into ones sixties or seventies. Ted, a man who farms in Marshall county, tells me “We don’t really need quite as many people in farming because of the equipment we have and the efficiencies we’ve gained” He notes that even fifty years ago, farming was a much for labor intensive process that involved

more people and wore people out. “You couldn’t just do that your entire life. It’s hard to bend over and weed fields all day—it’s just not much fun”. He goes on to note that it’s relatively easy to farm now: “you of course have to rely on the weather and the seasons, but it’s not as back breaking of a profession as it once was”. Indeed, the mechanization of farming has decreased the physical strain associated with the profession and allowed for an increasingly older set of people to maintain productive farms.

Farmers have been able to stay on the farm for longer because of the increasing mechanization of the agriculture, which makes farming less labor intensive. Farms have increased inputs including machinery, fertilizers, and chemicals, allowing the operations to get larger and allowing farmers to work later in to their lives. Complex and expensive machinery allows producers to put in less physical work during planting and harvesting time. Erica, a student at Grinnell College, tells me that her father has a tractor that uses a GPS system to map the contours of a field and plant seeds in the most efficient way. She tells me, “on a square field, you wouldn’t even need to be in the machine! It could literally drive itself”. Of course, such mechanization tends to take place on large scale farms; younger farmers often end up farming on smaller farms that cater to niche markets require more manual labor, according to Luke Robert Gran, the director of new farmer programs at Practical Farmers of Iowa.

As the children of farmers choose not to return to the farm, these choices create generational issues in Iowa farm communities. Traditionally, children of farmers inherit land from their parents and take over the family operation. This inheritance system endows children of farmers with an extraordinary opportunity, but also creates a burden for children of farmers. This structure of reproduction enables the system of family farming to continue from one

generation to the next. Such cultural reproduction has, in the past, been important in maintaining not only food and farming systems, but also small town culture.

However, evidence indicates that this cultural reproduction of family farming and rural communities may be at risk in Iowa and perhaps in other places. Keating and Munro's (1989) study found a tendency for farmers to discourage their children from entering farming because of the hard work and low financial gains that agricultural offers to most people. In my research, many of the young people with parents who farmed indicated that their parents had not encouraged them to enter the profession. Clare and Dana, two sisters who attend Grinnell College and whose parents farm in eastern Nebraska indicated that their father believes that "farming has gotten worse" and that he has thus never encouraged his daughters to enter the profession. Annie, a child of farmers in northeastern Iowa, indicated that her father discouraged her from farming because it was not a financially lucrative field. Other children of farmers confided that they had not experienced much encouragement to farm from their fathers and mothers throughout their time growing up. Valerie, another farm kid, told me that her father "didn't encourage my brothers [or me] to tag along—it was probably inefficient as hell to have a five year old tagging along and now that the farms are bigger, and that it's more about machines, it's more dangerous." Another young woman told me that she was uninterested in the field because she saw that both her father and uncle, who farm on a large operation in Northeast Iowa, are "slaves to the farm". Such a lifestyle seems uninteresting and unfruitful to her.

Many farmers told me that they did encourage their children to get into farming by having them help with day-to-day farm tasks and even encouraging them to attend schools with agronomy or agricultural sciences programs. Henry, a Grinnell farmer who has been farming since 1962, told me that he encouraged his children to get into farming, but only if it was



something they actually wanted to do. He notes, “Farming is not a job that you can jump into and out of. You need to be committed to it.” His encouragement has proven to be fruitful since his daughter and son-in-law are now returning to his farm to continue the family production in Grinnell.

Other children of farmers indicated that they simply are interested in other careers. This sentiment was particularly present among Grinnell College students who grew up on farms. When I asked one student whether he intended, now or later, to return to the farm he told me simply that he wanted to be an engineer and not a farmer. Annie, a Grinnell student who intends to attend medical school, told me that she has felt pressure to stay near the farm and potentially take it over, noting that this pressure is not a part of most of her friends’ lives. She asked me: “no one has ever assumed that you might go into your father’s profession, have they?” Farming is indeed a peculiar profession in that one inherits the job and does not earn it as one might get a degree.

When I asked children of farmers about why they were interested in pursuing engineering, medicine, and other non-agricultural career paths, several indicated the financial strain inherent in farming discouraged them, but others indicated that with increased inputs and industrialization of Iowa farming, it was not fun anymore. Elizabeth, a Grinnell College student, told me that farming was simply a means of “knowing how to manage money, debt, and machines. It is not about knowing the soil, the land, or the plants.” Fred Kirschenmann argues that as farming has become increasingly mechanized, it has turned away from being a “knowledge intensive” field. He notes that “knowledge intensive” farming cannot be done on an absentee basis, and it requires hard work and an understanding of the complexity of natural systems.

Michael Mayerfield Bell, a rural sociologist who studied Iowa farmers in the 1990s, writes that many of his informants believe that “the fun has gone out of farming.” While none of my informants explicitly told me that farming was not fun anymore, several indicated the increased strain that the profession put on their lives. Dan and Mary, two Grinnell residents who do contract hog farming, told me that they feel as if they are “simply a cog in the industrial machine” and that they worry about money a lot. Mary said, “It’s not about skills anymore. It’s about money.” Fred Kirschenmann said that conventional, commodity based farming does not use a knowledge of “biological synergies” and an understanding of the “dynamic use of resources” He said that conventional farming has become less about learning how to use resources dynamically and more about understanding machinery, land sales, and inputs.

Beyond all of these industry-wide factors that allow farmers to stay on the farm later into their lives and that make entering the field less appealing, there are other, more individual issues that complicate farm kids’ decision about taking over the farm. One such issue is familial strife that builds around passing on a family business. Sonya Salamon (1992) writes, “You can’t have two independent people running the same business” (148). My informants echo that statement—Elizabeth, a daughter of farmers who live in northeast Iowa, told me that her family experienced strife when her brother returned to the family farm. It has been hard for her brother and father to run a business together: her brother has different agricultural philosophies and such differences create issues not only on the farm but also in the family. Elizabeth herself is interested in potentially going back to take over her fathers’ cattle operation, but she seems wary about entering a situation that involves significant familial conflict.

Other informants agree that the family farm can become an arena of great stress and anger. Bill, a farmer in the Grinnell area, told me, “It’s sometimes hard to blend family and

business. It brings up a lot of problems especially when a father and son do not get along.” Kyle, a student at Iowa State University who intends to eventually take over the family farm, asserts that familial issues make it difficult for families to go through the transition from “father to son.” “It’s hard to transition a business in the family. For us, there are a lot of unknowns right now. I have two brothers who are also interested in farming. One of us will be returning, and I’d like if it could be me.” When I ask him if this situation feels stressful, he says that he feels that it “could lead to problems” and notes that “it sometimes stresses me out but right now I can’t do anything about it.” When Kyle graduates from Iowa State this coming spring he will work as a representative for Pioneer Seed in Southern Minnesota. He tells me that he is “biding his time” and waiting for his family to figure out the transition from one generation to the next.

Other values can affect which children are encouraged to return to the farm. In my interviews, informants continually indicated both implicitly and explicitly the gendered nature of the farm profession, especially large-scale conventional farming. Annie, a young woman who attends Grinnell College and whose father farms 2,800 acres in northeastern Iowa, says her father never encouraged her or her sister to go into farming. She says, “I think he was sad when he did not have any sons, but he was also happy because he has felt like a slave to the farm and did not want to pass it on.” Andrea Rissing (2008) notes in her research about women farmers that, while in traditional small-scale cultures agriculture was often a female-dominated field, the American agricultural system is a male-dominated industry. The gendered nature of farming may, at some level, prevent the passing of the farm from father to *daughter*. Henry, a man who has been in farming in Grinnell since 1962, discussed with me the fact that his son, who lives in Chicago, is completely uninterested in returning to the farm, while his daughter and son-in-law plan to take over the farm within a year. He says, “The gender of my children got mixed up” referring to the

traditional scenario in which the father would pass the farm to his eldest son. While the gendered nature of farming is not, of course, the principal cause for the generational imbalances occurring in Iowa agriculture, the fact that half of the population of farmers' children may be implicitly or explicitly discouraged from farming may contribute to the lack of young people who are interested in taking over the family farm.

