

A Year in the Life of a Family Farmer

Steven Berntson

Steven Berntson farms with his wife, Joanne, and son Daniel in northwest Iowa, near Paullina. The farm has been in the family for 80 years, established by Steven's grandfather, a Norwegian immigrant. The following are excerpts from his personal journal for the year 1990.

Thursday, January 11

In Roman mythology, Janus, guardian of portals and patron of beginnings, was a god of two faces: one looked forward, the other back.

We are deep into winter, and the great snows of the season are swirling upon us. These days are an enforced break from busyness, a rare time for quiet thought. And so I look forward and back in my own inner inventory of what it means to belong to the land.

Robert Frost once wrote, "We were the land's before the land was ours." It is a line that seems paradoxical but isn't. We claim ownership in titles and deeds, but in the end, what are we without cornfields? Without the farmer, the earth is yet the earth. Without the earth, what is the farmer?

We do not own the land, it owns us. It garners our days and steals our hearts. If farming were a drug, we would all be addicts.

Somehow, when you farm, everything gets all mixed up together — your wife and kids, your acres and your work, your home and your life itself. It gets all knitted together in what we call the home place. Painted on the great white barns with a date neatly inscribed below, the name of the home place is spoken in a reverential, almost holy way.

The home place: a remembered place. A place of secrets and memories and dreams. Of mistakes as well.

A safe place. A place where you know who you are. A place of stories. A place to go back to, sometimes in person, more often in mind.

For myself, I am deeply grateful to my parents

and grandparents for the rich life they gave me as a child on this particular home place, the place of my moorings.

Tuesday, February 6

I'm deep in the art of taxes; my tax appointment is Friday. Bookkeeping is not my forte, but it must be done.

Today I also paid for some of my seed corn but won't pick it up until late April, just before planting. Is seed corn ever getting expensive! Some of it is now over \$70 a bushel. In return, I'm lucky if I can get \$2 a bushel for the corn I grow and sell. Who said farming ever made sense?

Saturday, February 17

My attention is shifting from the farming year past to the year upcoming. I have finished my taxes and am doing some thinking about crop insurance for the next year. How much risk should I take?

This afternoon I'm going to a meeting to hear about the government farm program for 1990.

Thursday, March 1

March 1 is the traditional date for the major moves of the year: taking possession of a newly-bought farm, making payments on a mortgage, moving to a rented place, etc. In that sense, it is the beginning of a farmer's year.

I can never begin a new farming season without thinking of my Grandpa Berntson, a Norwegian immigrant, who exactly 80 years ago this very day made that fateful move from an 80-acre hill farm in Marshall County in southeastern Iowa to this farm near Paullina. How many times have I heard that long and eloquent story! How he loaded his family and machinery and livestock and furniture on two freight cars, and then on an unseasonably warm March day was surprised to be met at the Paullina depot by his new neighbors, who helped him move the final five miles



*Dried soybeans are lifted by elevator into a steel bin for winter storage.
Steve and his father, Glenn, watch from below.
Photo by Bill Neibergall, courtesy Des Moines Register*

to a new farm and a new life. Here he and his wife, Karina, the enchanting evangelist from Mayville, North Dakota, who had stolen his heart at a tent meeting, achieved a good measure of worldly success in their farming (buying a second farm in the midst of the Great Depression), only to have their confidence in themselves and in their God grievously shaken when scarlet fever plucked two of their children, Burdette and Beulah, from the bloom of childhood.

I write this in the very house — indeed, in the very room — they died. And that has meaning, too: if the story of my immigrant grandfather sustains and fortifies me, it also scares me, in caution and apprehension.

I am a keeper of his story, a custodian of his old-but-not-so-odd dream of land, and the inheri-

tor of that promise. But in a larger and truer sense, I am more than curator. I am creator. For I own the land adjacent to his land; my dream borders his. His place has become my place.

And yet it is not a case of intrusion, of a stranger in his place. It is the fulfillment of his place.

Monday, March 26

The snowstorm that swirled in just ahead of April had to give way quickly to the sun and the thaw.

It was a rich snow, indeed, for it leaves behind a greening earth that contrasts wildly with the dirtiness of fall's leftovers. And this is a green like no other. I have often marveled at the solid green of corn neck-deep in a wet July, and then after the harvest another kind of richness in the color of money. But here in the green spring there is no price whatever, but a bargain basement value of promise and hope.

