

# **EXPERIENCING FARMING IN STRESSFUL TIMES: A NATURALISTIC INQUIRY**

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By

Barbara Joy MacDonald Sanderson

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## **ABSTRACT**

The purpose of this study was to explore what it means to be farming in Saskatchewan today. Naturalistic inquiry using open-ended interviews provided the framework for four farmers' narratives. The goal was to gain insight into farmers' lives, to expand the understanding of farmers' experiences, and to explore potential stressors of farming life. The farmers' interviews revealed the heart, soul, and spirit of farming today. Although they said they were losing hope in farming, they demonstrated characteristics of determination, perseverance and tenacity that keep them farming. The insights learned from this sample of Saskatchewan farmers are relevant not only to farm families but also to new entrants into farming, professionals who work with farmers in challenging times, and government policy makers. This study may help to provide information, develop understanding of farmers' needs, and raise questions that contribute to knowledge and meaning about how it is to farm in Saskatchewan today. Implications for practise and research conclude the study.

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Our stories weave together in a tapestry of farming life...

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“To have a child is to decide forever to have your heart go walking outside your body.”  
Elizabeth Stone

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## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

### What is it like to farm in Saskatchewan today?

*“In all honesty, it’s been quite devastating to my family.”*

*“Farming the land is in his blood.”*

*“It doesn’t work economically; it just doesn’t work”*

*“I would like to pay my bills in a timely fashion.”*

*“Who is going to farm all this land?”*

*“We’ve had a good life.”*

Farming has always been the bread and butter of Saskatchewan; farmers are primary producers. Their relationship with nature is based on the principle of production (Silvasti, 2003). In a good year, they grow bumper crops; in times of drought, they grow little or no crop. Farmers experienced a tough time in the dirty thirties, had bins full of grain in the forties, and got a good price for grain in the seventies when the farm economy was booming. Farming attitudes, practices, and environmental conditions have always been changing; farmers have continued to adapt and look to ‘next year’, farming in cyclical times. However, the changes in agriculture today have larger social, economic, and environmental implications, due to “intimate links between farming and food production, on the one hand, and social organization and culture, on the other” (Peterson, 2000, p. 105). This concurs with the changing horizon in the farming economy described by the farmer in my pilot study, as well as in research done by Gerrard (2000b) with farmers in rural Saskatchewan. Farmers described a growing cloud of disillusionment, a sense of impending doom and gloom, and a fear of losing equity in their land. They said they are losing hope that farming will improve in their lifetime.



Farran, Herth, and Popovich (1995) describe hope as “the presence of some indescribable strength despite adversity” (p. 4). Hope propels persons forward when the odds seem to be against them. Snyder (2000b), whose research work on hope is significant in this area, describes hope as a positive motivational state based on a sense of successful goal-directed energy and planning. Wolin and Wolin (1993) write that, “while you cannot change the past, you can change the way you understand it” (p. 207). Having hope in farming is the seed in the spring that is needed for farmers to believe in the harvested crop in the fall, and to have faith in the next year. Edey and Jevne (2003) write that although hope is recognized as important in facing adversity, most of the scholarly work in the field of hope has focused on either developing a conceptual understanding of hope or assessing measures of hope. I was curious about the relationship between farmers’ hope and adversity. Gerrard (2000b) writes that there is limited research material about rural stress and resiliency. Farmers in her study said resiliency was about moving beyond where they were when adversity struck. Hope and resiliency are important in combating farm stress.

The purpose of this study was to explore the meaning of being a Saskatchewan farmer today. Farming is a stressful occupation (Deary, Willock, & McGregor, 1997; Jurich & Russell, 1987; Thompson & McCubbin, 1987). In the United States, farming was rated the twelfth most stressful out of 130 high stress occupations by the Institute of Occupational Safety and Health (Deary et al, 1997). These authors write that the major stressors for farmers are farming bureaucracy, finance, isolation, uncontrollable natural forces, personal hazards, and time pressure. Regardless of the type of farming, the potential of losing the farm due to the economic crisis is a stressor common to all farm

families (Davis-Brown & Salamon, 1987; Olson & Schellenberg, 1986). This appears to be the case in Saskatchewan, with farm numbers dwindling.

Although farm life has been portrayed as less stressful than its urban counterpart, farming is one of the most dangerous occupations, with stress being one of the highest risk factors, having deleterious effects on everyone in the family (Carruth & Logan, 2002; Gordon, 1990). This is consistent with previous research done by Gordon (1987) explaining that there are stress factors inherent in the institution of the farm family, such as a lack of separation of economic and social roles. Often the whole family is involved in the business one way or another, with stress impacting the way the family functions. McCubbin, McCubbin, Mishler, and Svavarsdottir (2001) write: “in effective family functioning, role allocation is reasonable and does not overburden any one member” (p. 215). Due to the timing and placement of actions for farmers, such as seeding and harvest, stress occurs at particular periods of high pressure (Swisher, Elder, Lorenz, & Conger, 1998). They explain that farmers experience both exposure and vulnerability to stress at these times, which impacts their relationships with family and friends. Other researchers agree that stress impacts many of the family dynamics. Conger et al. (1992) indicate that economic stress in family life has adverse consequences for families, such as impacting the healthy development of adolescents.