## **VII. Cultural Reproduction of Iowa Farming Culture:**

What the farmers and farm kids are calling attention to in these comments is the failure of the traditional Iowa family farm to reproduce itself for much longer. This resonates with an approach to cultural analysis known as "cultural reproduction theory" (Foley 1990). Douglas Foley explains how culture and economy are interconnected. He discusses how one's economic status is tied to social norms and how these norms are reproduced over time due to societal and economic factors like tradition, stigma, socioeconomics, and family (Foley 1990: 190-194). While Foley's work focuses on class issues, I believe that cultural reproduction theory can be applied to the social phenomenon of aging farmers. The changes in farm demographics threaten the life cycle and cultural reproduction of this way of life and its cultural, economic, social, and political character. A lack of cultural reproduction will create vast cultural, economic, social, and political changes in rural Iowa if the current trends continue. Many of the children of farmers I spoke with touched on the problematic nature of this lack of cultural reproduction: they discussed the sadness and stress they felt that, in the future, fewer children would have the opportunity to live on the farm.

Whether they practice traditional or conventional agriculture, my informants all feel strongly about their identity as Iowa farmers. Many of them also feel that this identity is being

threatened by the lack of cultural reproduction of the family farm. Gene, a Grinnell area farmer, said:

It's sad to think that the profession might be dying out. It's nice to own your own land—to own your own business, and to work the land yourself. We're not going to see that as much anymore. Instead, we'll see people getting paid an hourly wage to farm someone else's land. And that landowner will probably live in Florida and not care about anything but the money.”

Annie, a farm kid from Northeast Iowa, says she feels the “identity of farmer will change” during the next twenty years of generational transfer. Valerie, a Grinnell College student whose father farms in Marshall County, tells me that she feels that “the family farm is going to suffer, but so is the family. These areas and these families are going to face an identity crisis because things will be different.” There is a great deal of sadness connected to the lack of cultural reproduction.

Cultural reproduction theory is traditionally applied to the ways that a cultural system manages to reproduce itself against opposition or in the face of it not serving all the people who live under it. Generational issues, by contrast, pose a situation where cultural norms and systems are not being reproduced. As fewer and fewer children of farmers return to the farm, farmers and their children fear that their way of life will not be reproduced. Peter, an Iowa State University student said, “It's really too bad. My kids probably won't have the kind of childhood I had.” Grant, a Grinnell College student said, “It's too bad that this way of life is changing.” Individual and collective sadness about the lack of cultural reproduction is significant. Despite the inherent problems with agricultural systems in Iowa, individuals have built their lives around the culture of farming and experience sadness about the lack of cultural reproduction.

### **VIII. Challenges for Youth in Farming:**

Despite all of this sadness about the lack of cultural reproduction in Iowa farming, there is some hope that Iowa farm communities may remain intact. It is inaccurate to say that no young people are interested in farming.. The popular press and the blogosphere report a surge in the number of young people who are not from farm families but who are interested in agriculture. *The New York Times* reports, “Young farmers are an emerging social movement” (Salkin 2008). The article indicates that many of these young farmers do not come from farm backgrounds and do not intend to raise commodity crops, like corn and soybeans; rather, they cater to niche markets by providing locally grown and organic produce and meat. (Salkin 2008). An article in *USA Today* profiles two young people who attended the University of Pennsylvania, and now own a farm forty miles outside of Philadelphia (Loviglio 2007). Loviglio writes, “On a recent summer day, instead of working in an air-conditioned office building 40 miles away in Philadelphia, the pair were tending to kale, collard greens and broccoli in Bucks County” (Loviglio 2007).

Such stories run contrary to the dire picture of aging farmers and lack of interest in farming among young people that I painted earlier in this paper. However, the interest of young people like those profiled in the *New York Times* and *USA Today* are another aspect of the generational issues in the agricultural sector. There is, indeed, an interest in farming on the part of a small sub-set of young people in America. These young people are oftentimes engaged in local agriculture movements and want to move back to the land to produce food for their local economy (Salkin 2008). Additionally, there has been a surge in recent immigrants to Iowa and the Midwest that have an interest in vegetable farming. For instance, recent Mexican immigrants in Marshalltown, Iowa, have partnered with the local community college to learn food production and marketing techniques (Ford, Personal Communication). However, many of these

young people are *not* children of farmers and thus do not have access to land, which is, of course, the crucial ingredient for a successful farm.

Before purchasing a farm, deciding to enter the farming profession is a significant and long-term commitment and might deter some young people from entering the farm work force. Ted, a farmer from Marshall County, notes that “you can’t just get in and get out of farming. It’s a time commitment.” Another farmer who works in the Grinnell area said, “Farming is a life commitment.” In a society where many professionals experiment with different jobs and have mid-life career changes, farming looms as a very significant career commitment. Ray, a livestock farmer in Grinnell, sums it up nicely when he says, “You don’t want to invest a million dollars in machinery to find out that you don’t like the job.” Combined with the initial financial investment, the long-term commitment can make farming seem like a daunting career path.

Once one decides to make the commitment they find that farming is an extremely input intensive field with high entry costs. In Poweshiek County, the average cost per acre for farmland is \$4,197 (Iowa State Extension Service 2007). Beyond the costs of land, farmers also must pay the costs of machinery, chemical inputs, and seed costs. Dan, a hog farmer outside of Grinnell, tells me that a “combine can run for \$500,000, easily. That might even be a cheap combine.” Erica, a farm kid from northeastern Iowa estimated that her parents spent about \$750,000 on their combine. In short, the capital costs associated with farming can be prohibitive for young people interested in entering the field. Karen, the wife of a farmer who grows 1,400 acres of corn and beans in Grinnell, tells me that “farming is an exercise in being in debt. If you’re a young farmer, you have got to have someone to back you up”. Gene, a Grinnell area farmer estimated that, in total, it might cost two million dollars to start a farm from scratch. Indeed, without enormous personal wealth, it would be nearly impossible for a young person to

break into large-scale farming without inherited land. In her book *Prairie Patrimony*, Sonya Salamon (1992) writes about this issue: “A young person can’t start on his own anymore. He has to have some backing—a parent or other relative” (145). Almost every single one of my informants discussed the enormous capital needed to start a large-scale farm. Luke Robert Gran, the head of new-farmer programs at Practical Farmers of Iowa said, “People aren’t going to just go out and buy 2000 acres. It’s just too expensive.” According to several of the farmers I have spoken with, in order to run a profitable commodity crop production, farmers must maintain a large farm, As noted, many believe that a farmer must have at least 500 acres of land in production—many farmers have significantly more.

Another way for people from non-farm backgrounds to get into farming is to rent land. Many individuals have responded to need to increase their acreage and the high costs of land by renting ground. Grant, a farm kid who attends Grinnell College, told me, “I don’t know how you could possibly get into farming without family land. Even if you rented land, you might go broke.” Most of my informants who own large-scale farming operations rent at least part of the acres they farm. However, renting is not inexpensive either. The USDA National Agricultural Statistics Service reports that the average rental per acre of farmland in the Corn Belt in 2009 was \$146 per year (USDA National Agricultural Statistics Service 2009:1). When a person rents upwards of 1000 acres, these costs add up, especially when a farmer is starting up and has little capital or access to credit.

Thus, the children of farmers are often disinclined to farm, while young people who may be interested in farming face considerable financial hurdles to enter farming. This imbalance encapsulates the problems inherent in the current generational transfer of land and capital in Iowa farm communities. Capitalist dynamics inhibit people interested in entering the field



because the holders of wealth control entry and exit. As discussed, governmental systems, agribusiness, and the banking system have a significant stake in the agricultural system and work to keep farms large and commodity based. Such a farm system is hard to enter. The Marxist perspective indicates that the holders of wealth control the means of entry and exit from the system (Wolf 2001: 344). Such is certainly the case in terms of large scale conventional farming in Iowa. Such a system is rooted in capitalism and bars interested people from entry while enslaving those within the system and leaving them little room for mobility.

As noted earlier, the Marxian perspective implies that the “holders of wealth” control the means of production because they decide what commodities are subsidized, and thus what products are produced (Wolf 2001: 344). Because the volume of corn and soybean products are so high, the price is kept low for consumers and these foods are used for non-essential products like high fructose corn syrup and ethanol (Holthaus 2006:207). In addition, these holders of wealth effectively block others from entry. Because of the subsidy system, farmers must own a large farm in order to make money; they must purchase many inputs and pay an increased price for land. Neil, a Grinnell farmer, said “the government controls everything. Subsidies artificially increase the price of land, and the whole system only works for you if you have a lot of land.” Ted, a farmer from Marshall County echoes Neil’s sentiments: “right now, the distorted market makes it so that you really must get big or get out.” As such, the holders of wealth control a great deal of power over not only the farmers themselves but also over interested potential farm entrants who are not land rich.

## **IX. Sadness and Stress in Iowa Farm Communities**

There is significant stress and anxiety about these generational issues on the part of my informants. Erica, a child of farmers from northeastern Iowa says, “My parents and their farmer

friends are stressed out about this transition. It's sad to see that the family farm might not survive." Ted, a farmer from Marshall County indicates similar feelings:

On one hand, I feel sad about these transitions, on the other hand I feel a lot of stress because I have to pass my farm on and I really would rather not just sell it to a corporation. I'd love to pass it on to my son or to another farmer in the area.