Tuesday, April 10

These spring days are tentative and yet decisive.

I began field work today, seeding 20 acres of oats on last year's cornstalks. There is something elemental and fundamental about sowing oats — no high-tech machinery, no herbicides, no fertilizer except for what I haul out of the barn.

The crisp air was utterly intoxicating, the crunch of cornstalks a potent medicine for a farmer's soul.

High overhead, flocks of Canada geese plowed faint furrows into their own vast blue prairie fields.

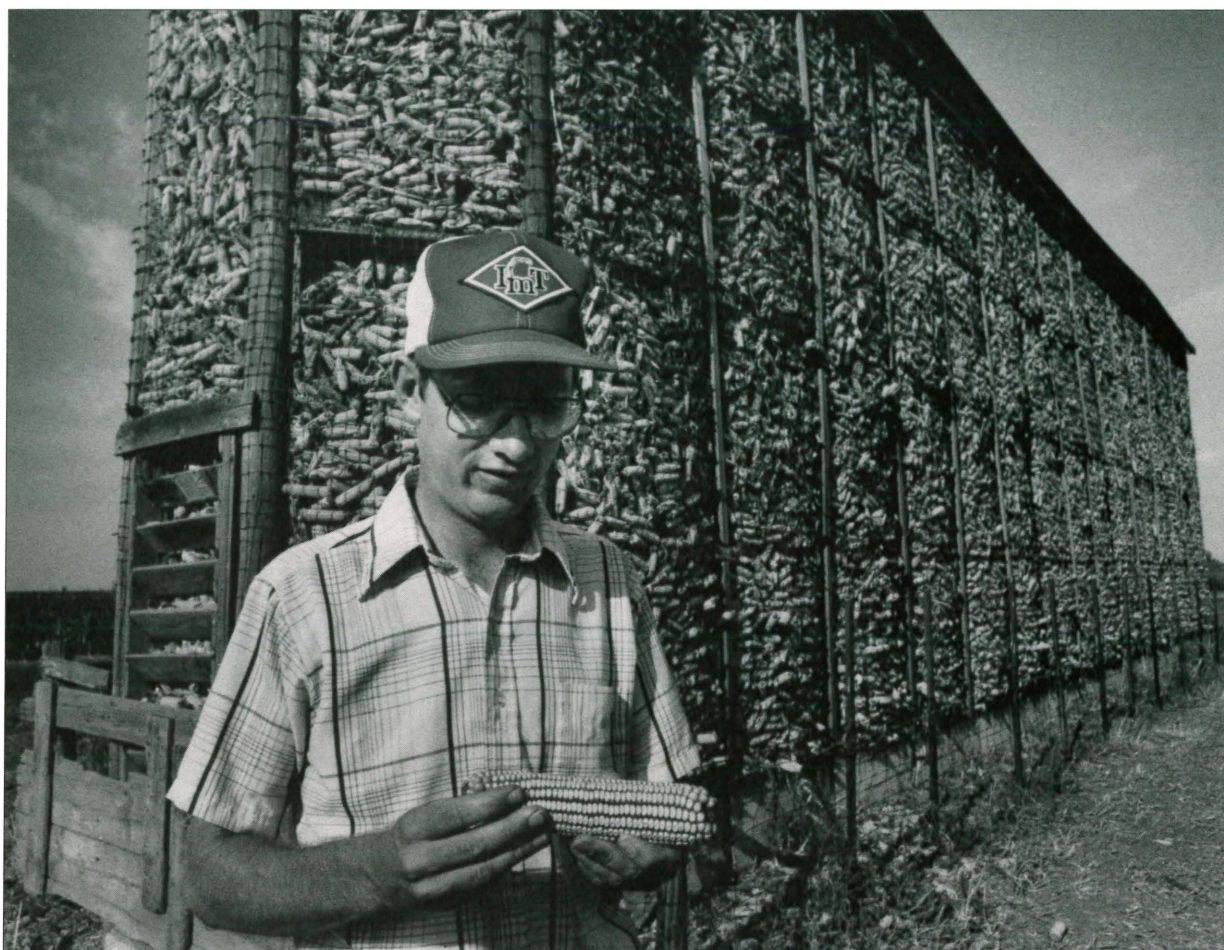
What a marvelous day!

