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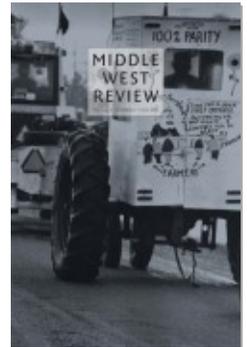
Sustaining the Conversation: The Farm Crisis and the Midwest

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Sustaining the Conversation

The Farm Crisis and the Midwest

On September 22, 1985, 80,000 people crowded into Memorial Stadium at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign for the first Farm Aid concert. Organized by Willie Nelson, John Mellencamp, and Neil Young, the nationally televised concert explained to urban audiences the devastating economic crisis in America's hinterlands. Thousands of farmers had lost their farms to foreclosure and thousands more were on the brink. The family farm, a fundamental American institution, was at stake. Rather than yielding solutions to the problem, however, Farm Aid revealed to the public the complexities inherent to American agriculture and raised just \$9 million, well below the \$50 million expected. At the time, critics deemed the concert a failure and the farm crisis an inevitable byproduct of the free market. Now, thirty years later, Farm Aid has persisted as an organization and the questions it raised in 1985 continue to demand our attention. This issue of the *Middle West Review* initiates new discussions about the farm crisis of the 1980s with the hope that we can begin to unravel the complexities of this critical moment in midwestern history.¹

The farm crisis of the 1980s had no singular cause. It was the product of changing social and technological circumstances in the countryside, devastating droughts, increasing levels of farm debt, and decades of complex, sometimes contradictory, federal policies. After the Second World War, rural America experienced a massive outmigration as mechanization reduced the need for human labor, and rising costs of production stymied profits. Between 1945 and 1974, the total number of farms fell from 5.8 million to 2.3 million. Earl Butz, the secretary of agriculture under President Rich-

ard Nixon, viewed this as a positive trend, urging farmers to invest in more land and equipment. His “get big or get out” mantra led thousands of farm families to take on greater debt and expand their operations. Optimism ran high during America’s bicentennial in 1976, when the newly inaugurated Century Farm Program recognized farms operating continuously under the same family for one hundred years or more. In its first year, more than five thousand certificates were issued in Iowa alone, lending a sense of permanence and stability for midwestern farmers. Less than ten years later many of those Century Farms were up for sale.²

By the late seventies, commodity prices plummeted as a result of grain embargoes and unstable global markets. Confronted with rising production costs, declining land values, unfavorable weather conditions, and federal policies that drove interest rates as high as twenty-one percent in the early 1980s, many farm families faced foreclosure as they struggled to manage their debt. The crisis was most acute in the corn belt of the Midwest, where between 1982 and 1992 one third of all farms faced financial hardship, and nearly eighteen percent of all farms went out of business. In 1983 the American Bankers Association reported that seventeen percent of farmers with outstanding loans would not be able to make payments that year, and for the first time in American history, the total interest owed on farm loans surpassed total farm income. The following year, farm debt reached an all-time high of \$215 billion, with only one third of farmers owing sixty-five percent of that amount. The crisis continued, and between 1984 and 1988 agricultural lenders wrote off \$19 billion in unpaid loans, approximately ten percent of all farm loans.³

The crisis rippled through the rural economy, and in 1987 three hundred agricultural banks failed, more than in any year since the Great Depression. Between 1979 and 1985, farm machinery sales declined by fifty percent, and firms that manufactured farm equipment laid off 140,000 workers. Many farm families no longer had the ability to patronize local, small town businesses, and with so many businesses suffering, farm families could no longer rely on off-farm wages to buffer hard times. The crisis did not affect everyone evenly. Established farmers, those with well-paid jobs off the farm, and those with smaller operations were more insulated from fluctuations in interest rates and land values. Those carrying heavy debt tended to be younger farm operators of larger and midsize grain operations in the Midwest. Eager to modernize with the help of high-interest loans during the 1970s, they were the most likely to be displaced in the 1980s.⁴

All told, 300,000 farms went out of business between 1982 and 1989. In the course of a decade, the total number of American farms fell by fourteen percent, from 2.2 million to 1.9 million. In 1983 alone, an estimated five hundred farm auctions took place each month. The sheer number of farmers facing displacement led many to social and political action. Iowa senator Tom Harkin urged the crowd gathered at a rally in 1985, “Let’s tell the president we’re not going to fade away quietly into the countryside.” Farmers denounced President Ronald Reagan’s commitment to free market principles, which viewed the farm crisis as an inevitable and needed correction in the farm economy. Rural Americans decried urban apathy and “a blind and uncaring federal government in Washington” that had encouraged farmers to expand their operations and then ignored their requests for debt relief and restructuring. Between 1980 and 1986, activists formed 150 new groups to raise public awareness and lobby for more sound agricultural policies. Dramatic protests included hammering white crosses on courthouse lawns to represent foreclosures, as well as attempts to halt auctions by chanting, “No sale!” Most activists emerged from the grassroots to take up issues at the state and county levels and raise awareness among urban Americans. Recognizing that the unevenness of the farm crisis sometimes led farmers to attribute their situation to poor personal decisions, they addressed rising rates of depression, abuse, alcohol use, divorce, and suicide by setting up crisis hotlines and providing financial counseling and social services.⁵