According to Statistics Canada, many farm families are impacted by the agricultural economy today, with the number of farms in Saskatchewan declining steadily since the 1940's (Census of Agriculture, 2001). These results showed a 28.6% reduction in the numbers of farm operators (who are under 35 years of age) since the last census five years earlier in 1996. Saskatchewan's farm population has continued to decline. As

well as the loss of home or occupation, losing a family farm can mean a loss of identity and loss of a heritage for farmers whose families have owned the farm for generations (Gerrard, 2000b). Changing careers can also be very stressful (Heppner & Cook, Strozier, & Heppner, 1991). Resiliency theorists need to look closer at this larger economic-political context within which farm families cope with stress. Even the most resilient farming families are fragile when faced with loss of occupation. If reemployment possibilities exist, however, psychological effects are lessened (McCubbin, Thompson, Thompson & Futrell, 1999). Farmers ask: ‘What can I do? How employable are farmers over the age of fifty? And are there enough jobs to go around?’ Both men and women have increased their rate of working off the farm since 1990, and roughly equal proportions of women farm operators and men worked at non-farm jobs in 2000 (Census of Agriculture, 2001). Working both off the farm and on the farm increases the work-load, putting extra pressure on the family, and even more on the women (Berkowitz & Perkins, 1984; Carruth & Logan, 2002; McCubbin & Figley, 1983). A multitude of responsibilities, environmental and social influences, and stressors place farm women at high risk for symptoms of depression. The degree to which farm women experience stress associated with non-farm employment and home responsibilities depends on the relationship with and support from the spousal partner (Berkowitz & Perkins, 1984). As well as balancing multiple family roles and responsibilities, farm women worry about the threat of harm to self and family members, whether the harm is due to farm accidents, suicide, or exhaustion from the overload of multiple roles. Women involved in the farm operation for longer than twenty years were almost twice as likely to experience symptoms of depression (Carruth & Logan, 2002).

Those professionals who work with farm men and women may find it useful to explore the values placed by women on their participation in farm decisions or farm work. When studying farm work, Barlett, Lobao, and Meyer (1998), established a need to pay greater attention to women's attitudes toward farming.

Economic hardship based on an inability to pay an existing debt load is a consistent predictor of stress and depression for farmers (Meyer & Lobao, 2003; Thompson & McCubbin, 1987). Farming is a stressful occupation, and farmers as a group are more prone to suicide than individuals in the general population (Deary et al., 1997). Simkin, Hawton, Yip, and Yam (2003) write that male farmers, as an occupational group, have a high risk of suicide with the highest numbers of farming suicides in April and September. These authors suggest that this may be due to the nature of farmers' work and vulnerability to seasonal changes in weather. Farm men are more exposed to financial and job-related stressors than farm women (Swisher, Elder, Lorenz, & Conger, 1998). Suicide of farmers has been a concern for me as a Saskatchewan farmer, teacher, and facilitator of classes and workshops in farm business management for farmers and farm families. During that time, I felt sadness and pain working with farm families in financial difficulty. Since then, professional people who work with farmers have informed me that suicides go unreported in the farming community. They may be reported as farm accidents or natural deaths to avoid more family shame.

In the past, financial counselling has been offered to families affected by the farm crisis. Such counselling often neglects the emotional and psychological crisis experienced by a family faced with losing a farming operation (Davis-Brown & Salamon, 1987). These authors found that if farm families are to be truly helped to cope with

financial, personal, and social loss, counsellors need to better understand farmers' specific needs and strengths. Thompson and McCubbin (1987) indicate that two of the most effective ways to reach farmers is through one-on-one counselling and small group counselling. Gerrard (2000a) contributed a community psychology perspective in relation to programs in farm stress in Saskatchewan. "Community psychology programs...share a focus on and understanding of the role of the social context in clients' lives" (p. 90). My experience working with farmers in farm business management also underlines the importance of supportive relationships in farmers' lives.

### **Researcher Context and Positionality**

As well as being the researcher in this study, I am a farmer, teacher, and counsellor. My background, education, and experience in the farm community all contribute to my desire and ability to do this research (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992). As a researcher, I have passion about my subject, understand my interest, and can build on that energy (Seidman, 1998). My personal experience with farm stress, coping, resilience, and hope must be presented. As a child growing up on a farm, my assumptions were based on the folk pedagogy (lay teachings) in my culture at the time: A farmer's work was never done. It was a man's world. A woman's place was in the kitchen. A girl helped her mother in the kitchen, got married, and became someone's wife. A woman was subservient to a man. The father was boss, was usually right, and had the last word on everything. Children were to be seen and not heard. No one talked back. A boy helped his father and inherited the farm. A girl had no part in the farm work, land ownership or land transfer. A father's job was to worry about the farm and make all the

decisions; a mother's job was to look after the children and not ask for much. That was my naïve perception and reality based on my own experiences.

