

The Hobby Farm

Helene M. Lawson, University of Pittsburgh, Bradford, PA
Jennifer Sanders, Showman Farms, Edinboro, PA
Lawrence R. Lawson, Wood Studies Group, Bradford, PA

Abstract

On the family farm, the romance of farming and emotional ties to the land are in opposition to economic forces that arise from the inherent vulnerability and inefficiency of small scale operations in a market dominated by agribusiness. Some small farmers, however, have developed strategies to keep their farms in business. This paper focuses on how two of these strategies, capitalization on the popular vision of the small farmer and the dual career, combine to affect the fate of farms that can no longer entirely support themselves. These farms tend to evolve into “hobby farms” as they call themselves, marginally commercial farms that have a cheery recreational outward appearance.

Most family farms provide a minority of the income of the families that operate them. They are stabilized and sometimes subsidized by their owners’ off-farm occupations. At the same time, the need for farmers to be creative in the production of their work has caused them to seek out niche markets where the small size of their farms is an advantage. In the presence of sufficient off-farm income, they frequently remain as farms retaining their title and acreage but with only minimal output. The small remaining animal herds are often characterized as pets for the family to play with.

Introduction: The Nature of Small Farms

Virtually all small farms in Pennsylvania are family farms in that they are operated by families. A 2006 review of family farm operations in Pennsylvania stated that: “Sixty per cent of the state’s dairy farmers are considered to be small, having 30 to 100 cows, with an average herd size of 58. With their weathered wooden barns, towering

silos, and lush pastures, small dairy farms have long been a fixture of the Keystone State's rural landscape. They have also been disappearing at an alarming rate" (Mullhollem, 2008) According to the Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture, the state has 9,600 commercial dairy farms, down from 14,500 in 1980 (Mulhollem, 2008).

Illuminating these statistics is a study of small farm efficiency. An economic efficiency analysis published in *Research in Rural Sociology and Development* (Schwartzweller, 2000) concluded that small dairy farms would be more efficient if they were large: At least 200 cows are needed before a farm becomes efficient. Nearly every farmer interviewed seemed to know that already.

This paper is part of a larger study of small farmers and focuses on the "hobby farm" as one of the more interesting fates that a small farm might meet. These hobby farms differ from their traditional definition. The continuation of traditional/historical hobby farming is reviewed by Wilkie (2010).

Research Methods

The first author was born in a large city (Chicago) and grew up living in apartments without yards, grass or trees. When she encountered rural life in the area where she now lives and teaches, she was fascinated. "I have students who are farmers. Several years ago, one of my sociology majors showed me a picture of herself as 'Dairy Queen' at a county fair, where she helped promote dairy education and the nutritional value of milk. During her reign as the dairy queen, she gave speeches, rode in parades, had a monthly article in the local newspaper for new dairy recipes, and attended farm meetings."

"Although I am a vegetarian, I wanted to know about her feelings, attitude, beliefs and mostly her experiences on her family farm. I applied for a grant to work with her

over the summer and we toured local small farms together. Eventually she, Jennifer, became the second author of this paper. Jennifer has recently graduated with a bachelor's degree and last year returned to farming.”

We interviewed dairy farm owners and their adult children. We chose the sample from an area which once had over a thousand family dairy farms. We selected interviewees from farms that were either still in business or had been recently sold. We interviewed twenty farmers and their families who lived near Edinboro, Pennsylvania. We also interviewed people that had grown up on a farm but left for different career options. Other students participated in the work. Eventually my husband, Lawrence, a research scientist whose family had owned a farm and who had lived and worked on a dairy farm as a child, joined in as the third author. He was acquainted with disused farms. He interviewed five owners of non-working farms in the area around Bradford, Pennsylvania and Olean, New York. These were mostly landowners who had the remains of a barn, fields and pastures on their property. One still had a cow barn with stalls and a milk house. Its dairy equipment was no longer operable but the farm still produced feed and lumber commercially. Subsequently I interviewed ten professional people, academics, who were no longer working on farms but had done so in the past.