Just how did the farm crisis change the Midwest and rural America? The verdict is still out. Journalists, activists, policymakers, and scholars (primarily economists and sociologists) paid careful attention to the crisis as it unfolded throughout the 1980s and created an extensive literature on nearly every facet of agriculture and rural life. Yet media coverage and most of the scholarly literature that focused on the farm crisis as a *phenomenon* dried up by the mid-nineties and virtually disappeared as agriculture rebounded in the early twenty-first century. The rural Midwest experienced a new sense of confidence as commodity prices and land values once again hit record levels, and federal programs set in motion during the crisis helped farmers hedge market fluctuations. Experts warn that bubbles can still burst and that we should heed lessons learned in the 1980s. But again, what are those lessons?⁶

Our hesitation to discuss the farm crisis and its consequences may be rooted in a general understanding of the post-1945 era as a period of trau-

matic decline for small towns, family farms, and industry. Within a declensionist narrative, the 160-acre diversified family farm is upheld as a standard that somehow always existed. The decimation of the “family farm” in the 1980s is an endpoint, an inevitable and irreparable consequence of America’s march toward monoculture and commercial agriculture. Certainly, major events like Farm Aid created a sweeping sense of collective loss for farm families and the entire nation. The stark realities of the farm crisis, vividly described in Jane Smiley’s Pulitzer Prize–winning novel *A Thousand Acres* and nonfiction such as Mark Friedberger’s *Shake-Out* left readers with a sense that the era of the family farm had come to a close. In the academic literature, scholars have reinforced this notion of decline by accepting it as fact, identifying the efforts of rural residents as futile and misguided. For example, Richard Longworth describes the “rural slum,” left in the wake of the farm crisis where small towns are populated only by the elderly “waiting to die” and “washed up” welfare mothers living in “shanties and mobiles homes with littered yards.” Without strong leadership, he affirms, most rural midwesterners are “resigned to a slow and steady decline and seemingly not very upset about it.”⁷

New studies of the farm crisis offer opportunities to critique notions of decline, allowing us to recast the second half of the twentieth century in terms of change and transformation. As early as 1995, historian David Danbom observed that while the activism of the 1980s did little to “reverse long-term trends,” in American agriculture, it awakened a need to reconsider the nature of commercial agriculture as many farmers “no longer automatically regarded yield as the main index of their success.” Recent works, including Richard Wood’s *Survival of Rural America* and Robert Wuthnow’s *Remaking the Heartland*, urge us to take a more dynamic view of how people have adapted to changing conditions over time, so that we can best understand the changing needs of rural communities today. Declensionist narratives may indulge a collective need for nostalgia, but Wood argues that we need new accounts to help us “understand what is really taking place, what it means for our culture and identity.” Growing interest in organic and sustainable agriculture, as well as rural tourism and emerging industries, suggests that the story did not end in the 1980s. As J. L. Anderson points out in his introduction to *The Midwest since World War II*, “The people of the rural Midwest found much of the change in the post-war period wrenching, but they were not destroyed by it.”⁸

As promising as these works are, few specifically examine the farm cri-

sis of the 1980s as a distinct phenomenon. Doing so demands that we see beyond the opposing narratives of decline and cautious optimism. Rather, new avenues for analysis promise exciting possibilities for understanding transformations in American politics, economics, and social forces during the past forty years. For example, many associate the emergence of conservative movements with the rise of “rural ghettos,” wherein isolated, gun-loving country folk share suspicions of outsiders and invasive government. Michael Stewart Foley presents an alternative view in a 2015 article. Whereas standard narratives of 1980s politics suggest voter apathy and the rise of the political right, Foley posits that farm activists were neither liberal nor conservative. Rather, rural Americans experienced a heightened political awareness and “mobilized across a wide array of political issues not because of ideology, but because they were searching for solutions.” Foley’s theoretical framework shifts the focus away from national trends and toward understanding farm activists as political actors working on behalf of their communities in a moment of crisis.⁹

