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INTRODUCTION

Here in corn and soybean country the land stretches endlessly to meet the sky in all directions. Vast acreages of grain spread across gentle rises and shallow valleys. A row of tall electrical poles leads off the highway down a sanded country road toward a farmstead surrounded by trees. Corn ripens on one side and cattle graze on the other. Pungent goldenrod lining the fencerows scents the warm late summer air.

A left turn into the driveway reveals a modest two-story, hip-roof house cased in white aluminum siding. A thick evergreen shelterbelt protects the house on the north. Thinly spaced elms to the south permit ample sunlight during the winter. Near the back of the house a path to the swing set looks well used.

Farther along the driveway a double garage stands near a faded red barn and behind it a large metal machine shed. The machine shed is noticeably newer than the barn. Toward the end of the driveway a giant self-propelled spraying rig with upright folding booms flanks an outlying clutter of half-rusted implements from earlier days.

Neil and Arlene Jorgensen have been farming in this part of the country all their lives. They are fifth-generation farmers. Mr. Jorgensen's parents, Clay and Mary, live a mile to the east and a quarter mile south. Clay's great-grandfather purchased the family's first quarter section here in the early 1880s. Clay's grandfather built the house and barn where Clay and Mary live. "I'm still sleeping in the same bedroom I was born in," Clay says.

Families like the Jorgensens are the backbone of America's rural economy. Many of these families have farmed in the same location for generations. In some areas they coax the nation's corn and soybeans toward harvest, in other places they nurture its wheat, and in still others they tend its cotton. Their daily labor supplies the milk we drink and the fruits and vegetables we eat.

Family relations are integral to the Jorgensens' farming activities. Neil and Clay farm in partnership. The two generations draw income from the same crops. Although Clay is old enough to have retired, he stays active running errands, helping feed the cows, manning one of the tractors during

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planting, and driving the truck during harvest. Neil does the heavy fieldwork and handles most of the management decisions. Hardly a day passes that the two do not spend time working together.

The Jorgensen women are as actively involved in farming as their husbands. Arlene has a job in town but does most of the farm bookkeeping. She and Neil decide together on major purchases, such as land and equipment. Mary looks after the grandchildren. "I'm the go-getter," she says, explaining that she runs errands, drives a tractor, and brings meals to the field during harvest. Neil eats at his parents' house about as often as at his own.

Both couples are proud to be doing what their ancestors did. They consider it fortunate to be living near each other and working together. The physical labor is not as exhausting as it used to be. The tractors are bigger and better. Information technology has dramatically changed the way farming is done. The Jorgensens no longer raise hogs. Corn and soybean prices have been good the last few years.

The Jorgensens are also facing challenges. When Neil was growing up, it seemed natural that he would farm. He started helping with the chores in grade school and was driving the tractor by the time he was in junior high. "I guess I've got farming in my blood," he says. He hopes one of the children will follow in his footsteps but is unsure if that will happen. It has been harder to pass his knowledge on to his sons and daughters and to save enough to get them started. Machinery is almost prohibitively expensive. The new combine he purchased three years ago cost a quarter of a million dollars.

Relationships with the neighbors have been changing too. Clay remembers when neighbors shared machinery and got together to visit on Sunday afternoons. Now that he is almost retired, he meets a couple of other farmers his age for coffee early on weekday mornings. Neil is too busy. Besides that, there are hardly any farmers nearby. Only the ones with large tracts of land are left. Neil worries about being squeezed out before he is old enough to retire. The competition is fierce.

Then there are the challenges of keeping up with new technology. The high cost of machinery necessitates careful budgeting. Seed is now genetically engineered and costs ten times what it did a decade ago. New fungicides and pesticides come with confusing instructions. Too much at the wrong time will stunt the grain. Information technology makes it easier to stay current of new developments but also makes it important to keep up with market fluctuations.

A century ago approximately six million Americans farmed. That number has declined dramatically. According to the US Census Bureau fewer than 750,000 employed Americans list their principal occupation as farmer, meaning that they earn their primary living from farming land they own or rent. If people who describe themselves as farm managers are included, the

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total rises to about a million. More Americans earn their livings as accountants than as farmers. Twice as many.[1]

Although farmers are a small fraction of the US labor force, farming continues to be a topic of interest and importance to the nonfarming public. One reason is that nearly everyone interacts indirectly with farming three times a day—at breakfast, lunch, and dinner. The food supply depends on farming. We expect food to be there when we want it, and we expect it to be healthy and reasonably priced.