The interviews were tape-recorded and coded. We asked open-ended questions. Most respondents were happy to talk about the experiences that they had on farms and were proud of what they had accomplished through farming. Their sense of accomplishment was connected to their love of the land, of the animals and their perceived social role.

The Human Factors that Keep Farmers Farming

The factors that perpetuate the small farm are both human and economic. Of these the human factors are the most salient. My interactions with family farmers, both men and women, opened my eyes to a world of romance, sense of place, and concern over human and animal wellbeing.

Romance

The most striking of the human factors is sometimes called “the romance of farming.” It is a love affair with the animals, smells, sounds, land and physical labor of farming as illustrated by these quotes:

When the stress levels get really high being with other people, it just makes me want to go back to the farm where it seems like it is a slower pace.

I can be with the cows and it is just a different type of living and a different type of world that I really like to do and live in, but when I get sick of that world I just want to come back to this one.

Another farmer commented:

I liked working off the farm because of the money but my heart was always back here on the farm and to be farming again. I liked working out because of the money but there is a lot more to life than that and you get wrapped up in the outside world and forget about what is most important, so that is why I like being back on the farm.

A former farmer turned professional said that he is drawn back to farming for some reason he cannot easily describe:

Probably the same reason I like to cut wood. When I go to sleep at night, I like to be tired. That's a good feeling. It feels like you have accomplished something.

Now that he has sold his farm, he is looking around to buy another that he could just have and operate part time.

Another former farmer yearned to be back on the farm:

Yes, now that I look back, it was a lot simpler life-- hard work but less stress involved and you don't have to deal with people as much, but you could work at your own pace, be your own boss and you knew what needed done and it was your responsibility to get it done. And if you didn't get it done then you were the one that was going to suffer the consequences and you wouldn't have a good crop or milk production would be down, so you were actually affecting your outcome more than you do if you work at a shop for somebody-- else they are the ones seeing the results.

The activities of farming appear to take on spiritual meaning for many family farmers. For example, one of the dairy farmers interviewed said:

Um, my favorite part is just being out fixing fence, because our farm is up on a hill and you aren't bothered by anyone and you don't have anything to worry about other than rolling down the hill in barbed wire. But, that is fun though and enjoyable. But at least I can be out -- I call it the big sky where I can be underneath everything.

Bonding with the animals is an important part of the romance of dairy farming according to most interviewees. Other studies have also found strong relationships between farmers and their livestock. Bock et al. (2007) found that cows, because of their

long life on the farm and their likeability, are the farm animal that farm workers bond with most strongly.

The romance of farming is well-illustrated by the manual written by John and Sally Seymour on how to live independently off of a five-acre farm. Who but a romantic would attempt to perform such a feat? Yet, says the manual, “A cow is absolutely central to the economy of a smallholding...But think about it, a cow is the biggest tie in the world. You have to milk her twice a day.” (Seymour and Seymour, 1973 p.42.) Thus cows force intimacy between farmer and animal. This intimacy may not always be desired but is difficult to relinquish say many interviewees.

Under the heading, “Family Farm”, Wikipedia, an Internet resource, states that in countries such as the United States, France and Japan, where rural lifestyles are regarded as desirable, the family farm is viewed “sentimentally, as a lifestyle to be preserved for tradition’s sake.” Wikipedia defines the family farm as not only a small farm operated by a family but requires that it is one passed down through a family for generations. (Wikipedia, 11/9/2009). In Pennsylvania, government-recognized “century farms” are an example of this definition of family farm. It embodies the romance of multi-generational stability and economic independence.

The sentimental attractions of the farm are not limited to those people who have grown up as farmers. There is trend among young professionals to seek a “simpler life” through farming at least part time. One case study was that of Josh and Kathy Gunn, corporate types, whose farming adventure was reported in Money magazine (Rosato, 2008). In the article Josh said, “It’s hard work and exhausting but I get pleasure in what I do every day.” This sense of romance brings new small farms into being (Wilkie, 2010).

This same romance, with its positive memories, also leads to the next most mentioned reason why existing farmers return to or try desperately to hold onto their small farms. The farm gives them a sense of place and an identity usually beginning at a very young age.