Taking the longer view, as Foley does, requires that we make better sense of this decade and work with those who lived it to build collections of artifacts, documents, and oral testimony. We are now at a moment when those who experienced the crisis firsthand—whether they were farmers, small town business owners, activists, workers in agribusinesses, lenders, policy makers, or even children—can share perspectives shaped by time and distance. Those just starting out in farming during the 1980s are reaching retirement age, when they can take a longer view of how these years affected their lives. Their papers, mementoes, and artifacts sit in humid basements and hot attics, and for some people, they are beginning to appreciate the deep historical significance of those materials. We are now at a moment when it is not only appropriate, but imperative, to ask questions.¹⁰

The farm crisis affected nearly every facet of rural life and was well documented in print media, photographs, and video, creating countless avenues for exploration. Online resources and social media offer exciting possibilities for research and outreach through digital collections, exhibits, and communities for individuals wanting to share their stories. Furthermore, stories about the farm crisis may find eager audiences among urban Americans expressing greater interest in agriculture as they demand sustainable, organic, or locally produced food. To list subjects that have yet to be explored would consume this entire volume, so we propose to begin the conversation by exploring the overriding premise of a distinctive midwest-

ern identity shaped by activists, farmers, politicians, and the media. Based on a specific interpretation of how the family farm operates in American society, this identity both shaped and complicated the social, economic, and political response to the crisis.

For this special issue of *Middle West Review*, we draw together three articles and a series of images that illuminate the history of the crisis. Each article explores in vivid prose how the crisis unfolded and the feelings, efforts, and heated exchanges to solve it. As midwestern landowners debated often opaque economic theories such as price parity, inflation, and oversupply, they also forged political voices and local experiences that extended far beyond the farm crisis era.

Farmer anger, community worries, and local policy implications are also told in this special issue through evocative images. Historical photographs obtained from archival collections housed at Kansas State University and Iowa State University highlight the uncertainties and vulnerabilities of economic decline, boisterous agricultural activism in response, and heated local exchanges over policy. New voices, sources, and images emerge in this special issue—rich soil for historical analysis.

In “Children of the Crisis,” Pamela Riney-Kehrberg takes a longer but more localized view of the farm crisis. Her study moves the story away from journalistic vignettes and considers the experiences of some of those hardest hit: younger farmers. Family farms’ significance resided in their generational networks, not just the community’s history. Farming parents increasingly lost control of their fields, and economic lives presented a devastating example for their children and grandchildren. Farmers in the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s could respond to volatile economic booms and busts and a kind of ecological knife’s edge of dust storms, droughts, grasshopper plagues with technological, scientific, or policy-based solutions, but the 1980s farm crisis was different. Some communities suffered more than others. Financial declines did not affect all families equally. And perhaps most important of all, many agricultural experts working in extension offices or teaching in midwestern land-grant universities insisted that a crisis did not exist. Riney-Kehrberg’s account reveals that the risks, uncertainties, and despondencies generated by the farm crisis led younger families to the edge of despair, placing a permanent scar on the vibrancy and legacy of midwestern farming communities.

Rebecca Stoil also shows how the farm crisis moved well beyond simple economic decline or sociopolitical divides—it scoured lives on a very

personal level requiring strategies that generated a broad-based cultural awareness. In her study of “Desperate Farm Wives,” Stoil illustrates how farmer advocacy and activism centered as much on cinematic allure as it did on falling prices and failing farms. As Congress debated the 1981 Farm Bill, celebrities such as Jessica Lange, Sissy Spacek, and Jane Fonda came to farmers’ aid. This trend continued throughout the period with famous musicians such as Willie Nelson playing at Kansas State University to raise awareness for farmers’ economic plight. Cinema’s influence, for Stoil, also provides an important historical lens to understand the crisis through gender, traditionalism, and liberation. Actual farmwomen versus their celluloid Hollywood versions brought increased attention to the Midwest’s agricultural plight during the crisis, but at a cost. As Stoil succinctly argues, the crisis placed farmwomen in a precarious public position—they were at once protesters, victims, and advocates while also cultural caricatures. This image, she insists, “simultaneously sought to defy stereotypes about the backwardness and parochialism of rural womanhood but also cast rural life as a panacea to the dangers of modernity.”

In “Memories of the Crisis,” farmer and activist Denise O’Brien examines the tumultuous exchanges between landowners, policymakers, and social organizations as someone who lived through the era. Through first-hand reflections, O’Brien underscores how rural identity, gender, political protests, agricultural policy, and place all merged during the farm crisis. In addition to tracing the political contours of midwestern activism during the 1980s, O’Brien also thoughtfully analyzes changing gender roles, economic and social consequences of farm foreclosures, and the resonance of cultural calls to action—mainly Farm Aid concerts held throughout the region. O’Brien experienced how the “world of production agriculture was turned on its head . . . people were losing the foundation of their livelihoods. Their livestock, tractors and farm equipment were being hauled away or sold at auction.” For O’Brien, the farm crisis forged new views about the power of communities, an ability to carve out a political voice, redefinitions of gender roles, and an ecological consciousness. New local, national, and global networks emerged such as her work as cofounder of the Women, Food, and Agriculture Network in 1997 to tackle the ongoing consequences of industrial farming.