I realized the downside of some of the traditional ways when I left home, became educated, and gradually started to make decisions for myself. As I became more conscious and critical of my surroundings, I learned that my mother appeared to have little say in the important farm decisions. My father appeared to have had the power and rights, as well as the responsibility and worries. When I got married in the seventies my husband encouraged me to have an opinion, to make some decisions for myself, and even to buy land. This did not come easy for me. I purchased my first piece of land in 1976, and bought more in 1979 and 1985. On the farm, I am involved in the decision-making and business operations, including production, human resources, marketing, and financial business planning. I understand the components of farm business management, and as a woman farmer, teacher and writer, I am also aware of the many roles of a farmer. My educational background with Bachelor degrees in Home Economics and in Education, and a Business Administration Certificate from the College of Commerce, enabled me to experience off-farm work in agriculture as well as farm decision-making. I am presently a graduate student in the Counselling program in the Department of Educational Psychology and Special Education at the University of Saskatchewan, living on the farm, and in the rural community.

As an adult, I started recognizing signs of stress on farmers and their families. When farming is going well, stress is manageable. When there is crop failure (such as the drought of 1988), rise in machinery and input costs, a decrease in commodity prices, or a combination thereof, there is an increased amount of farm stress. Not all farmers are

resilient or equipped to handle the stress. My experiences indicate that the etiology of farm stress results from different factors. Gerrard (2000b) suggests that stress or tension can result from both external and internal factors. Intergenerational transfers, such as passing the farm down from one generation to the next, can cause family conflict. Anxiety can result from traditional expectations in community living, where people marrying into the family move into a different culture with different role expectations. Stereotypical male/female roles on the farm can and do get passed on from generation to generation. Tension can also be the result of heredity, biology, society and environment, including uncontrollable variables, such as weather or government intervention. If people knew what to expect, would they be better able to cope? Would they be more hopeful? These assumptions, queries, and questions emerged as I continued my readings.

My personal experience in learning to cope and be hopeful informs my study. Upon reflection, I realized that the back problems I experienced during the drought in 1988 may have been the result of farm stress. The opportunity for a positive change in my life led to my recovery. Since that experience, I am more protective of my mental, emotional, spiritual and physical health. As Wolin and Wolin write, "Forewarned is forearmed when it comes to resiliency" (1993, p. 76). When we experienced an even more severe drought along with a tragic custom-combining accident claiming two family members in 2001, I recognized the stress I was under, and was able to take care of myself. Recognition, awareness and education were key in helping my family and I ride the waves through these troubled times.

For more than ten years, I worked with farm families. As a facilitator, I worked with farm teams teaching goal-directed farm business management courses such as

“Farming to Win”, “The Rural Family”, and “AgDirections 2000”. I served on provincial and national farm management boards, attended international farm management conferences, and presented a paper "Save the Family, Not Just the Farm" at the International Farm Management Association Congress in South Africa in 1999. In this paper, I outlined the importance of focusing on relationships rather than money. I wonder how important these relationships are in combating adversity in troubled times.

### **Purpose of the Study and Research Question**

The purpose of this study was to answer the question of what it is like to farm in this province at this time. The main research question framing this thesis was “What is the experience of a sample of Saskatchewan farmers farming today?” To answer this question, I interviewed four farmers and listened to their stories. It was my intention to thoughtfully explore the experiences of a sampling of these farmers to gain insight into their lives, to expand our understanding of their existence, and to discover and present the meanings made of life on the farm today. Although I did not initially expect to focus on stress, each story I heard reflected stressful times due to financial pressures. Although I have some understanding of the causes of farm stress, I became curious about how farmers can best manage this stress. What causes it to be more of a problem for some farmers than others? Does poor health result from mental, emotional, or physical stress? Is it a lack of spirituality or religion in our lives? Is it our attitudes? What factors affect how we experience stress, how we cope with it, and manage it? Does it differ from person to person and family to family? How does it differ from stress in urban populations? Are coping mechanisms neurological, biological, environmental, or physical? How is it related to emotional intelligence and is it? If farmers recognized the



stress in their lives, would it be easier for them to deal with it? I was curious about what keeps farmers farming in spite of the obstacles they face. As a researcher, educator, farmer, and graduate student in counselling, I wanted to interview farmers, hear their stories, and from the interview findings uncover their experiences of farming in Saskatchewan today. The findings of this study will help to provide information, develop understanding, and raise questions that will contribute to knowledge and meaning about how it is to farm in the face of the transition in agriculture in Saskatchewan today. Awareness and education about this topic can benefit new entrants into farming, professionals who work with farmers during challenging times, and government policy-makers as they guide farm people in managing their lives.

As a lifelong learner, counsellor, and researcher, I wanted to learn more about what these farmers were experiencing, and what they need. How might this information assist counsellors and other professionals who work with farmers? In this study, I used narratives to thoughtfully explore how they make sense of their lives (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Merriam & Associates, 2002). The literature review, as discussed in detail in Chapter Two, substantiated the need for further exploration of the experiences of Saskatchewan farmers farming during this economic downturn.

### **Definition of Terms**

In order to understand my study, the following important terms need to be defined:

## **Resilience**

Wolin and Wolin (1993) describe resilience as “the capacity to channel your pain rather than exploding... You need to see beyond life as it actually is and envision how it could possibly be" (p. 164-5).

## **Hope**

Dufault and Martocchio (1985) described hope as:

a multidimensional dynamic life force characterized by a confident yet uncertain expectation of achieving a future good, which, to the hoping person, is realistically possible, and personally significant”. It is a way of being, a “complex of many thoughts, feelings, and actions that change with time” (p. 380).