Sense of Place

One perceived attraction of the family farm is the farm itself. There is a sense of belonging to a place in those who have worked a family farm. It is seen especially in the nostalgia of those who have left it as described by this former farmer:

I would argue that I never left the farm. It is still very much a part of me. I recently went to look for a farm to go back to farming. I wouldn't quit my job here. I'd be a gentleman farmer. It's not like work where you leave and go home. It's a much greater sense of attachment. It involves cycles of life. And, plants and animals are a part of your family. I'm looking to get back to place. It's nurturing, growing and developing.

Some farmers equate this sense of place to experiences with life and death that are associated with the land on which these experiences took place.

A lamb was birthed and had serious problems got stiff and fell over. I was up all night with it. I woke up in the morning and it died. This life and death gives me a sense of attachment.

Some farmers we interviewed expressed negative feelings toward operating a farm without animals. They did not want to resort to raising feed crops alone even though this would be more profitable than running a dairy farm. Without the cycle of animal life on the land, they seemed to feel that the land lacked spirit for them.

There is a strong attachment to the farm as a place among family farmers. This attachment has not received much scholarly attention. However, the elements of cultural place attachment identified by Setha Low (1992) illuminate what we have observed. She

defines cultural place attachment as a “symbolic relationship formed by people giving culturally shared emotional/affective meanings to a particular space or piece of land that provides the basis for the individual’s and group’s understanding of and relation to the environment.” She uses several typologies to delineate the nature of place attachment.

The first of these typologies is *genealogical* which refers to historical linkage through community. In our study we noticed that the “century farm” was not only a respected icon of the farming community, it was accorded special honor by the Pennsylvania State government. These farms were ones operated by the same family for over a century. For a family to give up a century farm seemed to imply a disgrace--although this happened from time to time due to economic pressures and family disunity. But family is important: In the farming communities we studied, people described the layout of the land using the names of the families whose farms occupied it or were nearby.

The second typology is *Loss/Destruction*. Loss or threatened loss stimulates expression of attachment. Mourning the loss of the farm often concomitant with a desire or plan to return to farm life is one of the most common themes among those we met living in rural communities. A professor we met teaching at a rural college wrote a syllabus for a proposed course on place attachment as an apparent catharsis for his longing to return to the farm life of his childhood. Even in society at large, there is a general nostalgia, such as we have discussed, regarding the loss of the family farm.

The third typology is *Economic* and refers to the utilitarian role of a place or land in the lives of those who work it. Certainly the farm is a place of work—often hard work. For millennia, farm ownership has been the essence of ownership itself. This essence is

expressed in such words as *landed* and *yeoman*. Small farm owners and their farm workers have together formed a kind of family that earned its living out of the soil itself.

The fourth typology is *cosmology*; it relates to the spiritual nature of the place as having a bond to the universe. While the farms we studied did not have chapels and the country church appears to be less important to the community than it was 100 years ago, the intimate struggle with nature and the caprices of weather seem to give farm people a sense that they are closer to God than city folk. This is expressed in the way that they look at the sky and in remarks that they make about Providence. Some say that they have seen God's bounty and God's wrath in their toils on God's earth

The fifth typology is *pilgrimage*. The bond to a place is marked by celebratory events to which people make pilgrimages. This aspect of bonding is represented by the county fairs, grange shows and similar celebrations of the local agriculture. The co-author of this paper was awarded the title of Dairy Queen at such a fair. While attendance at these events is largely local, tourists and buyers from out of town often attend.

The sixth and final typology is *narrative*. The place of attachment is expected to engender narratives about it that are passed within the culture. The family farm has been a seemingly endless source of stories, too many to begin to mention. As an example, we will mention the poem by Robert Frost, "The Death of the Hired Man" (1915) in which a laborer returns to his former farm of employment to die because he is so bonded to it.

The sense of place associated with family farms seems to be extreme at least in the six dimensions of place attachment just examined. The attachment is both to the individual and to the group. It draws people back and holds onto them. In this way it increases the number of available workers in spite of low wages.

