

Family Farm Folklore

Betty J. Belanus



Three generations of the Peters family of Vallonia, Indiana, pose in front of the sign that shows their farm as having been in the family for over a century.

Photo courtesy Jackson County Schneck Memorial Hospital

The “economic crisis” of the early 1980s rivaled the Great Depression of the 1930s in its impact on family farming. Its effects are still being felt today. Some farms that have been in families for a century or more have gone bankrupt; people who love working the land have been forced to move to towns or cities and work in factories or offices. In many rural areas, churches and schools have closed or merged with those in nearby towns because populations have become depleted. Some farmers complain they don’t know their neighbors any more, as farmland is turned into housing developments or is bought up by large agribusinesses.

But many family farms have survived. In spite of the ups and downs of fluctuating agricultural markets, unpredictable weather, and debt payments, they have found strategies to persevere.

Strategies include redividing labor among family members, diversifying crops and livestock, and establishing a farm-related “side business” to supplement income. There seem to be as many combinations of strategies for survival as there are farm families. And even in the “Heartland” states of the Midwest, often considered a homogenous region of European Americans, a great variety of family farms exists.

Midwestern family farms include small “truck patches” and huge hog producers; medium-sized beef cattle farms and thousands of acres in corn, soybeans and wheat; fruit orchards and large dairy farms. And the families that operate the farms include African American farmers, whose grandfathers moved north to work in the city long enough to afford a piece of land; descendants of Northern, Central and Eastern European farmers, who came to America seeking land and opportunities unavailable to them in the Old Country; American Indian farmers whose agricultural tradition stretches back millennia on the continent; and recent Southeast Asian immigrant farmers, who work cooperatively to provide their communities with foods they were familiar with in their homeland.

It’s almost impossible, therefore, to define “the Heartland family farmer.” It’s easier to mention a few common traits. We’ve found two things that the families researched for this year’s Festival have in common — a body of skills and knowledge inherited between generations within an ethnic and rural tradition; and a keen interest in and understanding of their rural past, reflected in family histories, stories, photos and memorabilia. These two qualities — knowledge and consciousness — can be called “family farm folklore,” and they have helped rural families maintain a way of life few of them would willingly trade for easier and often more profitable lives in towns and cities.

The folklore of farm families is unique, for it emerges where occupation intertwines with family, where all household members are, or have been at one time, involved with the life of the

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Mandan Indians, Lydia Sage-Chase and her husband, Bob, in their garden in North Dakota. Today, Lydia and other members of her family carry on farming traditions, using seeds passed down through the generations, blessing the crops each year with special ceremonies. Photo courtesy Lydia Sage-Chase

farm. Farm families are not like those where father and often mother work outside the home and interact with children only in mornings and evenings, on weekends and during vacation. Most farm families live in an almost constant state of “togetherness.” This often extends to grandparents and sometimes even great-grandparents, who live nearby and still help on the farm. The folklore of families owning other types of family businesses may be somewhat similar — but farming is as much a distinctive lifestyle as it is a business. Some examples will bring this unique type of family folklore into focus.

Consciousness of a Rural Past

Like many other families, Heartland farm families mark their histories with documents, photographs, stories and various types of material objects. But the way a farm family constructs its history is remarkable in the extent to which their history reflects that of the farm itself. Large aerial photographs of the farm 20 years ago and today may take up part of the living room wall; home displays of photographs mix family portraits with images of children showing prize dairy or beef cattle, Future Farmers of America (FFA) certificates of merit, and blue ribbons won at the 4-H fair for perfect garden vegetables.

Some families have written lengthy histories of their ancestors, or are included as founding

members in community or county histories. Along with writing, other families have found unique ways of preserving and displaying their past. Iona Todd and her daughter, Deonna Todd Green, from Mecosta County, Michigan, created an extraordinary family quilt. It tells the story of Stephen Todd’s escape from slavery, his marriage to Caroline Todd, their eventual settlement as pioneer farmers, and their six generations of descendants; the quilt incorporates family oral narratives, Bible records, and documents found through library research. The mother and daughter quilters have also created an “old settler’s quilt” commemorating other African American homestead farmers in the history of their county.

Family stories are one of the most important means of conveying family history. Like photographs, these also can reflect a rural past. For instance, Ordell (“Bud”) Gustad who farms with his three sons in Volin, South Dakota, likes to tell the story of how his father raised enough cash to start farming on his own in the 1930s. Ineligible for a WPA (Works Project Administration) job, Bud’s father got the ingenious idea of selling coffee and doughnuts to the WPA workers. The next year, he started farming on his “coffee and doughnut” money.