Saturday, April 21

We still haven't had a good spring rain, so farmers can work in their fields without interruption from the weather. Joanne and Daniel and I have been flying kites in the evenings when the wind goes down.

Wednesday, May 2

I started planting corn today. Here in northwest Iowa we try to plant our corn between May 1 and



Steve inspects an ear of corn. Steve's father built this storage bin in 1972 from wire and old telephone poles. The sun and the wind dry these ears naturally, unlike the mechanical process used in closed steel bins.

Photo by Bill Neibergall, courtesy *Des Moines Register*

May 10 — earlier than May 1 and you risk damage from frost, later than May 10 and the crop doesn't have a full growing season.

Friday, May 18

Daniel was excited today to have one of the nests of ducks hatch out. The mother has 18 in her brood. Where but on a farm does a child grow up so close to life, to birth and death itself?

Saturday, May 26

I finished planting soybeans today. It's a job I enjoy for many reasons: it doesn't require quite the precision corn planting does, the days are warmer, it's the end of spring planting.

Memorial Day is just around the corner; I'm ready for a nap!

Monday, June 4

It is the season of motherhood again. The farm teems with life.

The hoghouse is full of hog music, sometimes nearly deafening as the sows, with deep rhyth-

mic grunts, call their piglets, who squeal and fight over their milk.

Several litters of kittens have been born in the bales of the barn, but it will be a few weeks yet before the tabbies bring their young out into the world.

Daniel's ducks have hatched four nests, totalling 47 ducklings, and some of the ducks are now sitting on their second clutch of eggs.

Our grove is home to squirrels, owls, wood ducks and a host of smaller birds. Badgers and foxes have dug dens for their young in the grass-back terraces, and pheasants and partridge are nesting in the grassy waterways of the fields.

Life is on its legs again, and I exult.

Tuesday, June 12

What a terrible hailstorm last night! I doubt if there is a more horrifying sound to a farmer than the clanging and banging of hailstones on the roof.

I have been through desiccating drought be-

fore — it wears on the soul like a lingering, languishing cancer. Hail is easier to take — like a heart attack — sudden, swift, definite, definable.

My beans have been hurt the worst, but not enough to warrant replanting.

Wednesday, June 20

Late this afternoon Daniel raced out to the field to ride the tractor with me while I finished cultivating the beans. Back and forth, back and forth we went, to the throaty solo of the Farmall M.

Then, as the day was dying, a doe and not one, but two fawns shadowed forth to our little stream for an evening drink. They came closer, ever so close, and we sensed then a kinship with them.

Utterly motionless, they stared, but music like the “Moonlight Sonata” cascaded from their wild brown eyes, and I understood every note. Both melodies are inscribed this hour upon my heart. I know which is the more beautiful.

Monday, July 2

We baled our second cutting of hay today. The recent rains have made for a lot of hay, but it's also tougher to get the hay to dry properly.

Sunday, July 22

Both sides of my family have been having their annual summer reunions. Typical summer reunions: lots of talk (same old stories, a few new ones), too much food, a few new babies, pictures, too much lemonade, relatives I see every day and others I see only at reunions.

What compels these family reunions? It is, I believe, a fundamental curiosity about yourself. Apart from your kin, you cannot begin to understand who you are or what you mean. Their story gives the sense to your story.

Bound by kinship to the soil and to one another, these are my people. We relish our time together. Good families don't just happen; they need to be nourished and nurtured.

Tuesday, August 7

We've been busy shelling last year's corn. As farmers go, I am about as average as average can be, farming a half section of land in a typical corn/soybean rotation and raising hogs.

But I am decidedly old-fashioned in picking corn in the ear and then shelling it the next summer, rather than simply combining my corn in the field.

Corn shelling is some of the most grueling, hot and dusty work on the farm, yet we seem to enjoy it. That's in part because we enjoy each other — joking, telling stories, eating together.

There is a place for everyone. I remember how my grandfather in his eighties could still take pride in just being able to bring out lunch, even though he couldn't scoop corn the vigorous way he once did.¹

Thursday, August 23

This morning I went to an auction of 80 acres of land about five miles from home. Early speculation was that the land might go for around \$2,300 an acre. That was optimistic; it sold for \$1,940.