The Dual Career Farm

Off-farm employment has always been a part of family farming. In northern latitudes winter limits the growing season. The grandfather of the third author was a farmer in northern Wisconsin who taught school in the winter. This was in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Today, off-farm employment is more than just a way to occupy time. In fact the US Department of Agriculture Economic Research Service (2008) stated that “Operators were just as likely to identify non-farm work as their major occupation as they were farming or ranching.” This indicator points to a new view of family farming among farm operators, the dual career.

Well, I am a tax collector, but we still have the farm so I have several hats. To tell you the truth, I love the animals on the farm, but I am tired of farming. There is no financial reward. I married a farmer.

Many of the new generation of family farmers view the dual career as a way of perpetuating farming rather than as a partial withdrawal from farming.

I also have a boyfriend whose farm is right next to mine, (which is a hundred acre in between). His family is also a small dairy farm that is struggling to make it. My boyfriend and I have both decided to continuing farming, but also have jobs outside of farming. This will guarantee that we will be able to afford farming and stay out of debt.

The US Department of Agriculture Economic Research Service (2009) analysis showed that on the average farm households currently earn less than 20% of their income from farming; the balance of their income is from off-farm sources. The same source showed that the average farm devoted primarily to raising livestock gained no income

from farming in 2008 but rather lost about \$10,000 to the farm in that year, 12% of their average total income. This loss does not mean that these farms earned no gross income in that year. Nor does it mean that these farmers are going to cease farming as shown by our interviews. In fact the same analysis shows that dairy farmers earn a much larger portion of their family income from farming operations than any other type of farm. In 2008 the average dairy farmer earned an average of \$70,000 from farming and only \$20,000 from off farm employment.

Family Farms Find Organic Niches

Health and safety regulations can favor the small producer over the larger one especially where inspections must be individualized to meet the requirements of a limited market. Raw milk is an example of such a limited market. One farmer interviewed explained that her farm was the only farm in the county holding a permit to sell raw milk. To sell raw milk, the farm must have each cow carefully inspected on a frequent basis. Raw milk is non-pasteurized and non-homogenized. She explained that it contains beneficial enzymes and natural as opposed to synthetic vitamin D. She adds that because pasteurization coagulates the proteins, raw milk is easier to digest. This is one example of the niche marketing that is evolving through the world-wide reaction to the excesses of agribusiness.

Concern over animal welfare such as described by Kirby (2010) is creating a rapidly-growing body of legislation worldwide in reaction to agribusiness (Ransom, 2007; Buller and Cesar, 2007). While no one interviewed had any cognizance of any direct economic effect from laws setting higher standards for animal husbandry, many of those interviewed who produced dairy and beef products seemed to bask in the light of

the heroic role in which the media portrays the small farmer. A similar but negative impression appears to apply in the case of illegal immigrant labor used by large-scale agribusiness to reduce costs.

The small-scale dairy business in particular along with poultry and beef has benefited from a trend among consumers to bypass mass-marketers and the agribusinesses that supply them. The trend is an outgrowth of the popularity of organic foods and the organic agriculture movement as described in a *New York Times* article titled “The Dairies Are Half-Pint But the Flavor Isn’t” (2.20.2008). Small dairies are in a better position than agribusiness to produce and market low-volume high-priced products. Organic milk, goat’s milk and artisan cheeses are among the niche markets listed. According to the article, better-tasting products with higher butterfat content are in demand both by individuals and restaurants. The article lists several examples of dairies that sell direct to consumers. This increasing demand for high-fat content dairy products was noted as an opportunity for small dairy farmers in 2001 (Bailey, 2001).

The second author of this paper has returned to her family farm after studying cheese-making. She said:

I am now running my own business. I am an artisan cheese maker. After numerous interviews and lots of rejections, I decided to go to cheese school. I am not regretting my college degree. It helped me start up my business. I started a creamery last December selling raw milk at my in-laws’ dairy farm. I started construction on the new cheese house in spring. I have been welcomed by my home town and am doing very well.