Voices of sadness have resonated throughout this paper—regardless of their position in the farming system, my informants indicate that there is reason to feel sad and worried. Bill, a Grinnell area farmer says, "I'm concerned. We're all concerned. That's why I'm talking to you. We have to figure this out." Another farmer indicated stress: "I don't know what to do. We're just going to have to wait, but right now it stresses me out and it stresses out a lot of other people who are getting older and trying to figure out what to do with their land."

My informants seem to fall into two camps: those who accept the change and those who want to fight it. Almost everyone I spoke with expressed some kind of sadness or stress, but some were more resigned to the demographic changes happening in Iowa farm communities. Henry, a farmer near Grinnell comments, "I know things are going to change—it's sad—but we can't do too much about it." Grant, a farm kid from Marshall County says, "You know, when I think about it it's sad that everything is changing, but I don't see that too many more young people will come back to the farm. I mean, I'm not going to."

On the other hand, some expressed a desire to make a change. Ray, a livestock farmer from Grinnell says, "We've got to do something! We need more young people in rural communities. We can't just sit around and wait for the young people to come." Elizabeth, a Grinnell student who comes from a farm family in northeastern Iowa says, "This is such a pressing issue and we're not really doing much to solve the problem right now. We need to turn it around and start creating programs and incentives so young people will come back." This

sadness can be conceptualized as structural nostalgia—the grieving for a social system which is being threatened.

This sadness and stress, whether it be complacent or not, is linked to the fact that my informants believe that generational issues will create a large number of other changes within Iowa farm communities. Generational transfer within Iowa farm communities has many potential cultural, economic, and political implications. Many of my informants predict that, as farmers age, the role of the “family farm” in the Midwest will decline as more and more farms are owned by absentee landowners or corporations. Others say that, as the “family farm” loses its status as the backbone of Midwest farming, small towns will also suffer given that fewer farmers will be available to help keep community functions alive and healthy. Some of my informants discuss that issues of aging farmers and the increasing size of farms will obligate farmers to continue to cultivate products that they can produce on a large scale and that are subsidized. Finally, farmers living close to urban areas retire and die, these areas are likely to be sold to developers who will convert the land use away from agriculture. These implications, large and small, give farmers, children of farmers, and small town residents reason to be concerned about the changes that generational transfer will bring in the next twenty years.

I asked each of my informants what they felt were the implications, positive or negative, of the increasing age of farmers in Iowa. Almost all of them said that they felt the Midwest would see an increase in the size of farms as farmers age. Grant, a child of farmers from Marshall County, put it very eloquently: “Farmers are going to retire and then die, and farms will then get bigger because that farmer’s land will either be rented or sold to local farmers or to corporations. Either way, we’re going to see bigger farms.” Ted, Grant’s father who farms about 1500 acres in Marshall County, echoes his son’s sentiments “We’re going to see a consolidation

of farmland owned by both families and corporations.” Karen, the wife of a Grinnell area farmer, told me that, as farmers get older and can’t work on the farm anymore, “there will be more humongous farm operations owned by corporations.” With the retirement of older farmers, land may be sold to corporations and thus more agricultural land will be by absentee landowners some of whom live out of state. Peter, an Iowa State University student who plans to start taking over his family’s farm, said that many older farmers will leave their land to their children and grandchildren who live out of state. “There will be a lot of out of state investors. I think it will be very bad,” he said

Many of my informants respond negatively to the idea that farms will get even bigger than they are now and that the family farm owners may be replaced by absentee landlords. Grant, the Grinnell student whose father farms in Marshall County, said, “It would be sad to see the small, rural family farm go away.” Erica, a daughter of farmers in Northeastern Iowa, told me, “There’s so much you learn about life on a farm. It’s sad that fewer kids will have that experience.” Indeed, many people see intrinsic social and cultural value in the identity of the family farm and feel sad about the fact that this cornerstone of the American Midwest may be slowly dying. In addition to the social damage, Bill Menner, the Iowa director of USDA rural development, said during a panel discussion at Grinnell College that during the upcoming years the state will be losing roughly \$500 billion 500 billion dollars because of the wealth transfer of land and businesses to children of Iowans who live out of state. This dire prospect indicates that the potential death of the family farm is not only a cultural loss but also an economic one.

Small towns throughout the Midwest will also suffer from this generational transition. Valerie, a farm kid from Marshall County says, “Family farms help prop up small towns.” My interviews with Grinnell area farmers demonstrate the kind of involvement that farmers can have

in a small community. Many of the farmers I have spoken with send (or have sent) their children to the local schools, participate in community events, help out as a part of the Grinnell Area Arts Council, sing in church choirs, attend lectures at Grinnell College, sell produce at the local farmers market, and patronize the local coffee shop, grocery stores, and other Grinnell businesses. Such social and economic engagement is important in keeping small towns culturally vibrant and economically sustainable. Bell writes, “not only are we losing farmers, but we are discouraging young people from even becoming farmers which is both an economic and a cultural threat to places like rural Iowa” (52). On that note, Valerie says that her town has seen problems in the past few years:

People now move to [my town] because it’s a cheap place to live, not because they want to contribute to the community or anything. They come here because they want to find work, so they work at the Pizza Ranch. It used to be different. The town used to be better—we used to have more community functions. More kids were involved in school sports, more people came to church in town. Now, we don’t really have community events as much.

If absentee landowners are to become the status quo in Iowa agriculture, we can predict that economic and social engagement in small town communities will suffer. Bell writes about the “plywood effect”, in which small town businesses go under and community vibrancy suffers. He notes that even with electronic media, cell phones, and the Internet, community still matters (59). Indeed, maintaining farm communities is important for reasons more than nostalgia or economics—community is important to individuals and increases quality of life. Bill, a Grinnell area farm, says, “I wouldn’t want to farm here if we didn’t have such a great community.” Dana, the daughter of a eastern Nebraska farmer says, “Farm communities are important—it’s nice to commiserate with people who live the same kind of like that you do.” Decreasing the vitality and vibrancy of Iowa small towns will increase the distance that people feel from one another, and hurt the community cohesiveness within these towns.

Additionally, if the family farm slowly deteriorates as the backbone of the Iowa small town, it is likely that small towns will suffer and that fewer young people will be attracted to stay in Iowa. Bill Menner, Iowa director of USDA rural development, frames the issue as one of quality of life. “We need to create communities where there is a high quality of life. Young people will come and stay if there is a high quality of life and good paying jobs.” My informants reflect on this fact as well: “Without young people, my town will die,” noted Valerie, a Grinnell College student who comes from a farm family. Grant, a farm kid from Marshall county notes, “I feel bad because I know that I’m contributing to the brain drain, but I don’t really know what I can do about it since there’s nothing for me in my hometown.” If fewer young people stay in small towns they will lose their vitality and quality of life will suffer. The potential decay of small town Iowa brings about feelings of “structural nostalgia”, grief for potential death of institutions. However, the decay of small towns is more than just sad—it is also economically dangerous. If fewer and fewer young people live in small towns, these areas will not function economically. Additionally, if fewer jobs and services exist it is likely that poverty will rise in these area. Thus, cultural vibrancy is important for small towns, but economic durability is also important for the continued quality of life of individuals living in Iowa.

Additionally, if farms get larger and there are more absentee landlords, the American agricultural system will likely continue its trajectory of producing purely commodity crops, for it is not physically or financially easy to produce more labor-intensive crops on such a large scale. This continuation means that many of the health problems associated with conventional farming that were cited earlier will likely continue and expand. For some of my informants, continuing to expand commodity crop production is a negative implication of the burgeoning corporate culture of farming. One of my informants, a Grinnell area farmer, frames the issue very well, “If farms

get bigger, we'll have to grow more corn and beans. It's not easy to grown 2000 acres of vegetables. That's 2,000 acres of backbreaking labor." Bill, a Grinnell area farmer, tells me that an increase in the size of farms would lead to more corn syrup production. "I think we'll see more obesity because we'll have to keep producing corn which is turned into corn syrup." Neil, a Grinnell area vegetable farmer notes: "Medicare and Medicaid costs are going up and up and up partially because of our poor diet. We subsidize unhealthy food." Indeed, the consumption of foods containing high fructose corn syrup has been linked to rising rates of obesity (Bray, Nielsen, & Popkin 2004: 537).