A second reason is that American history is rooted in farming. It is hard to understand America's past without considering the central role of farming to leaders such as Thomas Jefferson and Andrew Jackson and among the millions of pioneers who settled the land. Many Americans who now live in cities and suburbs hale from farm families.

The cultural legacy of farming generates continuing interest in understanding the experiences of people who live close to the land. A person interested in literature does not have to look far to find accounts by writers who have left the city, returned to the family farm or purchased a small parcel, and described their experiences raising animals and rediscovering the serenity and challenges of rural life.

A third source of interest stems from the fact that rural America is vitally important to the nation's public policy. What farmers do with the land they farm has important implications for environmental and energy policies. How agriculture is affected is an important consideration in international trade negotiations. It is a frequently contested issue in policy discussions about food stamps, school lunch programs, and public health.

Farming is also of interest and importance in academic discussions about the nature of society. Theories of society that emerged toward the end of the nineteenth century emphasized the large-scale shift from agrarian-based to industrial-based economies. With farm life declining, long-held traditions and values were assumed to be diminishing as well. Scholars expected the close-knit relationships that characterized farming communities to be replaced by something better suited to urban life. Gender relationships would probably change. Even religious beliefs and practices might change.[2]

Questions about social change have generated continuing interest in the differences between rural and urban life. Much of the attention has focused on the growth of cities and suburbs. The related questions have to do with changes in rural areas. These questions concern the impact on farm life of such changes as declining population in farming communities, the aging of farm families, succession of farms to the coming generation, and the effects of changes in technology and markets.

Perhaps because it is of such widespread interest, farming is a topic that sometimes eludes clear understanding. Stereotypes of farming range from depictions of country bumpkins living old-fashioned lives to images of rural

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plutocrats reaping undeserved benefits from the government dole. Stereotyping of this kind places farming outside the mainstream of modern middle-class America. Other stereotypes put farming too centrally inside the American story, attributing virtues and values to farmers that are somehow harder to find in urban locations.

Reliable information about farming comes from several sources. The news media carry stories about farm accidents, how the weather is affecting crop yields and food prices, and what the latest farm bills include in terms of government subsidies and regulations. The US Department of Agriculture (USDA) provides a wealth of information about crops, yields, prices, and the economics of farming. Agricultural economists, rural sociologists, and anthropologists have examined variations and changes in farm practices.[3] Fictional accounts and literary essays offer imaginative interpretations of rural life. Historical studies chronicle how farm families lived and worked in the past.[4]

The missing piece is what farmers themselves have to say about their lives. Why is farming important to them? What do they mean when they say farming is in their blood? How does the business of running a farm affect their families? Their relationships with neighbors? Their religious faith? Their sense of who they are as persons? Their understanding of the land? How are all of these understandings changing as farming changes?

THE PRINCETON STUDY

The research presented here was conceived of as a way of letting farmers themselves speak about their lives, telling their stories, describing their day-to-day activities, and talking about their families and their communities and the challenges they face as well as the opportunities they envision for the future. The idea was to prompt conversations by asking questions about various topics and then allow the conversations to develop in their own ways.

The study aimed to capture the voices of farmers who are seldom heard in any forum outside of farming communities themselves. Farmers who spend their days planting soybeans or wheat or harvesting corn or cotton or feeding livestock and milking cows. Farmers who may be earning a good living and farmers who worry about meeting the payments on their loans. Ordinary farmers like the Jorgensens whose stories would be missed in news headlines and government statistics.

The research was designed to record the stories of people who actually live on farms and who earn their primary income from farming. The researchers who collaborated with me on the project and I did not include people who may have lived in rural areas but who did not farm or people who could be described as hobby farmers because they earned their principal income from

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working at some other job or from investments. We excluded corporations that owned or operated corporate farms but included farmers who may have formed family corporations or partnerships for legal and tax-related reasons. We focused on farmers who were engaged in what they considered to be family farming, whether that meant husbands and wives, siblings farming in partnership, or multigenerational farms.