## **Stress**

According to well-known stress researcher Hans Selye, in 1936 stress was defined as “the non-specific result of any demand upon the body” (Selye, 1979, p. viii). Years later, this definition still holds. In a recent book about stress, edited by Snyder (2001), Williamson and Dooley define stress as “physiological and psychological reactions to either internal or external events (stressors) or, more comprehensively, as complex relations between stressors, responses, and additional mediating variables” and stressors as “situations that threaten, or are perceived as threatening, one’s well-being” (2001, p. 240).

## **Naturalistic Inquiry**

According to Guba and Lincoln, “naturalistic inquiry is a paradigm of inquiry; that is, a pattern or model for how inquiry may be conducted...It is carried out in a natural setting...and relies heavily on qualitative research methods” (2000, p. 363). It is a way of having people tell their stories in their own environment.

## **Narratives**

Narratives are first-person accounts of experiences that are in story format. They are powerful tools for understanding (Merriam & Associates, 2002).

### *Organization of the Thesis*

This thesis is organized in six chapters, as summarized below:

In Chapter One, I discussed my researcher background and focus, and highlighted how my life as a farmer and my work in agriculture stimulated my interest for this research. Who I am makes me suitable as a research instrument. My life as a farmer has given me an informed perspective and foundation or springboard from which I can launch the stories of the interviewed farmers in my study. My work in the area of farm business management as facilitator, counsellor and board director also enhances my experience and understanding to do this research. This study will shed light on the situation of farmers in Saskatchewan today. My study is an opportunity to hear farmers' stories, understand, and describe their experiences thus contributing to a body of knowledge about the transition in agriculture today. The abbreviated definition of terms outlines the theories and leads into the next chapter, the literature review.

Chapter Two is an overview of relevant literature about farming in Saskatchewan, as indicated by the Statistics Canada highlights and figures. This chapter also includes peer-reviewed journals about farming, rural communities and farm stress.

In Chapter Three, I outlined the research design and methodology used to conduct this study, including the rationale for choosing qualitative research, more specifically, naturalistic inquiry informed by narrative. I described the purpose of the study, the research question, and a brief review of the literature on qualitative research.

Chapter Four is the farmers' narratives. After a brief introduction to the farmers, I presented original data from the transcripts, so their stories remained *their* stories.

In Chapter Five, I integrated and related the stories to relevant literature, outlined implications of the findings for counselling, and made recommendations for further research.

## **CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Farming Today**

The agriculture industry has been changing rapidly over the past several decades. It has been impacted by global competition, industry consolidation, technological advancements, environmental considerations, and other change factors. According to Garven and Associates (2001), these factors have all created distress in agriculture. Thus, the agricultural industry is very different from the way it was in the past, and this trend will continue into the future. The Statistics Canada Census of Agriculture (1996) reported a decrease in the total number of farm operators in Saskatchewan from 78,025 in 1991 to only 72,925 in 1996, and reduced further to 66,275 in 2001 (Census of Agriculture, 2001). The number of Saskatchewan farms dropped from 60,840 farms in 1991 to 56,979 farms in 1996. Across Canada, the Census of Agriculture (2001) reported about 10% fewer farms in 2001 than 1996. The number of farms is expected to continue to decline as farmers retire, consolidate, sell or pursue other alternatives. Farm sizes are increasing, thus increasing the workload, the debt load, and the management responsibility. Transportation costs are increasing, and yet the price paid for Canadian grain and oilseed crops continues to be negatively affected by United States of America and European agricultural subsidy policies.

Farmers are caught in a cost-price squeeze that causes financial stress. Not many years ago, Farm Credit Corporation lent money to farmers only if their main income was due to farming and not from off-farm jobs. Now the same government encourages and expects farmers to support their farms with off-farm income. About half of the Saskatchewan farm family income is generated off the farm (Census of Agriculture,

2001). Adult members of the family farm work off the farm and also manage family responsibilities, having very little time left to look after themselves, thus increasing their personal stress. In the Farm Financial Survey (2003), Saskatchewan had the second lowest average net worth per farm in Canada, the lowest net capital investment, and lowest average farm liabilities. The average age of Saskatchewan farmers was forty-nine (Census of Agriculture, 2001); many are not trained and prepared to launch into a new career at this age. Many farmers I have encountered report feeling as if the rules of the game have been changed; they are being pushed out and discouraged from trying to make a living on the farm. When the price of commodities is up, they are considered good farmers; when the price goes down, they are considered poor farmers. When weather does not cooperate and there is little or no income, such as in drought years, stress on farm families is increased. Unlike most urban jobs, farmers lack job stability, pension benefits, medical benefits, and unemployment insurance. Hard work and persistence do not guarantee success when external factors have veto power. Uncontrollable variables, such as these, increase farm stress. Walker and Walker (1988) concur. They suggest that although conventional wisdom depicts farm life as idyllic, and less stressful than urban living, findings indicated that farm men and women were reporting somatic and physical symptoms commonly associated with chronic stress. In their study comparing farmers to urban people, self-reports of frequent to constant stress-related symptoms of trouble relaxing, loss of temper, and fatigue were significantly higher in the farm population. Self-reported symptom rates were also significantly higher in farm women than in farm men, higher in younger farmers, higher in mixed farming operations, and higher in farmers who were holding off-farm employment. It was suggested that the chronic stress

associated with the current farm financial crisis may be causing a high self-reported incidence of symptoms among farmers. This speaks to the need for more information, education, and awareness related to farm stress to help farm families manage the current situation in the field of agriculture.