Others worry that a reliance on the current system of agriculture will exacerbate and continue the negative environmental effects directly and indirectly connected to large scale, conventional agriculture. Hassanein (1999), writes that conventional agriculture offers benefits such as high levels of productivity, but that problems inherent in the system include these environmental risks like erosion and water pollution (4). On a similar note, some of my informants worry about problems of land preservation as the number of absentee landlords rises. Karen, the wife of a Grinnell farmer, told me that absentee landlords will likely have less of a stake in the farm than farmers who live on the land. She worries that these absentee landlords will have less of an ethic of preservation and that conservation will take a backseat to profits. She tells me that her husband is careful about using techniques that do not lead to soil erosion, and worries that someone who was an absentee landowner might not worry as much about the land. Erica, the daughter of a farmer in northeastern Iowa, says that her father works very hard to be "good to the environment" but she worries that if people do not own the land that they are farming, they will be less caring. She says, "Larger farms can be good at taking care of the environment, but only if the farmers have a stake in the land."

Additionally, some of my informants tell me that they worry that the impending retirement of one generation of farmers will lead to increased urbanization. Clare and Dana, two Grinnell College students who grew up on a farm near Omaha, Nebraska, reflect that the land prices for land near the city are very high. “There didn’t use to be development around our farm. Now there are several areas being developed for housing right near us.” They worry that the retirement of farmers will lead to increasing urbanization and sprawl. “We’re losing the countryside,” Clare said. Therefore, there is worry not only about the contested ownership of the “family farm”, but over the use of the farm ground itself. Losing farm ground to development seems to sit uneasily with many of my informants. Grant, a child of farmers in Marshall County said, “it’s sad to see good, fertile Iowa ground put towards houses and strip malls.” Another informant connected the issue to a Pete Seeger song: “We’re just going to see more ticky-tacky houses.”

These projected changes threaten the cultural reproduction of not only the farm lifestyle but also the farm landscape and small Iowa towns. Threats to the reproduction of the family farm cause what I call “transition stress” amongst many of my informants. Peter, a student at Iowa State University who is returning to the farm this fall, reflects that his father recently tried to buy another plot of land but was outbid by “some of the absentee landowners.” “It’s really too bad,” he says, “I wish it could be like it was back in the old days”, referring to his childhood when he grew up on a small family farm surrounded by other family farms of 500-1000 acres. He tells me that he plans to return to the farm because he likes working hard and because he loves watching the crops grow. “I’m not in it for the money,” he said, adding “some of those big landholders are.” Bill, a Grinnell area farmer reflects that he loves farming because he can work on his own schedule and does not have a direct boss. Later, he notes that if farms keep getting



bigger, “everyone is going to be working for someone else.” He says that he feels stressed when he thinks about the future generation of farmers. Bill has farmed for fifty-four years and seems sad that his generation of farmers is retiring, noting that there will be more and more changes in Iowa. He tells me that “fifteen percent of the farmers [in America] produce eighty five percent of the goods,” noting that it will be fewer than fifteen percent if farms keep getting bigger. He reflects, “food and farming are social, and if fewer and fewer people produce the food, that’s really too bad.” Bill makes it clear that he has farmed as a part of a community: “We all help each other out. It’s social. If someone needs help, I’m there. If I need help, people are here to give me a hand.” Indeed, if farms get bigger and farmers become fewer, these social linkages will become less strong.

Thomas Jefferson said, “The true foundation of republican government is the equal right of every citizen in his person and property and in their management” (1816: 5). Though his ideals excluded significant members of the population including women and African Americans, Jefferson believed that the ownership of land created equitable social relations and a more satisfactory society. The current farming system is denying individuals access and rights to land because of the high capital costs necessary to enter the field and the necessity to either sell or rent land to absentee landowners when one retires. The current system is problematic in that it is both hard to get into and hard to get out of farming. Such a system is deeply embedded in a capitalist system that is supported by governmental policy. If the current trend continues without change we will likely see changes in small town life and landscape, and we will also experience the corporatization of agriculture in Iowa. If more and more corporations own land and hire workers to do the manual labor, the means of production will be concentrated in landholders and farm laborers who are paid to work the land but do not own land or capital. Iowa will see the rise

of a farm proletariat, people who have nothing to sell except their own labor. Such a change has already begun in the Imperial Valley in Central California, where large-scale corporate farms raise many of the vegetables that Americans eat (Imperial Valley Farm Bureau 2010; FitzSimmons 1986: 334). Given the current generational crunch, Iowa, which has maintained its family farm identity, may begin to see similar trends and Thomas Jefferson's ideals may soon be forgotten in the American heartland as well.

In the face of these concerns, however, some of my informants express generally positive feelings about at least some aspects of the trend. Kyle, an Iowa State University student, notes that if farms get bigger, "they will be more efficient," adding that it is easier to make money on a large farm. Bell notes: "a study found that large farms received twelve percent more for their corn and sixteen percent more for their soybeans than smaller ones in 1997" (54). Such a discrepancy can be chalked up to the fact that larger farms have better access to markets than smaller farms. Another informant, Erica, told me that she felt that larger farms were "better at being good to the environment." Grant, a farm kid from Marshall County, said that though he felt sadness about the institution of the family farm deteriorating, that larger farms were more efficient, and that it made sense to consolidate large farms in order to have less machinery. He tells me that there is no reason why two people who own 1,000 acres should both have \$500,000 combines when one person could own 2,000 acres and still use one combine. Henry, a Grinnell area farmer, told me that he felt "family farming certainly needs to be sustained", but in the end "there is not too much you can do about farms getting bigger—it's more efficient."

#### **X. Revitalization in Iowa Farm Communities:**

The implications of generational issues in Iowa farm communities cause significant stress

and sadness on the part of farmers and their children. Structural nostalgia, grief about the death of institutions is certainly present and seems to lead to increasing stress on the part of my informants. When this stress becomes too much to bear, individuals must find ways to cope—one such coping measure is to try to fix the problem. This motivation is reminiscent of Wallace's (1956) revitalization movements. Structural nostalgia and stress, in some cases, have created an impetus to change America's agricultural system and fix the problems inherent with these generational issues. Wallace's explains four stages of a revitalization movement, a process in which individual stress eventually creates cultural distortion and eventual revitalization. He writes:

A revitalization movement is defined as a deliberate, organized, conscious effort by members of a society to construct a more satisfying culture. Revitalization is thus, from a cultural standpoint, a special kind of culture change phenomenon: the persons involved in the process of revitalization must perceive their culture, or some major areas of it, as a system (whether accurately or not); they must feel that this cultural system is unsatisfactory; and they must innovate not merely discrete items, but a new cultural system, specifying new relationships as well as, in some cases, new traits (265).

In the agricultural community many individuals have started a deliberate effort to fight against parts of the system that are not satisfactory. As discussed in the theoretical perspectives section of this paper, revitalization movements have five different stages. I believe that many members of Iowa's farming community are currently transitioning from the period of cultural distortion into the period of revitalization. Wallace writes of this transition: "while the individual can tolerate a moderate degree of increased stress and still maintain the habitual way of behavior, a point is reached at which some alternative way must be considered" (269). On an individual level, my informants regularly express their great personal concern about these issues of generational transfer and offer solutions to these issues. They also express a desire to see significant change in farming systems. A Grinnell area livestock farmer says, "We've got to see

some change. We've got to make some change. Our current system is not sustainable." Francis Thicke, a dairy farmer from Fairfield, Iowa, notes that he thinks a change in American agricultural systems is necessary and inevitable given the increasing size of farms and the increasing price of oil. He believes that we will need to create food production systems that are smaller, more environmentally conscious, and more focused on food rather than commodities like corn and soybeans that are turned into processed foods like corn syrup and fuels like ethanol. Hassenein (1999) writes about the growing sustainable agriculture movement in America: "If there is a common conviction among those who identify with one or more of the goals associated with the sustainable agriculture movement, it is the opposition to the industrialization, corporate domination, and globalization of agriculture" (3). I have continually heard these convictions from many of my informants, who believe that we need to see significant change in American agricultural systems.

This individual stress has caused farmers, children of farmers, rural residents, and consumers to consider major changes to agricultural policy and practice. Many people believe that it is possible to build a farming system that is healthier for individuals, communities, and the environment and are eager to experiment with alternatives. For instance, many of my informants discussed that the generational issues facing Iowa communities could be solved by a switch to smaller scale farming. Such farm operations would carry fewer of the negative health and environmental impacts that large scale, conventional farming does, and would be easier for new farmers to break into.

In the face of the high cost of land and the general trend toward larger farms, some of my informants pointed out the opportunities that could exist on smaller farms. Karen, the wife of a Grinnell farmer talked about the trend of Iowa farms: "You've either got to get big or get out."

