

Farming, Then and Now, Minnesota

As told by Nora Sampson

Lanesboro, Minnesota

Story Narrative:

Agriculture and century farms are explored, specifically following generations of one family and what happened to change small family farming into bigger commercial farms. This story also takes a closer look at what's happening with farming right now and the challenges and opportunities that farmers may face in the future. Narrated by Nora Sampson and produced in conjunction with Lanesboro Arts, Minnesota, with technological support from Erin Dorbin.

Nora Sampson (00:00): Lanesboro, a small town in South Eastern Minnesota is most known today for its arts and theater. Although in the past, Lanesboro was just another small town that relied on agriculture. Most tourists wouldn't know that from how it looks now, unless they visited the sales barn, of course. Residents see it differently as most have or know someone who has lived, worked on or visited a family farm. When someone asks a person here in Lanesboro does agriculture still matter today? Most residents would respond-

Rick Lamon (00:24): Oh absolutely. It was important in the past and it's important now and it's going to be important in the future. Farming is a very important industry period.

Lee Peterson (00:36): Oh definitely. Yeah. It's always been a farming community.

Doug Baker (00:39): Farming? Yes. Well, the farming helps build the economy around here. It gives jobs to the grain elevator and the sales barn and people come into town with their cattle and things like that and do shopping and stuff like that.

Mai Gjere (00:54): It's definitely interesting and important because it's one of the main things that started Lanesboro and stuff.

Nora Sampson (01:00): Agriculture is undeniably a part of many families' history. When the Homestead Act was enacted in 1862, many people and families moved to the area to start a new life. This is where the tradition of family farms started, and many of the people who first acquired land still have it in their families today. Some of the families that have been around for generations are the Reins, [Torgersons 00:01:18] and many others. One of these such families, the Horihans, have been farming here for three generations.

Kevin Horihan (01:25): My name is Kevin Horihan. I am from Lanesboro, Minnesota and I am 33 years old. Our farm is about 1200 acres. We have 600 acres of crop land and about 600 acres of wooded and pasture land. We have a river bottom that's flat, and then all the other fields are rolling hills, and most of our pasture is

really rough and rugged land. My grandfather, great grandfather bought the farm in 1912. I think it was a little bit like Ireland with the hills and the rivers.

John Hohiran (02:00): I am John Horihan. I live in North of Lanesboro on a family farm. When I say family farm, that's usually a mom and dad and some kids, which we are. I'm the third generation at our farm. My son is the fourth. Everybody is involved in it. [inaudible 00:02:16] did as a young person on the farm, we had milk cows and chickens and pigs. So we would help milk cows, usually more so the evening, not the morning chores. It was too much because my dad would do that. We'd be ready for school. But after school, we'd get home, feed the cows, clean the barn out, milk the cows and be in the house by 7:00 o'clock. That was our goal.

John Hohiran (02:43): Rural people do come to town and socialize, visit the churches, at the local, just the restaurant, like the White Front, the famous White Front. That's where everybody went when we were in school. After a game, it's where supposed to meet. "I'll meet you at the White Front," because they had 25 cent hamburgers and I think a malt was 25 cents, I believe.

Kevin Horihan (03:08): Most of the businesses were agriculture related like 100 years ago. But now, there's maybe one or two in town that deal in agriculture.

John Hohiran (03:20): The sales barn was, that was the big place to go. Everybody went to on a Friday afternoon [inaudible 00:03:25] on sale and you couldn't even get in the door. It was so packed with people. It's a very important place, the sales barn is, because you have to have a place to sell your cattle and they've done a good job of getting buyers to come to this barn.

Joe Nelson (03:47): Joe Nelson from Lanesboro Sales Commission. It started in 1947 and just kept expanding from there. Basically what you do is, like say for yourself, if you have three or four cows and you raised them up and their calves or you can bring them to us and then we'll go to work for you and you can sign them to the market. And we go to work and we get them weighed and then we bring them in the ring and we'll auction them all to the highest bidder.

Speaker 9 (04:16): [inaudible 00:00:04:17].

Joe Nelson (04:24): And then we take a commission from there. We collect the money for you, and then we give you a check for yours. Well, one thing that's nice about here is whether you got two cows or 100 cows or 300 cows, you can bring them to town one or whatever you want and it gives people cashflow and it brings people to town and they stop uptown and it's good for everybody.

Joe Nelson (04:53): We probably used to be more locally, just within a 50 mile radius, but now we get cattle with probably a 500 mile radius to come to the market. Well, if you come here during the winter, you wouldn't know there's many tourists around. So the community depends on local support, local businesses and livestock producers, and they come to town year round, not just during the summer. There's not a lot of

livestock markets left in the country, so it's good to see Lanesboro's continuing and growing.

Nora Sampson (05:39): There have been many changes in agriculture in the last 50 years and even the last 100 years. Some of these changes include technology. In recent years, tractors have had things like GPS and auto-steer added to them and are larger than ever. One of the most important changes however, is in the rise of conservation. Conservation is a must and was started in agriculture to avoid crises like the dust bowl in the thirties. Many organizations and laws have been put into place to help with conservation. And one of these such organizations is National Resources Conservation Service. NRCS, for short, is an optional organization that pays farmers to try new programs for conservation among other things.