Sometimes I get a little weary from all the talk about what land is worth, and I think that in the deepest sense, to the true farmer, it's beyond and apart from dollars. Sure, I suppose it's more fun the more digits that are on your net worth statement, but it's a shallow measure. One of the greatest crimes inflicted upon rural America is the notion that somehow a man's net worth and his human worth are one and the same. When you belong to the earth it really doesn't matter.

Tuesday, September 25

We had our first hard, killing frost last night, a reminder of how fickle fall can be.

One day you marvel in an immense sky and heady, crisp air. And the next day the sky turns sullen and melancholy and leaden, and the wind, like work, finds you no matter where you try to hide.

I suppose you could decipher the season in terms of jet streams and fading chlorophyll and mean temperatures, and you would be correct, in a sense. But not really, for fall has more to do with meanings than reasons.

Wednesday, October 3

Our soybean harvest is in full swing now. Most of the beans are averaging 24 bushels an acre, which is about half the normal crop. It's the biggest loss I've had in my 15 years of farming.

When you farm, you take your losses with your gains.

Saturday, October 20

We picked corn again today, and it looks like

¹ Author's note: Corn shelling is the process in which ears of corn are removed from a corn crib using a horizontal elevator called a dragfeed, and then run through a sheller — a combine-like machine which removes the kernels from the cobs. A typical shelling crew includes two or three men in the crib to scoop the corn into the dragfeed, one man to run the sheller and others to level off cobwagons and truck the corn to town. Corn shelling is considered hard work both because of the physical exertion required and because it is dusty work, often done in the hottest days of summer and the coldest days of winter.



Steve and Daniel inspect the farm from their pickup truck. Photo by Bill Neibergall, courtesy Des Moines Register

we could get done this next week with any luck at all. Dad drives the picker tractor, and Daniel and I haul and unload the corn. Joanne and I will be relieved when harvest is over because we worry about the danger of all these machines. Accidents happen in a twinkling.

Daniel's job is to stay on the tractor and work the hydraulic lever that raises the wagon as I unload the corn into the elevator. He's very proud that he can "higher the wagon," as he calls it.

I'm not sure which I enjoy more: listening to dad as he tells about his 50 years of cornpicking, or answering Daniel's delightful questions.

At 36, I wonder — at what other job are you blessed at once with the wisdom of a 76-year-old and the wonder of a 6-year-old?

Saturday, November 3

Today Daniel and I tore out an ancient, sagging fence just north of our cattle shed. It wasn't a long stretch, only 150 feet or so, and it served no useful purpose, holding nothing either in or out.

When the day was done, all that was left were two sets of footprints in the mud, irresistibly

metaphorical. Daniel was walking, quite literally, in my footsteps.

One of my favorite and most comical images of my father comes from when he would get home from a long day in the field, and then, doing chores, would be trailed by — in approximately this order — his elderly father, his brother and partner in farming, his youngest son, the dog and at least a dozen cats. The cats were waiting for him to milk the cow; the rest of the procession had assorted concerns of the day. It made for quite a collection of footsteps.

Tuesday, November 13

We received our first serious snow of the season today, about three inches. The first snow is a marker of the season, like the first frost. The gray slate of the land and the year are now cleared. There is no finer imagery than snow; even the Scriptures use it: crimson sins are washed "whiter than snow." The snow has blanketed our fields, covering whatever the sins of our farming were.

Sunday, November 18

As I write on this quiet, rural autumn evening, the western sky, like embers upon a hearth, sends marvelous shadows across the land. It is spectacular in its subtlety. We are but four days from Thanksgiving. I wonder, could Thanksgiving have found a more reflective time of year?

Tuesday, December 18

Working with the soil doesn't automatically endow a man with either wisdom or philosophy, but it does accord him an understanding of the sequences and cycles of the seasons.

A farmer lives by these seasons, and it is good to have them clearly and cleanly defined, not by the calendar, but by the days themselves. You plant your fields; you harvest them in their due season, again and again and again, in endless repetition, until one day you are worn out and used up and gone. And then in that final harvest, the farmer himself is planted into the soil, his final seed.

We are slipping again into the deep midwinter. I walk into the still, star-shot night, pondering the year past, looking up, like Whitman's learned astronomer, in perfect silence at the stars.

Steven Berntson farms and writes about farming in northwest Iowa. He has been published in the Des Moines Register, the Northwest Iowa Review, and farm cooperative magazines. Steven graduated from Dana College, Blair, Nebraska, with a B.A. in English.