Such was the refrain of Earl Butz, Secretary of Agriculture during the Nixon administration, and it continues to be the refrain of many policy makers, agribusiness companies, and conventional farmers. However, many of my informants indicated that getting big was not the way to stay in the game. Rather, they indicated that one of the solutions to the generational crisis was to *stay small*. Several of my informants said that they felt that small, niche-market farming was an easier way for young people to enter the field, and further, allowed farmers to escape the governmental bureaucracy inherent in large-scale farming. Ray, a Grinnell area livestock farmer told me that he felt niche-market farming enterprises were the ideal way to deal with generational issues. Small-scale agriculture requires less land and often yields more profit per unit than corn or soybeans do. For instance, Neil, a vegetable farmer in Grinnell makes a living on seventy-six acres of land where he grows vegetables for sale at local farmers markets, food co-ops, and through a CSA share. He receives no subsidies for his certified organic produce. A corn and soybeans farmer would never make a living on the same seventy-six acres due to the low per-unit price of those goods and the extraordinary inputs needed to plant, tend to, and harvest fields of corn and beans. Luke Robert Gran at Practical Farmers of Iowa says, “now is a great time to get into farming,” adding that he does not know if now is a great time to get into conventional crops. Elizabeth, the daughter of a grass fed beef producer in Northeastern Iowa says that several of her peers who are interested in returning to their family’s farm have approached her family about learning organic techniques. “There’s a market for organic. It’s a good way to make money.” Dan and Mary, hog farmers near Grinnell, said that their daughter owns a dairy farm with her husband: “they converted to organic a year after they got married. It’s an easier way to make money.”

Niche market farming is perhaps an alternative or a solution to the dire picture of dying family farms and small towns. Ray, a local livestock producer, says “young people getting involved in alternative agriculture will mean a lot to the farm communities,” adding, “we still need more hands and feet out on the land.” Additionally, multiple sources indicate that these kinds of farming operations are oftentimes less ecologically intensive and do not rely on governmental subsidies (Hassanein 1999:5; Kirschenmann, Personal Communication). Finally, these kinds of food systems create more community and more consumer connection to food. Brett, a child of farmers from western Wisconsin and a self-declared “foodie” notes that buying vegetables and meat from local farmers creates positive connections within communities and “makes you think about where your food comes from.” In addition to these positive effects of small-scale production perhaps, alternative agriculture is one of the best ways to combat the issues of generational transfer and small town decay in the rural Midwest as well because of the lower entry costs associated with the field.

Fred Kirschenmann contradicts the opinions of many conventional farming experts when he predicts that farms will get smaller rather than larger in the next twenty to fifty years. Fred believes that the rising price of oil will obligate farms to reduce in size. He says, “The only reason that this current agricultural system works is because of relatively cheap energy. If the price of crude oil goes up to \$350/barrel within ten years we won’t be able to maintain these farms.” Machinery, fertilizer, pesticides, and other inputs all require petroleum. Fred thinks that as the price of oil increase we will be obligated to “recapture the wisdom of the past” and practice agriculture that is less energy intensive. Francis Thicke, echoes Kirschenmann’s sentiments: “we would not have the system of agriculture we have today if it were not for cheap

oil,” noting that if oil were not as cheap we would have to find ways to use our resources in ways that are more resilient and efficient.

Fred Kirschenmann warns that this new system will be reliant on “knowledge intensive” farming practices. Neva Hassanein echoes this sentiment:

For nearly all of agricultural history, farmers and craftspeople have produced the knowledge necessary to farm. Farmers have tilled the soil, and they have domesticated plants and animals. Farmers have selectively bred livestock to perform a variety of services and provide a range of products. From each year’s harvest, farmers have selectively saved seeds and, in this way, created more productive, genetically diverse, and locally adapted cultivars....When agriculture became a commercial enterprise and its development accelerated rapidly in the United States during the early nineteenth century, farmers continued to be the primary source of agricultural knowledge. That knowledge was poorly developed, however, because during this expansionist period farmers tended to think that prime agricultural land was abundant and that resources were infinite. Rather than learn to maintain soil fertility and productivity through improved cultural practices, commercial farmers and plantation owners typically focused on rapidly increasing production; they found it more profitable in the short run to use land until it was depleted and then to abandon it” (1999: 11).

Elizabeth, a child of farmers in Northeast Iowa believes that we need to go back to a more “knowledge intensive” system as well. She notes: “There’s a lot to be said for non-traditional agriculture. It takes more knowledge, but it is more sustainable, and easier to get into.” Ray, a livestock farmer from the Grinnell area, echoes Elizabeth’s suggestions: “I think that getting into farming through hogs is a great idea. You need less land, and less start up cash. You also receive more money than you do for corn and beans.” Ray himself clearly conducts “knowledge-intensive” farming: during our interview he discussed a grant he recently received to create a new rotational pattern for his cattle. The careful thought and innovation that he has put into this system reflects ingenuity and a great deal of knowledge about cattle, ecological systems, and the land. Conventional farming also requires knowledge, of course; however Kirschenmann believes that alternative modes of production require unique understanding of the biological synergies at work in the farm landscape.

I believe that there is a revitalization movement happening within a subset of American farmers. If the movement continues as Wallace's (1956) trajectory suggests, communities will undergo a period of revitalization in which

The prolonged experience of stress, produced by failure of need satisfaction techniques and by anxiety over the prospect of changing behavior patterns, is responded to differently by different people....In this phase, the culture is internally distorted; the elements are not harmoniously related but are mutually inconsistent and interfering. For this reason alone, stress continues to rise" (269).

There are several important aspects of a revitalization movement. For instance, during maze way reformulation elements and subsystems "which have already attained currency in the society" are restructured (270). Such a process has started happening in agricultural circles where individuals have worked to use the current systems of land ownership and rental to create farms that are different from conventional ones. In this sense, individuals are working with traditional systems of agriculture to produce new systems of production.

Another aspect of a revitalization movement is communication (273) in which individuals communicate the message of the revitalization movement to others. This phase has also started to happen in the sustainable agriculture movement. On a national and international scale, individuals like Michael Pollan and Wendell Berry have captured the hearts of many consumers through their advocacy of eating locally produced food and supporting small-scale agricultural systems. Documentary films like *King Corn* and *Food Inc.* have portrayed many of the negative aspects of large-scale, conventional agricultural systems. On a local level, consumers have shown their demand for products from small-scale farming operations through their attendance at farmers markets and their purchasing of Community Supported Agriculture shares. Such communication is crucial for the success of the movement and is necessary both on national and local levels to engage both farmers and consumers.



Organization is, of course, an important part of such a movement as well. According to Wallace and Weber (1947), such organization is often coordinated by a “charismatic leader.” In the alternative agriculture movement, national figures like Michael Pollan and Wendell Berry might serve in this role. Beyond the leaders, there are also organizations that help to mobilize individuals interested in creating a new system of agriculture. Practical Farmers of Iowa and The Land Stewardship Project both serve to support farmers who are practicing small-scale agriculture. They also work to help new and transitioning farmers receive the support they need and to support policy that supports and enables alternative agriculture. Elizabeth, the daughter of a cattle farmer in northeastern Iowa, says, “PFI and LSP are great! They’re really working to influence policy and get alternative agriculture on the map.” Indeed, such organizations work to gather support from disparate individuals and channel it into change. Additionally, on an even more local level, groups of people have organized themselves to create change locally and support one another. The Los Angeles Times recently ran an article about “The Crop Mob” in North Carolina, individuals who volunteer to help new and transitioning and farmers with farm tasks. David Zucchini writes: “This was Crop Mob, a roving band of volunteers dedicated to helping young farmers build sustainable small farms. It’s a modern version of a barn raising, with volunteers brought together by Google and Facebook” (2010). The renaissance of interest in small scale agriculture has worked to organize people around the country to come together to help farmers, eat local food, and help create a movement.

The other aspects of the revitalization movement, adaptation, cultural transformation, and routinization, are pending as this particular revitalization movement is transitioning from the period of cultural distortion to the revitalization stage. Generational issues, among other factors, drive this revitalization movement in Iowa farm communities, and make the movement even

timelier given that the current generation of farmers will likely be retiring within the next fifteen to twenty five years. Ray, a livestock farm in Grinnell, says “Now’s the time to change the system since we [older farmers] won’t be around forever.” Ted, a conventional farmer from Marshall county says, “If there’s a change, we’ll see it soon because we’re going to retire in twenty or thirty years. If we want to see more young people on the land, they’re going to have come before we all sell our land to larger landholders.”