### **Stress Research**

Snyder (2001) describes that there always has been and always will be events that cause psychological pain and shake the foundations of our beings. The idea of stress goes back to Greek medicine and was referred to as *pónos*. When studied by Hans Selye in 1936, stress was originally referred to as the general adaptation syndrome or G.A.S. (Selye, 1976). Today although it is a common term, there is not a universal definition of stress.

I started my research by comparing farm stress to stress in general. As I was gathering information, I found information on stress in the urban population and on children in the rural areas, but there appeared to be a gap in information on farm stress in Saskatchewan and in Canada. Although some of the research was twenty years old, it still addresses challenges and difficulties that pertain to farming in Saskatchewan today.

Family stress is defined as:

a state which arises from an actual or perceived imbalance between demand (eg., challenge, threat) and capability (eg., resources, coping) in the family's functioning. Stress varies depending upon the nature of the situation, the characteristics of the family unit, and the psychological and physical well-being of its members (McCubbin & Figley, 1983, p. 10).

According to Jurich and Russell (1987), although few studies have focused specifically upon the effect of the farm crisis on rural families and communities, there has been ample mounting evidence to support the contention that rural America is undergoing

a great deal of stress. They write that the “ripple effect” could destroy much of the rural country due to its effect on the banking industry, the farm credit system, and the rural communities. With farm stress, the need for coping and problem solving strategies and access to professional services is apparent. Davis-Brown and Salamon (1987) discussed problems with generic counselling and self-help programs for farm families, saying these solutions do not account for the unique stressors for families in agriculture. These authors write that classic stress theory isolates individuals from their social and cultural contexts. Thompson and McCubbin (1987) concur. They outlined an overview of resources for farm families that indicated the most popular tool was one-on-one counselling (which tends to be expensive), but small group counselling also worked well for farm families. They stated that financial crisis affects the whole family, and all members of the family need to be involved in these programs.

Economic hardship over a period of time has pronounced mental health outcomes. In the 1980’s farm crisis in United States, macro-level economic change set up a situation that was discouraging to all farmers. The farmers’ sense of enlightenment and capability were reduced. Healthy farmers with strong networks and supportive spouses experienced poor social-psychological well-being as well as those who were sickly and alone. “Our research made clear how difficult it is for individuals to view their futures as viable when an entire economic sector and the occupations within it experience restructuring” (Meyer & Lobao, 2003). This appears to resemble what is happening in agriculture in Saskatchewan today.

The fact that there is limited material about rural stress concurs with research done by Gerrard (2000b). Her research indicates that the biggest difference between



urban stress and farm stress for women is isolation and associated problems that occur as a result of this factor. Another study showed that farm women are also at high risk for depression and related symptoms because of the high expectations placed on them, socially and culturally; they have a multitude of family and farm roles and responsibilities, and stressors related to farming (Carruth & Logan, 2002). They found that as well as experiencing the day to day stress that men experienced, women also felt responsible for the impact of the farming operation on the physical, social and financial well-being of all family members. Berkowitz and Perkins (1984) found a significant predictor of stress was related to the relationship between role conflict and husband support. Interpersonal dynamics in the family were important in mediating stress. Attention to women's attitudes toward farming is a neglected dimension of farm work patterns (Barlett, Lobao, & Meyer, 1998). These researchers explored gendered patterns of work on family farms in Ohio, and found that women varied in how much farm work they did depending on their regional context and ideology.

### **Farm Stress and Resiliency Theory**

How does resiliency underpin this study? What part does resiliency play in rising above adversity in agriculture? In the medical field, there is a growing body of research linking optimism with positive immunological functioning and healthy outcomes (Scheier, Carver, & Bridges, 2001). The Society for the Psychological Study of Social Issues made individual and social resilience its theme at the 1995 American Psychological Association annual meeting. The focus appears to be moving from pathology to more of an interest on human strength and resilience.

Farmers have received a great deal of negative publicity about their attitudes, even so far as to be considered "disengaged". Many surveys, questionnaires, and focus groups do not tap into the essence of what is really happening in their lives. When I thought about researching farm stress, I wanted to focus on what makes farmers thrive rather than focusing on worry, negativity, and adversity. Saskatchewan has many success stories about resilient farm families; I wanted to understand what makes farmers hopeful.

Dr. Nikki Gerrard, a well-known community psychologist and farm stress consultant, takes a positive approach to farm stress, focusing on what makes people well rather than what makes them ill. Gerrard designed and implemented a farm stress program, the Rural Quality of Life Program for the Saskatoon Health District. She helps farm families to deal with a variety of difficulties---social, emotional, and financial (Gerrard, 1991, 1995). She provides learning opportunities for families, preferring to talk about choices and resiliency rather than coping strategies. Her work addresses farm stress as well as the impact of agriculture and farm policy on farm families (Gerrard, 2000b). She described herself as a facilitator doing research *with* farmers, so they could tell their story. In *What Doesn't Kill You Makes You Stronger---Building Resiliency in Rural People*, she found some farmers to be more resilient than others in coping with farm stress. When asked to define resiliency, farmers said resiliency was more than just coping; it was about moving beyond where they were when adversity struck. They said that coping is what people do in the absence of choice. Farmers have choices to be resilient rather than merely cope.

