

The Last Crop

Editorial Commentary
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In 2000 with Dad gone for nearly 21 years and none of us four children having a direct, agricultural interest in the property, my Mother, then 87, decided to sell the farm. It's a decision that more and more farm families face. The reasons are numerous. Often, however, it is the demand for land and housing exacerbated by a burgeoning population, particularly around the suburbs of metropolitan areas.

Frankly, our land had lost its agricultural value and taken on commercial value. Increasingly, developers and contractors approached the family with plans to build manufacturing plants, housing developments, and office buildings. It was only a matter of time before the town annexed the property or exercised a taking to further the cause of progress.

Mother and Dad had sold part of the farm many years earlier. It had become too much to handle, and with failing health, Dad had too many other worries on his mind. Out of concern for our father, we siblings went along with the sale, even though a little something died within each of us as the new owners assumed control. We reasoned that there still was enough farm left to watch crops grow, smell the new mown hay in the summer and see the native wildlife. But when Mother decided to put the rest of the farm on the block, the emotions took over. Our family had owned and farmed the land for 48 years; we were the last stewards in a succession of caretakers

that dated back 150 years or more. Abraham Lincoln signed the deed to the original land grant that created the farm. Upon our shoulders now rested the decision that would stand in perpetuity. What would we plant for the last crop?

At one time or another, every farm youth relives the formidable years of growing up on the farm. There was always work to be done—crops to grow, livestock to feed, manure to haul, garden to weed, fence to make or mend, or machinery to repair. Yet, there was time for other things, too. My brother and I fished in the creek for crawfish and in the farm pond for bluegills, bass and the occasional catfish. We found Indian arrowheads in the newly plowed fields. We learned how to dribble a bas-



ketball against a barn floor whose boards were so cupped and warped that, if you put it on the vertical, the floor could have been

used as a giant washboard. We could fix almost anything with bailing wire. We knew every water source on the property, and I remember showing my town-reared girlfriend how to get a drink of water from a cool, clear spring at the far end of a hot, dusty hay field. The warm summers juxtaposed with cold winters, the trap lines for wild game, the awe-inspiring joy of watching a calf being born, and the sorrow of losing 25 sheep to hemorrhagic septicemia on a Sunday morning just before church cascade through the memory banks.

When we sold off the other part of the

farm, the entire farmstead went with the deal. The new owners immediately razed the old main barn that had been a landmark in the community for the past 100 years. The heavy, stout, 12x12 inch and 12x18 inch timbers that made up the framework were products of the trees on the farm. These barns were built without nails. The beams with the adz marks stretched more than 40 feet before they connected to another beam with wooden pegs.

Now, in anticipation of a pending sale, the field next to the main highway remained fallow, the first time anyone could ever remember. I walked to the field and picked up a clod of dirt. The clay based dry soil crumbled in my hand, and the particles slowly fell to the ground. A little cloud of dust rose on the mounting breeze and then scurried off west to join some other dust particles in a housing development that used to be a neighbor's corn field. The scene brought back a flood of memories from years gone by. Year after year, that field had yielded a crop to the best of its ability—corn, soybeans, hay, oats, wheat. This year, as if it were a harbinger of the future, it once again had produced a crop—heavy, rank weeds, the ideal cover to protect the precious soil.

I was reminded that like this field, each of us has the potential to achieve the best of our ability, but we must be nurtured, cared, and cultivated to yield a harvestable product. Our farm was the incubator for a family to grow and achieve the best of its ability. The six of us living there traveled in different directions as our lives unfolded, but each of us had our roots in a commonality of land, livestock and homegrown values. Farm life shaped and molded us in different ways, and it helped create in us a sense of appreciation for ourselves as well as for others.

It is hard for us to face change, to let go of those things that have been so close for so long. The land, the barns, the house, and the people—each has achieved a permanency within us, a part of our very being. To alter or take any part of it away is to modify our very soul. The soil slowly sifting through my fingers is indicative of the changes we face as we journey through life. The more we change, the more constant change becomes.

Selling the last remnants of the farm severed a tied that has been a part of my life for almost half a century. As I stood in the center of the field and looked to the north, then east, south, and lastly to the west, the air danced with the ghosts of times

past. During those years away from the land, I have tried desperately to hold to the physical parts, the things that trigger this story or that memory, knowing all along that the security of the land would be there. Now, that too passes into the abyss of memories. My “farm home” ceases to be a reality and has become a treasured dust particle in my mind and heart, a cherished memory to be savored and loved over and over again.

Today, the land has taken on new meaning. Where once there were tall rows of corn, there is a massive parking lot with swales and doodles and elaborate landscaping. A local group purchased the entire land parcel, and its leaders have erected a magnificent and commanding church (see photo) complete with sanctuary, administrative offices, Sunday school rooms, kitchens, patios, and libraries. Where we planted wheat and soybeans, this church now nurtures and harvests souls. The angels of heaven have replaced the ghosts of my memories, and the entire congregation of this church rejoices on the same soil that has been so close to me all these years. Yes, our farm has now become a sanctuary for souls, and a Holy Shepherd tends the sheep on our pasture.

Laura Ingles Wilder wrote in her books that her father, Pa Ingles, liked to sing and play the fiddle. My joy in sharing our land with this new church to achieve a higher glory can be summed up in Pa's words: “...mid pleasures and palaces o're they may roam; be it ever so humble, there's no place like home.” On this Thanksgiving season, I am truly thankful that the last crop we planted will be an everlasting crop.