Finally, a series of striking images encapsulates the signal themes of the crisis. Photographs housed in midwestern land grant universities such as Kansas State present how livelihoods rapidly changed, tensions between

farmers, scholars, and policymakers exploded and how agricultural implements, iconic to the farm in American life, transformed into polemics. The photographs also encourage readers to take an artifact's perspective when considering the crisis. Agricultural activists understood that tractors and other farm implements carried a tremendous amount of cultural imagery in addition to their more basic technological functions, turning their typical tools into powerful political statements.

The articles and photographs in this special issue of *Middle West Review* provide readers an opportunity to study known histories about the farm crisis as well as explore new perspectives. These papers and images underscore the value in revisiting old voices, views, and challenges to forge new pathways ahead. Each author points to new directions for further study while also surveying the power and legacy of a crisis that challenged the political fault lines and cultural fabric of the Midwest throughout the 1980s.

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NOTES

1. "Crowds Gather in Illinois for Farm Aid Concert," *Hutchinson Daily News* (Kan.), Sept. 22, 1985, 4; Thomas A. Lyson, "Who Cares About the Farmer? Apathy and the Current Farm Crisis," *Rural Sociology* 51, no. 4 (Winter 1986): 490.

2. Kathryn J. Braiser, "Spatial Analysis of Changes in the Number of Farms During the Farm Crisis," *Rural Sociology* 70, no. 4 (Dec. 2005): 541.

3. *Ibid.*; Heather Ball and Leland Beatty, "Blowing Away the Family Farmer: The Debt Tornado," *Nation* 239, no. 14, Nov. 3, 1984, 442; Richard Orr, "Economists Rip Reagan Farm Policy," *Chicago Tribune*, May 27, 1985.

4. Gordon Bulenta, Paul Lasley, and Jack Geller, "The Farm Crisis: Patterns and Impacts of Financial Distress Among Iowa Farm Families," *Rural Sociology* 51, no. 4 (Winter 1986), 437, 446-47; Greg Hanson, "Beyond the Farm Debt Crisis," *Choices: The Magazine of Food, Farm, and Resource Issues* 5, no. 4 (1990): 33; John R. Campbell, "Modern Farm Aid to Ease Crisis," *New York Times*, Sept. 25, 1985, A19.

5. *The Farm Crisis* (2013), Laurel Bower Burgmaier, Iowa Public Television, iptv.org/iowastories/detail.cfm/farm-crisis; Edward Walsh, "Farmers Plant Fear in GOP," *Washington Post*, Nov. 28, 1985, A1; Lee Sigelman, "Economic Pressures and the Farm Vote: The Case of 1984," *Rural Sociology* 52, no. 2 (Summer 1987): 152; "Forced Sale of Farm Draws Protest," *Victoria Advocate* (Texas), Feb. 24, 1987, 11A.

6. Michael Rosmann, "Did we learn any lessons from the last farm crisis?" *Farm and Ranch Guide*, May 2, 2012, farmandranchguide.com; interview, Neil Harl, *The Farm Crisis*.

7. Jane Smiley, *A Thousand Acres* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1991); Mark Friedberger, *Shake-Out: Iowa Farm Families in the 1980s* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1989); Richard C. Longworth, *Caught in the Middle: America's Heartland in the Age of Globalism* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2008), 84, 36.

8. David B. Danbom, *Born in the Country: A History of Rural America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 266–68; Robert Wuthnow, *Remaking the Heartland: Middle America since the 1950s* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2010); Richard E. Wood, *Survival of Rural America: Small Victories and Bitter Harvests* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2008), 10; J. L. Anderson, ed., *The Midwest since World War II* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2014), 9.

9. Michael Stewart Foley, "'Everyone Was Pounding on Us': Front Porch Politics and the American Farm Crisis of the 1970s and 1980s," *Journal of Historical Sociology* 28, no. 1 (Mar. 2015): 107.

10. Those who lived during the farm crisis are increasingly demonstrating their need to talk about those years and share their experiences. For examples, see *The Farm Crisis*; Sue Massey, *Letter from the Heart: The Real Story Behind the Iconic Photograph* (Mineral Point, Wis.: Little Creek Press, 2014).