In resiliency literature, a resilient individual has a strong internal locus of control, a more positive self-concept, an achievement-oriented attitude toward life, an ability to

see the positive aspects of change, and an ability to find meaning and value in what one is doing (McCubbin et al., 1999). These authors emphasized the critical importance of strong relationships and self-understanding, which are ongoing and developmental, resulting in a better position to manage the stresses.

Wolin and Wolin (1993) describe resilience as “the capacity to channel your pain rather than exploding... You need to see beyond life as it actually is and envision how it could possibly be” (1993, p. 164-5) and claim that “While you cannot change the past, you can change the way you understand it” (p. 207). Resilient adults do not take people, themselves, or life at face value. “Striving always to understand, resilient survivors process their experiences, look for meanings hidden beneath the surface of events, and confront themselves honestly”(p. 81). They illustrate how “the seven resiliencies---insight, independence, relationships, initiative, creativity, humour and morality---evolve over time, from childhood to adolescence to adulthood” (p. 62-63). This resiliency definition relates more to what farmers in Gerrard’s study (2000b) said about resiliency, that they need to look beyond adversity to see what is possible. Farmers who bounce back from adversity appear to have this resilience. Wolin and Wolin, for their part, say that resilient people find lasting strength by setting goals, persisting through frustration, and by claiming successes where they can. They suggest that resilience can be measured by the effort, strategies, and goals you attempt in spite of the troubled family situation, “to the extent that you take hold of life rather than letting life take hold of you, you are resilient” (1993, p. 154).

Whereas Wolin and Wolin (1993) write that survivors process and understand meanings, Flach (1990) takes a somewhat different approach. Flach describes the

difference between healthy and ill persons as their ability to experience the pain and integrate it into a new learning, rather than completely falling apart, unable to bear the uncertainty. Flach writes that falling apart emotionally is normal and necessary during periods of chaos that “shake us free of obsolete assumptions, identities, and environmental conditions that block growth” (p. 300), but periods of chaos also encourage us to seek new ways to move along in life. Integrating the experience as a new learning is the resilient response of normal chaotic events in life.

Using a similar argument, VanLieshout and Heymans (2000) describe resilience in terms of ego-resilience as “resourceful, flexible and persistent adaptation to changing circumstances and environmental contingencies in problem solving” (p 105). According to Gerrard (2000b), farmers demonstrated a resiliency that was both proactive and reactive. Farmers spoke about the necessity to go beyond where they were before, to learn, to be ready for the next thing...to be stronger, more capable, and prepared to deal with the next adversity. They described resiliency as a “dynamic, socially contextualized concept, that is both a process and a product, changeable over time, which is about preparing for and responding to adversity at the individual, family, community and state levels” (p. iii). Resiliency is about learning and growing as a person in community.

### **Available Resources for Resiliency**

"Trends in Saskatchewan Agriculture" (Garven & Associates Ltd., 2001) outlined rapid changes in agriculture, as indicated earlier in this paper. Gerrard (2000b) writes that a farmer often has a difficult time separating himself/herself as an individual from the farm. When the farm business fails, farmers believe they have failed themselves,

their family, and extended family members. Even the ancestors of the living family members appear to have an impact on this issue.

According to Swisher et al., (1998), the farming operation has effects that spill over into family and friend relationships. Farming individuals are exposed to a higher frequency of financial and job related stressful events than non-farming individuals. Farmers report higher rates of cuts in wages or salary, financial losses, increases in debt loads, and limitations by banks on the size of loans than non-farmers. The implications for farm families are obvious; there is increased stress on family relationships (McCubbin, Thompson, Thompson, & Fromer, 1998). Stress in one person in the family impacts the whole family. Farm women showed significantly higher symptom scores than did men, and younger men higher than older men (Walker & Walker, 1988). The authors suggest that it is possible that symptom levels are lower in older farmers because they may have lower debt loads than younger farmers who are entering the occupation more recently.

The Farm Stress Unit of Saskatchewan Agriculture and Food, has a toll-free Farm Stress Line set up by the government to help farmers in stress. Ken Imhoff (personal communication, February 16, 2004) reported approximately 2000 calls annually, more calls from men than women. Three hundred of these calls related to financial issues, such as collective actions, foreclosure notices, insolvency, and bankruptcy. The caller remains anonymous and can choose to talk to either a male or female counsellor who encourages and assists them to clarify the problem. After the call, the counsellor prepares a statistical report and briefs the other counsellors.

Another support for farmers in stress is the Institute of Agricultural Rural Environmental Health (formerly the Centre of Agricultural Medicine) at the Royal University Hospital. In a public pamphlet prepared for the Farm Stress Line, "Resiliency in Rural People", Gerrard (1999) outlines farmers' responses to information, conflict or crisis. The Farm Stress Unit of Saskatchewan Agriculture and Food and Rural Quality of Life Program of Saskatoon District Health also funded a study of rural people's resiliency and barriers and enhancers to resiliency.