Another recollection from the recent past gives a humorous family story a rural twist. Judy Borman, who grew up on and now runs her family’s



Marktavious Smith with his son and mother-in-law, Marie Berry Cross, at home in Mecosta County, Michigan. Their ancestors settled in Michigan as farmers in 1860. The fiddle has been handed down for five generations from the time of the first settlement. Photo by Roland Freeman, © 1986

dairy farm in Kingdom City, Missouri, with her husband, Harlan, tells the story of how she was almost late to her own wedding. Before the ceremony she spent a little too much time showing off the family farm to the out-of-town guests. By the time she arrived at the church to get dressed, most of the guests had already arrived and were seated. To avoid being seen by anyone, she sneaked into the dressing room by climbing up the fire escape.

Along with stories, the material items that farm families choose to collect also reflect the importance of the farm in their lives. A common collectible is model farm machinery. A wall of shelves in the living room or family room often displays their collection, which more often than not reflects the type of machinery currently or once owned by the family. Larry Loganbach, whose family has raised cucumbers, tomatoes, and sugar beets for several generations in northwestern Ohio, found himself in a dilemma when his young son requested a model sugar beet harvester for a Christmas present. Since none of the commercial farm machinery model companies carried such a relatively uncommon item, Larry and his wife, Connie, labored for weeks after the

children were asleep to build the desired toy. Larry has since completed 14 of these models at the request of other sugar beet farming families.

While many families proclaim their rural past by displaying old plows or other parts of used machinery on a lawn, or by incorporating them into a mailbox post, the Arnold family of Rushville, Indiana, restored the original 1820 log homestead on their farm as a tribute to the farm's founders. The modest cabin stands as a physical reminder of the humble beginnings of the family, and of their progress over the years. The farmhouse that Eleanor and Jake Arnold live in — the second house on the farm, built in 1853 — is itself a tribute to earlier members of the family.

Knowledge and Skills

Most knowledge and skills needed to run a family farm are passed down from one generation to the next through a process combining informal learning and formal apprenticeship. As children follow their parents around the home and farm, they are gradually introduced to simple tasks. They graduate to more complex ones as time goes on. At the same time, most farm children in the past several generations have been

encouraged to join rural-based clubs that more formally prepare them for farm life. Recently, more and more young people have attended college, studying agriculture and bringing modern innovations back to the farm. The older generation has embraced what they find useful in this new knowledge, combining it with the tried and true methods of the farm operation.

As most farmers will admit, farming often relies more on continual trial-and-error than on science. Traditional knowledge also helps. Dave Jones of Brown County, Nebraska, explains how his father used the phases of the moon and the information in a farm almanac to guide his planting. While Dave does not always use this method today, he has become known in his family and community as a weather predictor in recent years. Applying information he read several years ago in a farm magazine, Dave predicts the coming winter's snowfall by examining the choke-cherry and plum bushes in the area. If there is not enough fruit on these bushes for small animals to store, then there will be less snowfall to allow them to forage for food. This knowledge has served Dave and his two farming sons, Tom and Jim, well in the past few years, warning them to store more feed and hay for farm animals if a severe winter is predicted.

Children are usually introduced to more complex chores on the farm before the age of ten. Bradley Peters of Jackson County, Indiana, was almost eight last year when he received his first heifer calf, which he raised under his father Larry's supervision as a 4-H project. The heifer has now been bred, and when she calves, Bradley will get to raise the offspring as well. He trades work on the farm for feed for the heifer. His father proudly says that his son is building "a little business of his own" and saving money toward his college education. Other farm children have started their own profitable side businesses as well, building on what they learn from their parents as well as the skills they learn from clubs like 4-H and FFA.

Recently, many farmers have been attempting to reduce the chemicals used in the form of fertilizers and herbicides on the farm, and to employ more aggressive soil conservation methods. For the Cerny brothers of Cobden, Illinois, this means a blend of traditional practices they have already been engaged in for years, and soil conservation techniques like "no-till," which leaves corn residue in the field after harvest to act as mulch and reduce erosion. As Norbert Cerny puts it, "This land has been farmed for a long time, and it's been farmed hard. . . . Maybe we can leave



Close by the original family farm house, the Cerny brothers of Cobden, Illinois, prepare to plant tomato seeds in the hotbed their grandfather built. Most vegetable growers now begin their seeds in green-houses, but the Cernys prefer the older method. Photo by LeeEllen Friedland

things a little better than we found them."

Generally, family farmers seem conservative and progressive at the same time. Machine sheds house small tractors dating back to the 1940s, which are often still used for some farm operations, side-by-side with giant tractors with computerized dashboard controls and stereo sound systems. The old and the new, the older generation and the younger generation, come together on the family farm. Like folklore itself, life on the family farm embodies both continuity and disjuncture, change and durability.

Betty Belanus is the Curator of this year's Family Farm program. She grew up on a farm in the dairying area of Addison County, Vermont, and holds her Ph.D. in folklore from Indiana University.

Further Readings

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