#### **XI. Existing, Proposed, and Possible Solutions:**

This revitalization movement has spurred the possibility of many different solutions to the current generational issues happening in Iowa farm communities. Though the problem of high entry costs for young farmers has not elicited significant public policy response, and not enough to address the need for capital young farm entrants face, there are some organizations and programs that work to combat the generational issues. When President Obama released his *Blueprint for Change* he promised tax incentives “to make it easier for farmers to afford their first farm” (2007:47). As of now, these tax incentives have not been approved. The Farm Bill, which was renewed in 2008, expanded some loan programs for some beginning farmers. The Farm Bill also created a pilot program “that matches up to \$6,000 in a farmer’s savings account if the money is used to buy farmland and livestock, make early mortgage payments, or pay for similar expenses” (E. Vaughan 2009:1). The programs in the Farm Bill are a noble start, but they in no way meet the need for capital that young people have and will continue to have.

Non-governmental organizations have also worked to take on these issues. In the Midwest, Practical Farmers of Iowa (PFI) and the Land Stewardship Project (LSP in Minnesota) have both started programs aimed at supporting young farmers in starting a farm and older

farmers in transitioning into retirement. At PFI, Luke Robert Gran started a “New Farmer Program” in May of 2009. In less than a year, he has used social networking websites to communicate with young people interested in farming and has started offering online “farminars,” presentations by farmers about anything from land transfer to agricultural techniques. He also has started an informal mentoring program where he links aspiring young people with older farmers who need help on the farm. In December, he led a “Next Generation” retreat for young people interested in farming. Mr. Gran is hopeful that, with time, PFI will be able to set up mentoring programs that are more formalized and will raise funds so that the organization can offer matching funds through the Individual Development Account Model. This model incentivizes saving by matching the funds that individual farmers save each month. Currently, Luke is working to raise \$250,000 to start such a program at PFI.

The Land Stewardship Program offers similar services to farmers in Minnesota. Their program, “Farm Beginnings,” which was founded in 1998, offers thirty-six hours of hands-on and classroom learning experiences to new and transitioning farmers in Minnesota. This year’s on-farm seminars cover topics ranging from organic greenhouse management to raising Mangalitsa pigs (LSP 2010). The LSP website also serves as a networking device for farmers looking for interns and young people looking to gain experience on a farm. Beyond the education that LSP offers, they have also partnered with Heifer International to provide no-interest loans to new and transitional farmers for livestock. This program helps farmers without capital afford to start a livestock operation. The leaders of the “Farm Beginnings” program report that it has been very successful and gained in popularity over the past twelve years. Their program has spawned similar programs for new farmers in Illinois, Nebraska, and North Dakota.

In line with the revitalization movement, neither Practical Farmers of Iowa nor the Land Stewardship Program is engaged in promoting conventional, commodity-based farming. Luke Robert Gran told me that “the jury is still out on corn and soybeans. People aren’t going to go out and buy 2000 acres of land. But, there’s a lot of consumer demand for fresh, local vegetables.” He estimates that there is demand for one hundred more vegetable farms in the Des Moines metropolitan area. He is committed to working to help meet the demand with excited and skilled young farmers, He says, “it’s a great time to get into farming!” On a similar note, Ray, a Grinnell livestock farmer, said that he felt that now was a great time to get into alternative agriculture, noting that it does not require as much land as corn and beans do, and that it does not require machines that “are quite as fancy.” In many ways, organizations like PFI and LSP offer greater support to new farmers interested in alternative agriculture than the U.S. government provides to new farmers interested in commodity-based farming. Regardless, neither the government nor organizations like PFI and LSP offer enough support to meet the capital and knowledge needed to support a transition from one farming generation to the next in the Midwest.

While these programs are a noble start at combating these generational issues, there is still significant support needed to get young people on the land. The current problem centers on a lack of farm entrants. Helping young people enter the field will require two fulfilling two needs: (1) improving access to capital and credit necessary to help farmers buy land and machinery, and (2) providing access to knowledge about farming whether young people be interested in conventional or alternative agriculture. Additionally, encouraging children of farmers to consider farming is important, though current trends suggest that children of current farmers are not steadily returning (Kirschenmann, Personal Communication). However, giving children of

farmers education about alternative modes of production may be a way to get them back on the farm as well.

To encourage farm entry and to revitalize small farming communities, the government must expand the current national and state-based public policy for new and transitioning farmers. The current programs do not come close to addressing the needs that new farmers face. Specifically, President Obama ought to act upon his commitments to increase tax credits for young farmers. Further, organizations like Practical Farmers of Iowa and The Land Stewardship Project should strive to enhance their current programs, especially mentorship programs that aim to help young farmers gain access to knowledge as well as programs that allow new and transitioning farmers to partner with farmers looking for non-kin to whom they can to pass on their farm. Finally, these generational transfer issues raise the question of how large-scale farm-policy reform can rejuvenate the farm force and keep small communities vibrant.

My informants offer valuable insights into possible solutions to the problems that Iowa farm communities face. Henry, a Grinnell area farmer who has been farming since 1962, suggests that it was imperative to create tax incentives for entering farmers. “That’s one way to make farming more appealing and to make it possible for people to come back,” he says. In his view these tax incentives could include exemptions on everything from renting land to buying equipment. He notes that “some of these programs exist, but we need to make more. People will start farming if they can afford it.” Henry’s views fall in line with President Obama’s proposed policy. Henry notes, however, that these “tax incentives will have to be significant. We need to make farming financially viable. There’s no other way to get you young folks involved.” These new programs would have to be significant to make farming a financially viable enterprise for interested young people.

Some of my other informants have told me that tax incentives will not suffice arguing that, in addition, the government needs to offer grants and no-interest loans to young farmers. Gene, a Grinnell area farmer, says, “It’s crucial to keep family farming alive so we need to invest in it. We need to put money into keeping [family] farming alive. It’s crucial.” Another Grinnell farmer says, “if we diverted some of the money that we give to keep ethanol alive as a biofuel or money that we use to basically subsidize corn syrup into grants for young farmers to buy land or machinery, we would have a much better Farm Bill.” Indeed, adding a significant grants and no-interest loan program into the Farm Bill help endow young people with the resources they need to start farming.

Other farmers and children of farmers advocate mentorship and apprenticeship programs as well as “matching” programs for older farmers looking for non-kin heirs for their land. Francis Thicke says “The best way to learn about the farm is to work on one. We need more internship programs so that young people can have the opportunity to learning about farming and agriculture.” Ray, a Grinnell livestock farmer, echoes Thicke’s comments: “I would love to be able to have interns all year long. Someone could work for us until they got themselves a head of hogs. It would be a great way to transition a new person into farming.” Ray also notes, “I would like to see more of the landowners give opportunities to young farmers, help them take over the farm—maybe not the whole farm, but slowly take it over.” As noted earlier, Practical Farmers of Iowa offers informal mentorship programs for young people interested in learning new techniques. The Land Stewardship Project has its “Farm Beginnings” program, which offers opportunities for new farmers to learn about agriculture and take on-farm seminars. Expanding mentoring programs would be an excellent way for young farmers to gain skills, build rapport with older farmers, and create partnerships that could lead to non-kin transfer of

land. Fred Kirschenmann offers a good example of non-kin mentoring and land transfer. He owns an organic farm in North Dakota and has started working with a younger couple to teach them to maintain the farm. He tells me, “Right now, I farm by cell phone.” Due to his position at the Leopold Center for Sustainable Agriculture, Kirschenmann is not around on his farm all the time, so this couple has slowly begun to take over many of the farm tasks. They have already bought eighty acres of Kirschenmann’s farm from him and his wife. They are currently in the process of buying another quarter section of the farm and have their own animals, which they keep in the Kirschenmann barns. Kirschenmann notes, “They are there for us and there’s real value in that.”

Mentoring programs offer farmers the ability to pass on their knowledge to younger generations. Farm mentees also can help older farmers as they age and are not as able to do some of the physical tasks necessary to run a farm. One of my informants says, “Farmhands are necessary when you get to be old and move a little slower.” Ray, a livestock farmer near Grinnell, says that having interns would help him run his farm more effectively and would help them learn more about livestock production and how to run a farm. However, he notes that he and his wife cannot always afford an intern and mentions that it would be ideal if some outside granting agency could provide wages for farm interns. Such a program would allow young people to gain skill and make connections while not financially burdening farmers, who are often strapped for disposable income. Such a program would invest in the transfer of agricultural knowledge from one generation to the next and in the vitality of family farms and small towns. Ray, like many of my other informants, says that he feels that many young people are interested in farming: “I am encouraged by how many people want to get into farming.” He notes that we should not only look to Land Grant Universities as sources for the next generation of farmers:

“We need to look at students in non-traditional schools, like liberal arts colleges. These folks are interested in farming, too. We just need to provide them with opportunities to get on the land and learn.” Established and funded mentorship and internship programs would allow young people from traditional and non-traditional backgrounds to gain experience and make connections, which would go a long way in helping to rejuvenate the farm force, get more young people in small town Iowa, and help farmers transfer their knowledge to the next generation.