Also available for rural community use is a binder of overheads that is a ready-made presentation for community leaders to facilitate farm stress workshops with farm families. The Rural Health Extension Program has a rural stress tool-book that describes stress, reacting to stress and dealing with stress. The easy-to-read booklet includes tests of awareness skills, acceptance skills, coping skills, and action skills for individuals, families, and groups in workshops. Farmers can discover the pressure points in their stress---health, relationships, weather, finances, farm hassles or work overload. This resource also contains a list for basic stress prevention techniques and a list of resources and references for further help.

### **Barriers to Resiliency**

One of Gerrard's (2000b) research goals was to elicit a definition of resiliency. She used a qualitative analysis, interviewing seventeen farmers from an inter-sectoral group. She also researched barriers to resiliency, internal barriers, external barriers and barriers that were both internal and external. According to Gerrard, internal barriers to resiliency that seemed to make people feel paralyzed included such things as age, fear, isolation, communication, lack of knowledge, and lack of self. Some people felt they

were too old or too young to be resilient. Their fears included what the future for their children, losing the farm and the future of farming in Saskatchewan. Many felt isolated in different ways---geographically, socially, and spiritually. Some felt there was no one to talk to or communicate with. One farmer said you could stand on a hill in Southern Saskatchewan and see thirty-five empty farms around them. Some farmers were not happy, and felt trapped and unable to be resilient. Death was the bottom line of a total loss of resiliency.

External barriers refer to what is going on outside of oneself (Gerrard, 2000b). A community can be a source of strength when it is supportive, and a weakness when it is not. At times, there is no privacy or opportunity to protect personal boundaries. Everyone waves, and says "hello", and that is affirming. It gives people a sense of belonging and feeling part of the community. The downside is everyone always seems to know your business. What they do not know, sometimes they make up. Sometimes relationships in the community are not healthy interactions. These are all factors that cause stress. Gerrard's research indicated that some people feel there can be a lack of caring, apathy, and a lack of responsibility for community involvement. The same people do all the volunteer work in the community, and when the community depopulates and when more people are working off the farm, the same few people are left to work harder, feeling that they have a thankless job. Volunteerism can be overwhelming. Sometimes leadership is lacking. My findings from a pilot interview for my research and my own experiences verify that. Depopulation results in a loss of culture, a loss of a sense of community, and has negative effects on the family. People no longer get together to socialize. Those who socialize at coffee row sometimes dwell on the negative. Negative

attitudes can have a profound impact on others. One interesting suggestion from Gerrard's study was to draw a line down the center of a restaurant, and put a plus sign on the wall on one side and a negative sign on the opposite wall, and see where people choose to sit. Perhaps that might shift some thinking patterns. Gerrard reported that farmers say there can be resistance to change, to moving on, to new things. If someone tries something new in the family or community, they may be faced with criticism. An extended family can be a positive or negative influence, depending on how supportive they are of each other's interests.

In November 2001, I attended an Excellence in Agriculture conference in Mont Tremblant, Quebec. After speaking with farmers from across Canada (personal communication, Nov. 29-30, 2001), many tacit assumptions were confirmed. Although financial pressures are tough to deal with, many of the hardest problems to deal with are human resource or interaction issues, how to get along together when farming with the extended family, especially women who marry farmers and are introduced to a different family and culture. There is a higher level of farming-related stress reported by women (Deary et al., 1997). It is not clear whether women suffer more stress or are more prepared to admit to the adversity.

Gender issues on the farm are also a concern. There are many stereotypical attitudes, regarding the roles of females and of in-laws in family relationships (Gerrard, 2000b). She discovered issues around the daughter-in-law and patrilineal farms. Although females earn most of the off-farm income, many still do not have a voice. Census statistics show that female farmers in Saskatchewan tend to have more formal education than their husbands. Many of these resources go untapped. Seldom are the



daughters-in-law invited into the family business to which they contribute a great deal, including financially. Gerrard's study stated that financial or economic issues can also be external barriers to resiliency. Farmers complained about the uncontrollable variables in their lives. Another external barrier was having little or no input in government policies when decision-making is based on an urban-based culture. Lack of resources in the form of education, services and poor road systems were listed as external barriers to resiliency. Gerrard's research findings indicated that sometimes people think they have control over something and they do not, and sometimes people do not have control over something and they think they do. According to Gerrard, the lack of control or the perception of lack of control can be a combination of internal and external barriers to resiliency around farm stress. This is what farmers refer to as the uncontrollable variables. Not being able to control or perceiving that one cannot control his/her life is a stressor that is a barrier to resiliency.

What is different today than it was years ago is that farming is much more complicated---more choices and more limitations. The information overload can be overwhelming; there are too many chemicals, fertilizers, varieties of grain, marketing strategies, types of equipment, forms to fill out, quality assurance, environmental controls, and financial management requirements. Years ago, this was much simpler.

### **Community Support**

What factors enhance resiliency? Is it about self-management? Having a positive attitude, learning family communication, and pulling together in relationships all help people to be more resilient. How do farmers live with this?

According to Bruner (1996), learning is a very resiliency enhancing experience for individuals and for the community. It does not matter what we learn. It is the positive process of learning something new that makes the difference. How do we learn? Bruner describes ways we learn. He refers to “a computational view concerned with information processing or how we inscribe, sort, collect, retrieve, and manage information” (p. 87). Is it information organizing and processing or "meaning making"? Agency is taking more control of our mental activity. Meta-cognition is a way of reflecting on the experience. We can learn from our mistakes. Re-framing adverse experiences provides an excellent opportunity to learn. Ideas and thoughts transform from negative to positive when looked at in the right light. Collaboration or sharing resources can benefit individuals and communities. People also learn from their culture. My experience is that farmers say they learn best from other farmers. They trust the credibility of another farmer’s information and experience.