The research design provided opportunities for farmers in several regions of the country and engaged in several different kinds of farming to tell us about their lives and to talk about the meanings and values they associate with their experiences in family farming. We talked with farmers like the Jorgensens who grow corn and soybeans and with farmers in other areas who specialize in wheat or cotton, who raise cattle, who operate dairies, and who specialize in fruits and vegetables.

In our interviews we asked farmers and farm couples to tell us about their daily lives and what they liked or did not like about farming. We asked how long their families had been farming in the area. They told us stories about their parents and grandparents. They recalled what it was like growing up on farms, if they had, and what adjustments they made, if they had not.

We spoke with farmers in their living rooms, at kitchen tables, in farm shops, and while they inspected crops and livestock. Some of the interviews were conducted with farmers by cell phone while they drove their tractors or hauled grain to town. Many took place on rainy days and during the winter months when work was slow. We talked with farm couples together and with farmers individually. Although the majority of our interviews were with men, approximately a third were with women and farm couples.

Farmers talked about the tough decisions they had made and how farming led to family conflicts as well as to family harmony. They discussed their neighbors and expressed their views about government policies. We asked that they speak candidly and say whatever they wanted to. We promised not to disclose their names or the names of their communities or to include information that might reveal their identity. Jorgensen is a pseudonym. Some of the farmers we spoke with lived in hip-roof houses, and some had swing sets. Their name was not Jorgensen.

The farmers we spoke with ranged in age from late twenties to late eighties. Most were in their fifties and early sixties, and nearly all were married. We talked with farmers whose families had been farming for three, four, and five generations. We also talked with farmers who had not been raised on farms or who were farming land that had not been farmed by previous generations.

In all, we conducted lengthy qualitative interviews with 250 people. Fifty were community leaders who told us their impressions of farm life from working closely with farmers as agricultural extension agents, as heads of local farm companies, and as clergy. The rest were farmers we contacted

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through a sampling design that ensured representation among small, medium, and large farms and in regions specializing in corn and soybeans, wheat, cotton, dairy, and truck farming. On average, the interviews took about ninety minutes. Many lasted two and a half to three hours. (The appendix provides additional information about the research.)

The comments and the stories told and the opinions expressed provide a rare opportunity to see how farmers view their worlds and to understand what farming means and why farmers consider it important. Information like this is not amenable to statistical generalizations. It requires paying close attention to the words and the speakers and their stories. The farmers we spoke with were not speaking as representatives of the farming population. They were describing their own experiences. It is from these descriptions and in the texture of the language itself that an understanding of their experiences can be attained.

Nearly every farmer we spoke with thought the public was misinformed about farming. Some blamed the media for telling stories that misrepresented facts about farm subsidies or that focused too much on bumper crops one year and crop failures the next. Some merely recognized that the nonfarming public purchases its food washed, processed, and conveniently packaged with only a dim understanding of how it originated on someone's farm. Many of the farmers we spoke with acknowledged their own responsibility for popular misunderstandings. It would be wonderful, they said, if people from the city could spend a day on someone's farm or if farmers could give talks to the public about farming. There was not enough time in the day for that to happen.

When we probed this concern about being misunderstood, we learned that farmers were not intent on communicating any one particular story that was not being told. They were not saying that the public had an overly glowing or romanticized view of farming and needed to be informed that farm life these days was a desperate struggle. Nor did they feel that farm life was a whole lot better than the public generally imagined.

Instead, the message that came through again and again was that farm life is complicated. It is more complicated than headlines or summaries from statistical surveys generally acknowledge. Its meanings and how farmers think about it vary not only from day to day but vary also depending on how a person looks at it. The good and the bad—the enjoyable parts and the ones that keep farmers awake at night worrying—are all woven together. As one of the farmers we spoke with put it, "There's always another side to the story."

Letting the different sides of the story come out—and indeed honoring the inevitable ambivalence present in the daily lives that any of us lead—is more difficult than it should be. It is easier to look for the simple headline or ask that the complexity be reduced to an argument that can be summa-

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rized in a single sentence. That kind of information is easiest to process even though we know from our personal experiences that nothing is quite that simple.