Nora Sampson 0 (06:21): If you look closely at the soil as a plough cuts a slice through it, you may be surprised. Like a layer cake, the soil is in layers too. On top is the icing, a soft spongy layer called top soil that grows most of our food. Now we're not taking good care of our precious top soil when we plough steep land or when we plough up and down hills, or burn off what's left of plants we've used instead of letting it decay back into the soil. Such things weaken our top soil and from poor, weak top soil, we get poor crops like this. Just one hard rain on soil we haven't treated right, and top soil nature has spent millions of years making is washed down the rushing rivers and off to the sea.

Nora Sampson 0 (07:28): By not taking good things from the soil, and by adding good things to the soil, we can take care of it, build it up. The name for the way of farming that's good for the soil is conservation farming. It's the best way to get the best crops and the most food for city people as well as farmers, all from the layer of top soil powdered so thinly all over the face of our earth.

Jessica Bronson (08:07): My name is Jessica Bronson. I work for the USDA NRCS office in Fillmore County. Southeast Minnesota has a very different landscape. This area is called the driftless area. So we've got a really sensitive feature in this area. We're really fortunate to have this luxury. With the contour farming, with the way our fields are, we've got hills, we've got really steep slopes. Steep slopes are, you're at 17 to 24% slope coming down. With the contouring, what it does is it cuts those slope points off. So we go out and we lay contour lines and so then that's the way the farmers can farm on the contour. So when it, say when it rains, you don't have your rows for your corn and beans going down the hill. They're going across that slope so that water gets cut off, so it's not making those big ditches.

John Hohiran (09:10): We used to moldboard ploughers and what would just, the ploughers would just turn the soil over, everything was black. And now it's minimum till or no till. You just go in and you go through it one time or none at all, just to plant right in the corn stocks, and there's more cover and there just isn't the erosion that we used to have. When I was a kid, we'd always have a high water event or a flood every year, not only in the spring time, but during the summer. You'd always seem like you'd

get one. And now with the advent of minimum till, no till contour farming, we just don't have the water events like we used to have.

Nora Sampson (09:55): When farmers cannot keep farming due to age or expenses and the next generation is uninterested or unable to keep farming, a popular option is to rent or lease the land out.

Kevin Horihan (10:05): Yeah, I think renters are just more into just getting their own profit out of it. They don't really care about contouring as much as your own land would because they think that, oh, they'll just use it for a couple of years and then it'll be rented to someone else or sold off so they don't have to care as much [inaudible 00:10:24] if it was your own land.

Jessica Bronson (10:26): People are renting their land out either A, because they had no kids to take over that farm and they're getting up there in age where they don't want to physically farm anymore. It's not being financially beneficial to be farming it, so they rent it out. That way then they can rent that land out, they can get that cash money for that rented land to help pay then the property tax that comes with that agricultural land.

John Hohiran (10:56): I would, this is just a guess, I would say there's probably one quarter of the number of actual farmers operating the land now as it used to be, if that. If there was four family farms in the fifties, there's probably one now.

Jessica Bronson (11:13): Our family farms are getting smaller. There isn't the kids to take over that farm after their parents are done farming because they have to go off that farm to get that college education and get a job that has benefits and retirement. One thing about farming is there's no benefits. There is no retirement package for those guys. It's what they have. That's all they have.

Nora Sampson (11:37): Other than financial reasons, there are other personal reasons for a daughter or son to choose to leave the farm. Nora Rein, who has grown up on a family farm, explains why she doesn't want to be involved in agriculture in the future.

Nora Rein (11:48): Only if I marry someone who likes agriculture, otherwise I'm out of this place. I feel like this isn't really for me. I'm not that interested in taking care of animals. I mean-

Nora Sampson 3 (12:00): You've grown up farming.

Nora Rein (12:00): Yeah. I've grown up farming. I think I've done my job. So now I'm just going to leave.

Nora Sampson (12:05): With the decline in family farms, a national trend has been for commercial farms to rent out the land. And if they're able to, to buy the land. These large commercial farms use large and expensive equipment that smaller farms

can not afford. Because of our unique landscape, we are unlikely to see a rise in commercial farming.

Jessica Bronson (12:22): Right now, and to me in the future, I don't see a lot of our farms going to big commercial areas. We don't have that prime landscape for easy farming. What I mean easy farming, we don't have those 180 acre square fields. Our fields over in this area, especially the Lanesboro area, they're what we call chopped. So you have two acre strips running in a farm when these, on a commercial farm, they're going to be coming in and bringing in their 36 row planters. Well that doesn't fit our landscape on this side.

Nora Sampson (13:03): Around the country today, many ag courses and extracurriculars are decreasing in number of participants. At Lanesboro schools, it seems that this is not the case. One such extracurricular, FFA, has participants show and judge livestock among other activities.

Kristi Ruen (13:18): Agriculture at the Lanesboro school is ... Ag day is a great day because the kids really look forward to bringing their animals and showing them off to all of the students. And it's a great opportunity for kids in our school to see all the different things in agriculture that we have going on right here. And the other really neat thing is only about half of our kids in FFA actually live on farms. And so it's fun to see that you can be in FFA and be interested in ag and not live on a farm.

Kristi Ruen (13:49): Lanesboro is a really neat town because it has so many facets. It's got the agriculture and the arts and the tourism, and agriculture is what brought people here to begin with. And so, yes, I think it will be a smaller population that will actually do the farming, but all the support that needs to be done, all the jobs that are related to agriculture that aren't agriculture will continue to be really important. And so, yes, I think ag will continue to be important in Lanesboro.

Kevin Horihan (14:20): I'm hoping my children have the interest in farming and continue farming when they grow up. I will pressure them into it, but if they really don't want to do it, I'm not going to make them and force them into it because it's no fun to do something that you don't love to do.

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