

Farm Friction: Iowa Agricultural Transitions and the Battle for Representation

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Questions:

How do Iowa farmers respond to critiques of their profession and decide how to farm?

- 1) How do farmers understand local agricultural history and communicate this to younger generations?
- 2) How do farmers present themselves in debates about “sustainable” agriculture?
- 3) How do beginning or aspiring farmers decide how to farm?

Research

- 10 weeks in the field in central Iowa using ethnographic methods of participant observation and interviews
- Interviewed ~50 small to mid-sized “conventional” corn, soybean, and livestock farmers; “sustainable” smaller-scale farmers, beginning and aspiring farmers and agriculture organization representatives
- Attended agricultural fairs, shows, museums and conferences, town celebrations, farmers markets, environmental policy debates and activist demonstrations
- Worked at a agriculture education/community gardening program for youth

Results

- “Conventional” Iowa corn, soybean, and livestock producers speak of farm transitions with a mix of nostalgia for small, diversified farms and connected rural communities and awe of impressive technological advancements.
- These farmers feel misunderstood by the public and misrepresented by advocates of “sustainable” agriculture; they want their “reality” of farming to be known.
- Beginning farmers need capital or social connections to enter the field and compete with larger farms.

Iowa Farm History

Loss: The Romantic Rural

- The Farm Crisis of the 1980s
- Products
- Methods
- Community

Experience: Moralizing Rhetoric

Current Hardships

“You live here for 60 years and then think about the number of houses that aren't here that used to be.”

“Sometimes I would like to go back 50 years....you know, it was such a calm time, in a way. But yet, you wouldn't really want to do that either, because there's so much we have today....”

“I can see it. I mean, there's a certain amount of nostalgia to that kind of stuff, but between the realistic and nostalgia, there's a big gap.”

The Battle for Representation

Misinformation

- The Rural/Urban divide

Defense of Modern Agriculture

- Common Ground
- Iowa Food and Family Project
- Iowa Agricultural Awareness Coalition

Iowa Governor Terry Branstad: We need to be careful about these outside groups that have little knowledge of agriculture leveling attacks against an important economic driver of our state's economy.

“We're taking better care of our land now than ever.”

“You've got a big divide between the rural and urban. The urban, most people don't have the foggiest damn idea of what goes on.”

“You have your pretty little idea about how everything's gonna be so rosy, but that ain't quite the way it works.”

Beginning Farmers

How to Enter the Field

- Family Influences
- Agriculture Education
- Economic Limitations
- Ideology and Decision-Making

“I think something needs to be done to help young people get started, and I don't mean go work in a hog building eight hours a day...I mean to really be your own boss farmer. And I don't know what the answer is, but something needs to be done, because the bigger just get bigger. And somebody your age, if you don't have a parent that's got a boatload of land or something, there's no way. There's a lot of really good young kids that'll never get an opportunity, instead it'll be someone whose dad already has 10,000 acres and is lazy and doesn't really want to work at it, he's the one who'll end up with it.”