Elizabeth, the daughter of farmers in Northeast Iowa, suggests that there ought to be specific, well-funded mentorships available for people interested in pursuing niche-markets. “The big ag. schools are there for people who want to learn how to grow corn and beans, but there needs to be more opportunities for people who don’t want to do that.” She says that there is a lot of demand for value-added, niche market goods like grass-fed beef, organic vegetables, and hormone-free milk. As mentioned earlier, small-scale, niche market farming may also be an easier way for young people to enter the field so it seems especially prudent to offer specialized training for those interested in alternative agriculture.

Neil, a vegetable farmer near Grinnell, has thought about this issue of farmer education extensively and offered me a concrete idea to help increase educational opportunities for Grinnell area farmers: “I think Grinnell College should start a farm”, he says, adding that this farm could service the college dining hall, and that students could work there for their work study wages. Additionally, he hopes that Grinnell would offer post-graduate fellowships where interested students could stay after college, work on the farm, and learn best practices from local farmers. Such a program would allow Grinnell College to connect to its agricultural landscape and would allow interested students to learn the mechanical skills necessary to run a successful



farm. Such a system would also allow for students who have been schooled in the Liberal Arts to have opportunities to gain the skills necessary to enter the farm force.

Bret, a child of farmers from western Wisconsin, suggests another option of generational transfer. “What if older farmers whose children did not want to farm had the opportunity to sell their land to the state? The state could then put the land into prairie and we could increase conservation.” This program would allow farmers to take their land out of production when they retire. They would, in some ways, retire their business when they stop working. The proposal would also increase conservation, which is important in the American Midwest, a landscape which has lost much of its original identity to agriculture and development.

Some believe that tax incentives, grants, and mentorship programs are not enough to properly deal with the problems of generational transfer. They believe that this problem is systemic, stemming from farm policy that privileges large farm owners. Thus, in these informants’ eyes, the only way to properly deal with generational transfer and the deterioration of the family farm and small communities is to see comprehensive farm policy change. Neil, the vegetable farmer near Grinnell, describes the situation eloquently:

[The lack of young farmers] is entirely due to the federal farm policy. Federal farm policy since the 60s and 70s has been entirely aimed at getting people off the land...making people farm commodities, not food, consolidating control in fewer and fewer hands and fewer and fewer businesses. If we changed Federal farm policy, we would have a vastly different farm landscape. The reason that people aren’t farming today is because it doesn’t make them money. Why would you want to farm if you can’t make money? It all boils down to economics. The federal farm bill is structured in such a way that it’s not profitable to have a small farm anymore. It’s either get big or get out. I’m able to do it because I do high end, value added products that I sell directly to the end consumer.

Indeed, the Farm Bill enables farmers to make money if they grow corn and soybeans, crops that are not directly eaten by people and that are grown on a large scale. Large-scale farming

does not lend itself to easy entry or easy transfer. Thus, the Farm Bill does create logistical issues for farm entrance. It also poses significant ethical issues of conservation and food values.

Neil says, “It would be nice if it was a level playing field and there were no subsidies.” If there were not subsidies, farms would be smaller, would produce more diverse products, and would not rely on governmental funding to cover day-to-day costs. An overhaul of current farm policy would lead to drastic agricultural and societal changes and would create more opportunities for younger, smaller scale, niche farmers to enter the market. Neil’s proposition to fundamentally change farm policy is intriguing in that it, in many ways, gets to the bottom of the issues instead of simply putting a bandage on a system that is already so warped by farm policy.

Neil’s ideas connect to the revitalization movement discussed earlier. Changing the way America farms through changes in farm policy would fundamentally address many of the generational and other issues inherent in the current system. My other informants have also noted their displeasure with the current agricultural system. Dana, a Grinnell College student whose father farms corn and soybeans in Eastern Nebraska says: “We need to change Federal Farm Policy. It’s really messed up.” Bill, a Grinnell area farmer, echoes these sentiments as well: “We are going to need to see a change in the subsidy system. It doesn’t make very much sense to keep it going.” These sentiments lead to a need for revitalization of America’s farming systems.

## **XII. Conclusions:**

Wallace (1956) writes that revitalization movements either lead to a steady state in which cultural transformation is accomplished or can lead to the death of the society, if the process of revitalization goes unchecked (270-273). Given that this revitalization movement is still in its formative stages, we do not know what the future of agriculture in Iowa looks like. If the

revitalization movement is to continue its trajectory, the sources of power in American agriculture will need to be substantially challenged. Changes to the agriculture system will take significant restructuring of power and changing of norms. We must examine the power that organizations like agribusiness and the government wield to understand the place that Iowa agriculture is in today. The current agricultural system has at least partially created many of these generational issues in the sense that a different way of farming might be more attractive for children of farmers and might allow easier entry for land-less people. Michele Foucault (1982) writes about the function of power: “power exists only when it is put into action, even if, of course, it is integrated into a disparate field of possibilities brought to bear upon permanent structures. This also means that power is not a function of consent” (788). In the case of agriculture, institutions have great power over individuals. The revitalization movement reminds us that this power is not always a force of consent, and further, that it is possible to challenge current power structures. Thus, it is important to consider alternatives to our current agricultural system. I believe that the revitalization movement is crucial in that it reassess our current farm system to combat the generational issues facing Iowa farm communities.

Ultimately, this research raises more questions than answers. What will Iowa farms look like in forty years when this current generation of farmers in Iowa farmers has retired? What will the average size of an Iowa farm be? Who will our farmers be? Will they live in Iowa or will we see a rise in absentee landowners? Will we even have farmers or will we simply have a farm proletariat—people who have nothing to sell but their own labor? Who will have the power? And, what will our small towns look like?

Perhaps the ultimate question is: do we care? Based upon my informants’ words, I firmly believe that the answer to this question is yes. Now is the time to channel the individual

concern and stress that farm communities feel into active change. This paper has explored various ways to combat the generational issues in Iowa farm communities. Some of these ideas—tax incentives, grants, and loans—are easier to implement. Other ideas, like encouraging more small scale farming are also doable, especially with the support and enhancement of organizations like Practical Farmers of Iowa and The Land Stewardship Project. However, others believe that in order to truly revitalize Iowa farming, we must confront the fact these generational issues are systemic and that new farm policy is the ultimate and most important battle to be fought and won. Indeed, such changes would alter our farm landscape in significant and important ways and would, ultimately, work to combat the root issues of many of the generational issues outlined in this paper.

Systemic change is ultimately necessary for lasting and effective change in farming communities. Changing Federal farm policy would have enormous economic and social effects for both farmers and food consumers but changes could also create a fundamentally more just and equitable farm landscape for farmers, rural residents, and consumers. In the long term, it is necessary to seriously examine federal farm policy, its inherent power structure, and its implications for American farm communities. In the short term, creating ways for young people to get on the land will aid in generational transfer. Ray, a livestock farmer near Grinnell, put the issue nicely: “We just need more young hands and feet on the land.” Getting more young hands and feet on the land is the first step in combating these generational issues and helping to maintain the vitality of rural communities. On a local level, there needs to be more engagement and education. On the national level there needs to be more policy and government spending on young farmers. All of these actions can and potentially will be a part of the larger revitalization movements working to change agricultural systems in America.

Ultimately, identifying these generational issues helps us realize that Iowa small farms and communities are at stake. A Grinnell area farmer put it nicely: “It’s taken awhile for us to realize what’s at stake. But, now people are starting to realize that everything is in jeopardy: our neighbors, our friends, our grocery stores, our coffee shops, our churches, our schools, and our streets. We’re seeing rural decay. We might lose everything. But, we might not. We won’t lose everything if we get more young people investing their time and their money in our communities.” Indeed, this issue calls for immediate local and national response both in the short and long term. Gene, a Grinnell area farmer, reminds us of the urgency: “Iowa could become a second Imperial Valley [in Central California]. It would be easy to make that transition. But, the real question is: Is Iowa worth fighting for? [Or will Iowa become an ecological sacrifice zone?] Is Iowa worth saving?” I believe the definitive answer to that question is yes. Iowa, with its wealth of unique rural communities, fertile soil, and farming tradition is worth saving. Indeed rural Iowa and the family farm serves for more than nostalgia—it helps to sustain and enliven community, the economy, and culture in the heartland of America.

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*The Los Angeles Times*, March 10.