Not all small farms prosper. Farm debt arises mostly when commodity prices fall below expectations. As a result the farmer does not get paid enough to recoup his up-front costs of production. For large producers this shortfall is temporary. For small producers smaller margins due to lower efficiencies aggravated by smaller capital reserves create serious vulnerability. On the economics of milk production one small farmer said this.

You like the animal and you like the ground. It doesn't pay and it always costs more money to raise more food and to produce milk than what you get paid. And, you never have the say over what you get paid for the price of your milk product.

Fewer cows mean lower efficiency. The analysis cited above (Schwartzweller, 2000) stated that a dairy farm needs to have a herd size of at least 200 cows to function properly; Mulhollem (2008) stated that the average herd size for small farms in Pennsylvania is 58 cows.

Conversion to Hobby Farms

If the love of the farm and the ties to the land were the thesis in a dialectic, and farm debt the antithesis, then the hobby farm might be the synthesis. Conversion of working farms into hobby farms was an emergent phenomenon in this study. Yet these new hobby farms were still commercial. For this reason, the place of the hobby farm within farming is different now from the hobby farm of the past and its role is harder to define. Hobby farms such as Crabtree Farm, the estate of the McCormick family in Lake Bluff, Illinois, typified hobby farms of the past. It was created as a hobby farm to give its owner the attributes of the landed gentry. It was never intended to produce significant income. The hobby farms seen in this study evolve from working farms when the proportion of farm

income to off-farm income becomes sufficiently small. The process is often gradual as herds are sold off and land is sold or rented to other farmers but ends somewhat like what is described in this quote.

Ya, I do miss farming, but the thing is, we are kind of what we always called play farmers which only have a few animals. We still have 20 heifers and a couple horses and a big fat pig that has a good life. We only have to be up at 7 to milk the one cow.

The question that remains is whether or not hobby farming of this type represents the end of the farms involved? Or are they merely transformed into privately subsidized entities that are not entirely dormant but retain a nominal productivity. The authors encountered cases where these liminal farms found new identity by functioning as boarding stables, petting zoos and collectives. On the other hand, the “big fat pig” in the above quote, described as a beloved pet at the time of the interview, has since been slaughtered for food.

Conclusion

Small farming is a gamble in which unpredictables such as weather and commodity prices play a major role in deciding whether a farm grows and thereby becomes more efficient or shrinks under an accumulating burden of debt. However family farms do not die as easily or as simply as other unprofitable businesses. The dual-career nature of modern family farming allows family farms to persist with very little income. In fact, when the farm income reaches near zero, many family farms go into a dormant state which we have called the hobby farm. In this state, there seems to be little to challenge the farm’s continued existence other than the eventual death or disability of its operators.

Because the family farm seems to be a sacrosanct institution within the folk mythology of American life, it commands a special respect from the public that can be converted into dollars and cents through niche marketing. The family farm remains a symbol of freedom and self determination of one's destiny in opposition to agribusiness. This esteem has opened new market opportunities for farmers in which they can profit from the mere image of the small farm. This reinforces the farm operator's identity as one anchored by his/her social role as "the farmer."

The small farmer thus has a definite place within the frames of many social situations. After all, "Social situations contain people playing roles which tell them and us what to expect in the ensuing activity. Frames are therefore anchored to the degree that the participants identify with the roles they play. In situations where participants take their roles very seriously, there is likely to be little doubt about the frame's meaning..." (Manning, 1992, pp.127-128). In the frame of polite interaction, as on the street, the role of the farmer is not only an estimable one; it is one of enviable independence even if the farmer's major employment is really off-farm and menial.

The proof of the value of the farmer's role to the farmer is perhaps best exemplified by the modern hobby farm since it costs the farmer money to sustain. It illustrates that people need a sense of purpose; if they cannot be creative in production, then they can be creative in consumption. The hobby farm provides a respite from what C. Wright Mills called, "man's chief danger" which "today lies in the unruly forces of contemporary society itself, with its alienating methods of productions." (C. Wright Mills, 1991, p.26).

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