The cultural complexities of contemporary farming extend beyond the economic considerations that generally receive the most attention in food and farm policy discussions. The ambiguities or tensions involved reflect both the distinctive history of farming and its changing social location. Consider the following:

- Farming is a solitary occupation requiring long hours working alone and necessitating decisions for which the farmer takes sole responsibility, but farming is thoroughly embedded in social relationships that influence farming and change as farming undergoes change.

- Farming communities are tight-knit neighborhoods in which farmers share work and enjoy one another's company, but farmers' neighbors in these communities are uniquely their competitors in ways that characterize few other neighborhoods.

- Farming exemplifies the kind of traditional labor market in which decisions are made on the basis of ascriptive familial relationships rather than instrumental calculations, but farming has adapted to modern economic conditions in ways suggesting that rational decision-making processes prevail.

- Farming is an occupation that in many ways has changed very little and embraces values that emphasize tradition and continuity, but farming has also managed to adapt dramatically to new technologies that increase productivity and at the same time fundamentally change the social relationships in farm families.

- Farmers have a distinctly integral relationship with the land because of working closely with it on a daily basis, but this relationship is changing and perhaps becoming more distant as farmers employ larger equipment and use technologically advanced methods of farming.

- Farmers are thought to be particularly oriented toward religious values because of their dependence on the uncontrolled forces of nature, but questions must be asked as to whether this view is still correct as farmers have become more influenced by science, technology, and higher education.

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- As the sole proprietors of small business operations, farmers are in a weak position with respect to global markets, and they realize this weakness and find ways to make sense of it, and at the same time exemplify ways of increasing their position within the marketplace.

- The dramatic decline of the farming population over the past century could mean that farmers regard themselves as left behind and out of step with modern social change, but how farmers interpret their choice of career and lifestyle could also encourage a different view of how farming has changed.

These are among the characteristics of contemporary farming that shape how farmers think and talk about farming. Many of these characteristics are ones that have been of interest in broader scholarly discussions as well. How family ties and business relations can function together is one example. What it means to be an independent person when in many ways that is not the case is another. Why technology is embraced that may erode deeply held values is yet another.[5]

American farm life is vastly diverse—far more diverse than the interchangeable bushels of wheat and gallons of milk that get tabulated in farm statistics. The commonalities that may appear from the fact that farmers live in the country and earn their living from the land are refracted through the different lenses of topography, soil, and location. Farm life varies with seasonal changes in the weather. It is quite different for someone managing a spread of ten thousand acres than for a family earning a living from fewer than a hundred.

The true diversity of farm life is evident in the meanings that farmers attach to it as they tell their stories. The land holds distinct meanings because it has been in the family for several generations. Or it has meaning because its value is increasing. Or both. That grove behind the barn, a farmer might say, is where I played hide-and-seek growing up. I hated getting up in the morning to help milk the cows. Somehow I just enjoy being out on the tractor and looking out across the field.

The way to gain an understanding of what farm life means, short of farming oneself, is to listen as farmers tell their stories—as they talk about what they like or do not like, why they went into farming and why they have stayed, how it affects their families and what happens when they talk with their neighbors, whether it somehow connects with their religious beliefs, how they think about the land, and how they feel about new technology and changes in the market. From these accounts it is possible to gain an understanding of the diverse ways in which farmers interpret their lives.

The fact that there are different sides to the story is important too. Neil Jorgensen's narrative about his years' farming offers a suggestive illustration.

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Toward the end of a lengthy interview in which he spoke about the ups and downs of farming and what he does from day to day, he said that he was optimistic about the future of family farming. He would tell anyone considering it that it is a good life. Then, when asked if he wanted to add any other comments, he paused for a moment, seeming to hesitate, and said, yes, there was one thing. He talked for several minutes about the physical risks involved in farming. He described a serious accident that had put him in the hospital. But that was not as bad, he said, as an extended period of severe depression.

His depression might have manifested as seriously in any other line of work, but he was convinced that the struggles, the risks, and the uncertainties of farming made it worse. He eventually recovered. And yet, it was a struggle he wanted us to know about. "I prayed to die," he said. That's how bad I was."