APPENDIX I: Information about my informants:

**Virginia and Kathy Andersen** are Grinnell College students. They grew up on a farm North of Omaha in Northeastern Nebraska. Their father, a lifelong farmer, farms approximately five hundred acres of corn and soybeans on land that is owned by his father (Kathy and Virginia's grandfather). Their mother owns land near Harlan Iowa that she has inherited from her parents. She leases this land to a farmer in the area. Neither Virginia nor Kathy expect to return to farming and report that their parents have not encouraged this career path. Virginia will graduate from Grinnell in 2010 with a degree in sociology and Kathy will graduate in 2013. She expects to major in biology. *Interviewed 31 January 2010.*

**Kaleb Applegate** is a senior at Iowa State University. He grew up on a farm near Marshalltown, Iowa. He is majoring in agricultural science at Iowa State is planning to return to the farm this coming year where he will work with father. He plans to eventually inherit the farm and buy land of his own. *Interviewed 1 March 2010.*

**Nichole Baker** is a Grinnell College student who grew up on a farm where her father produces corn and soybeans. Nichole does not intend to return to the farm. *Interviewed 30 January 2010.*

**Barney Barenfeuse** is a Grinnell area livestock farmer. He grew up on a farm and currently raises hogs, chickens, sheep, and cattle. He practices direct-marketing techniques and is known throughout Grinnell for the fabulous meat he and his wife raise. *Interviewed 19 April 2010.*

**Andrew Burt** is a senior at Iowa State University. He grew up on a farm near Marshalltown, Iowa. He is majoring in agricultural business at Iowa State and next year will be a seed salesman for Monsanto in Southern Minnesota. He is hoping to eventually return to his father's farm though he worries about how the farm will be divided between him and his three other brothers. *Interviewed 6 March 2010.*

**Andy Dunham** is a local Grinnell farmer who runs Grinnell Heritage Farms where he grows vegetables for sale at farmers markets and through his CSA. His great grandfather, Levi Grinnell, bought the land that Andy, and currently farms 80 acre patch north of Grinnell College. Andy grew up in Northeast Iowa but started farming this family land recently. *Interviewed 28 January 2010*

**Chris and Jay Gaunt** are Iowa natives who currently raise hogs under contract on their land outside of Grinnell, Iowa. Both Chris and Jay grew up in Iowa on farms. They farmed in Laurel, Iowa but were hit badly by the farm crisis of the 1980s and had to sell the farm. Currently, Jay raises hogs on his land, takes care of hogs on several other farms in the area, and is a driver for the Swift packing plant. Chris works at Grinnell College Burling Library and is very involved in social justice work and political activism. *Interviewed 14 February 2010.*

**Luke Robert Gran** is the manager of the "New Farmer Program" which was started May of 2009. In less than a year, he has used social networking websites to communicate with young people interested in farming and has started offering online "farminars," presentations by farmers about anything from land transfer to agricultural techniques. He also has started an informal

mentoring program where he links aspiring young people with older farmers who need help on the farm. In December, he led a “Next Generation” retreat for young people interested in farming. Mr. Gran is hopeful that, with time, PFI will be able to set up mentoring programs that are more formalized and will raise funds so that the organization can offer matching funds through the Individual Development Account Model. This model incentivizes saving by matching the funds that individual farmers save each month. Currently, Luke is working to raise \$250,000 to start such a program at PFI. *Interviewed 18 March 2010.*

**Kate Howard** is a Grinnell College senior who grew up outside of Elgin, Iowa. Her father raises corn, soybeans, and cattle on 2,000 acres. Kate’s grandfather starting farming in the 1950s and her father raises crops on his land on land that he rents. Kate is planning on eventually going to medical school and thus does not plan to return to the farm. She is hopeful that her younger brother will be interested in taking over the business. *Interviewed 5 February 2010.*

**Fred Kirschenmann** is a farmer, academic, and leader in the organic/sustainable agriculture movement. He owns a 3,500 acre certified organic farm in Windsor, North Dakota. He is a professor in Iowa State University’s Department of Religion and Philosophy, has served as the president of the Leopold Center for Sustainable Agriculture, and is currently a distinguished fellow of the Leopold Center. *Interviewed 2 March 2010.*

**Kayla Koether** is a Grinnell College sophomore who grew up in northeast Iowa. Her father owns a grass fed beef operation. She has been involved in operation throughout her whole life and is considering going back to be a part of the operation later in her life. At Grinnell, Kayla has developed her own independent major in agriculture and sustainable rural development. *Interviewed 11 February 2010.*

**Howard McDonough** has been farming in Grinnell for fifty-four years. He grew up outside of Grinnell and attended Iowa State University. Howard has four sons but none of them are interested in pursuing farming. Howard has begun the process of renting and selling some of his land. Howard is an avid gardener and is an expert at doing food preservation. He has been very active in the Grinnell community throughout his entire life here. *Interviewed 3 February 2010.*

**Janna Niehaus** is a Grinnell College senior who grew up on a farm near Dubuque, Iowa. Janna’s father and uncle own a 2,800 acre farm and raise corn, soybeans, hogs, and cattle. Janna is planning on eventually going to medical school and does not think that she will farm her father’s land. Her cousin will likely take over the operation. *Interviewed 2 February 2010.*

**Howard Raffety** has been farming in Grinnell since he turned 21 in 1962. Over the years, he has grown more than 800 acres of corn, soybeans, oats, and hay. He has also raised hogs and cattle. Howard started farming in partnership with his father, who had farmed on the same land. Howard grew up outside of Grinnell and his brother, Maynard, attended the college. Howard has two children, a son who lives in Chicago, and a daughter who is coming back to the farm this season to start taking it over with her husband and children. *Interviewed 28 January 2010.*

**Vickie Rutherford** is a Grinnell native who grew up on a farm and whose husband, Mark Rutherford, farms 1,400 acres of land in Grinnell. Vickie works at the Registrar's office at Grinnell College. *Interviewed 17 February 2010.*

**Doug Svendsen** is a farmer from Marshall County. He has been farming for about twenty years. He has two sons and hopes that the youngest might eventually take over his farm. *Interviewed 6 April 2010.*

**Kevin Svendsen** is Doug Svendsen's son and a Grinnell College senior who grew up in Marshall county. His father has been farming for twenty years and currently raises more than 1,000 acres of corn and soybeans. Kevin is a physics major at Grinnell and hopes to pursue a career in engineering. He does not plan on returning to farming. *Interviewed 31 January 2010.*

**Francis Thicke** operates an eighty cow, grass-based organic dairy production near Fairfield, Iowa. Francis is an advocate of organic agriculture and works to create innovative ways to use and reuse resources on his farm. He is currently running for Iowa Secretary of Agriculture. *Interviewed 20 April 2010.*

**Neal Wepking** is a Grinnell College student whose family owns land in western Wisconsin. Neal is very interested in both agriculture food production, and conservation and has considered going back to the farm eventually. *Interviewed 7 April 2010.*

## APPENDIX II: Interview Questions

### Interview Guide for Farmers:

- 1) What is your name?
- 2) How old are you?
- 3) For how long have you been farming?
- 4) What do you farm?
- 5) How did you get into farming? Did you go to agriculture school? Did your parents farm?
- 6) If your parents farmed, are you farming on their land now? If not, when did you buy this land?
- 7) Do you have children? How old are they?
- 8) Have you (will you) encourage(d) your children to pursue farming? Why or why not?
- 9) Do you have a plan for what will happen to your farm when you retire?
- 10) As you may know, the average age of farmers in Iowa is over fifty. What do *you* think the implications of an aging farming population are? Specifically, how do you think that an aging population of farmers will affect the culture and economy of this area?
- 11) The latest USDA Census of Agriculture indicated that between 2002 and 2007, the number of farmers under the age of 25 dropped by 30%. Why are fewer young people entering this profession? Do you have ideas about how to get more young people to enter the profession?
- 12) What would you like to see happen to agriculture in Iowa, especially given that farmers are aging and few young people are entering the profession?
- 13) Do you have other comments or concerns?
- 14) Do you have any questions for me?

### Interview Guide for Children of Farmers:

- 15) What is your name?
- 16) How old are you?
- 17) Where do your parents farm and how long have they been farming?
- 18) What do you farm?
- 19) How did your parents get into farming?
- 20) Have your parents ever encouraged you to get into farming? How? Why or why not?
- 21) Do your parents have a plan for what will happen to your farm when you retire?
- 22) As you may know, the average age of farmers in Iowa is over fifty. What do *you* think the implications of an aging farming population are? Specifically, how do you think that an aging population of farmers will affect the culture and economy of this area?
- 23) The latest USDA Census of Agriculture indicated that between 2002 and 2007, the number of farmers under the age of 25 dropped by 30%. Why are fewer young people entering this profession? Do you have ideas about how to get more young people to enter the profession?
- 24) What would you like to see happen to agriculture in Iowa, especially given that farmers are aging and few young people are entering the profession?
- 25) Do you have other comments or concerns?
- 26) Do you have any questions for me?