This was one of many frank and personally revealing comments that emerged in our interviews. Farmers told of serious farm accidents and even murders that had taken place in their communities. They mentioned conflicts between husbands and wives and between parents and children. They talked of struggles over land and difficulties making ends meet. The stories were not told to show that farm life is terrible. Only that it is human.

Farming is inherently about families. The conclusion that came through clearly in our interviews is that farm families do work together, they do so across gender lines and often across generations, and these relationships are complicated by the fact that running a business and doing things as a family converge so often and in such complex and sometimes conflicting ways. As farm life changes, farmers argue that family relationships are still among their highest priorities. They enjoy working together and insist that farms are good places to raise children. And yet these family relationships are changing. Farmers are in the position of having to invent new reasons for arguing that farms are good places for families. I examine these reasons and their underlying relationships in chapter 1.

Farmers' relationships with neighbors are changing as well. The idea that farming communities are places in which neighbors understand one another, share work, worship together, drink coffee together on slow mornings, and enjoy one another's company is an ideal that many farmers would like to maintain. But they are finding it harder to realize this ideal in practice. Looking closely at what they do and say about neighbors suggests that neighborliness is being maintained in ways that depend less on warm feelings and more on formal organizations. The role of neighbors is the focus of chapter 2.

Like neighborliness, religious sentiments among farm families also appear to be changing. If sacred narratives about good shepherds and abundant harvests bear continuing resonance in farming communities, houses

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of worship are less often filled than in the past because of declining farm populations. Because of their enduring attachments to the land, farm families typically live in their communities for periods spanning lifetimes and generations. That lends stability to rural congregations. However, it can also breed discontent that may be especially difficult to transcend. How farmers experience faith and talk about it is discussed in chapter 3.

With farm life embedded so clearly in families and communities, an observer would have to wonder what farmers might say about being independent. That image of rugged, strong-willed independence has been part of legends about American farmers from the beginning. In these narratives farmers are the epitome of American individualism. The farmers we spoke with still embraced an ethos of self-determination. Being their own boss was what they especially liked about farming. They evaluated success and failure in these terms. At the same time the evidence suggests that the meaning of personal independence is changing. Chapter 4 summarizes what farmers said about their understandings of independence.

These shifting ways of understanding farm life ultimately bear on farmers' relationships to the land. On the one hand, the land is almost like family. It conjures up deep feelings of respect. Adoration sometimes borders on worship. On the other hand, farmers' relationships to the land are mediated by big machinery that reduces their immediate physical contact with the soil, by bank loans and soaring prices, and by chemicals. The resulting understanding is at best one of ambivalence. Farmers want to be good stewards of the land but express uncertainty about how best to practice good stewardship. Chapter 5 presents conclusions about farmers' understandings of the land.

The change that farmers say is affecting their lives most powerfully is technological innovation. Larger and more expensive machinery, genetically engineered seed, new fertilizers and pesticides, and information technology are all affecting farm life dramatically. Many of these developments are ones that farmers eagerly embrace. At the same time they are caught up short with questions they cannot answer about the best uses of technology and where it is all heading. How the farmers we spoke with think about technology is the focus of chapter 6.

The challenge that keeps farmers from sleeping at night—other than uncertainties about the weather—is concern about markets. They know that markets for farm commodities have never been under their control. But they worry that market fluctuations are occurring more rapidly and in larger swings than ever before. The fluctuations appear to be random and unpredictable and yet seem to be increasingly shaped by traders, by an agribusiness plutocracy, and by foreign countries. Against those odds, a striking number of the farmers we spoke with nevertheless described small ways

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in which they hoped to gain some control over the markets in which they function. Farmers' views of markets are discussed in chapter 7.

No single story emerges from these conversations. Nor should it. These are not the observations of policymakers who worry about food supplies and corporate agriculture. Nor are they the descriptions of lives left behind by those who have moved on to other places and different careers. They are the experiences and the meanings of those experiences of farmers who have stayed in family farming. They show what family farming is like and how it is changing. The message is that farming is complicated and yet inflected with family stories, relationships, and experiences drawn from day-to-day activities that render it uniquely meaningful to those involved. This is the message farmers we spoke with hoped the nonfarming public would understand.

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