In my work with the Agriculture Institute of Management in Saskatchewan, evaluations showed that farmers prefer to learn from other farmers. Farmers said they trusted the credibility of other farmers who have experienced farming. A retired farmer appeared to have more credibility in their eyes than a bureaucrat who had never farmed. A farmer with an agricultural degree would be valued if he also had experience farming. For example, in terms of production, farmers said they talked to and learned from other farmers who were good farmers and had success growing crops. We targeted our farm business management programs at the innovators and early adapters knowing that the middle adapters and late adapters would follow suit, learning from their neighbours and friends. The eager innovators and early adapters were more likely to sign up for the

courses, seminars, and meetings because they were eager to expand their learning and look at farming in a different way. Once they tried something on their farm and were successful, the other farmers adapted that method. The instructors, facilitators and counsellors who were hired were either farmers themselves or had experience working with farmers. Knowing the facilitator was a farmer gave him or her credibility in the eyes of the other farmers. Due to my farming background and work, my research stands to have credibility with other farmers.

Gerrard's study (2000b) reported that external resources that farmers reported lacking were in education, health care, and child care. Education needs seemed to focus on self-esteem, stress management, anger management and conflict resolution. With more farmers trying to work together to cut costs, there is a need for communication information. Most farmers are independent and do things their own way, which impacts working relationships with others. Health care is about the need for hospitals, home care and care for the aging population in the rural areas. Child-care needs were found lacking. I can identify with that from personal experience. Our three children were born in four years. Although we were very cautious about farm safety, and tried to keep the kids away from farm machinery, at crucial times, sometimes we behaved differently. Due to a shortage of help in the field, and in order to make things work out smoothly, young mothers are out there helping. What cost is this to the safety of the children and family?

According to Gerrard (2000b), family, friends, clergy, and community also provide support. If people talk, listen, and share, they are more likely to create safety and trust in supportive relationships. Farmers who are involved in the community and take advantage of leadership opportunities seem to fare better. Communities who are working

together to bring about and embrace change tend to benefit the most from resources that are available to them (Gerrard, 2000b). Does this relate to having a perception of more control over their lives and environment?

According to Wolin and Wolin (1993), child psychiatrist Robert Coles coined a phrase---"moral energy"---a life-sustaining force that can lift survivors above the downward tug of hardship. According to Coles, "in order to live, we need a sense of purpose. We need to know why we are getting up in the morning, and why we go through each day. The clearer your answer, the more resilient you are." (1993, p. 187)

Along the same lines was a summary of a Native Mental Health Conference in Vancouver. *Nurturing Relationships* (1995) described a 'damage' model and a 'resiliency' model. In the first model, there exists a victim and an expert with the answers to 'fix'. In the second model, there is a survivor with self-worth who is encouraged to see his potential and positive attributes, abilities to find his own answers, and responsible for personal growth. The resiliency model can serve as a tool for assessment and empowerment of individuals, families and communities (Mackinaw & Adler, 1995, p. 63).

### **Hope Theory**

This self-empowering attitude resonates with the hope theory. Snyder (2000b), whose research work is significant in the area of hope, describes hope as a positive motivational state based on a sense of successful goal-directed energy and planning. Snyder (1999) writes that with hope theory, people are assumed to be goal-oriented in their everyday thinking. In the case of farmers, resiliency and hope is about a faith in the future of farming in Saskatchewan. "High hope people" (Snyder et al., 2000) perceive

themselves as being able to generate alternate paths when the original path is blocked. Their goal-directed thoughts are attended by two related components: “pathway thought involving the perceived capacity to produce ways of reaching goals, and agency thought tapping the perceived capacity to initiate and sustain movement along those pathways” (Snyder, 1999, p. 206). After reading hope theory, I understand why the "Farming To Win" goal-setting program was successful with farmers. In these workshops, farm couples were encouraged to individually set individual, family, and farm goals, and then come together with their partner to discuss what they had written. This involved communication, planning, and sometimes conflict resolution.

In her book *Hoping, Coping and Moping*, Jevne (2000) teaches strategies for coping, reminding us how choices affect our life and sufferings. She suggests that we change our attitudes, shifting from self-pity to a proactive solution (from "why?" to "what now?"). This encourages people to look at alternative ways, rather than doing what has been done before. According to folk pedagogy, “If you always do what you've always done, you'll always get what you've always got.” According to Jevne, people want to be enthusiastic and optimistic about life, and hope, when nurtured and encouraged, is capable of changing lives.

Jevne (2000) writes about creating a new vision, saying that there is always hope but sometimes you have to work at achieving hope. By changing his or her thoughts and behaviours to more hopeful thoughts and actions, an individual is more likely to find alternative ways of solving his or her problems. Optimistic or “high hope” individuals have goal-directed energy and make plans to achieve their goals.

How did I make sense of all this? Where did I go from here? Where did I get more understanding? I had questions. When farmers know who they are, what they stand for and understand their values, goals and priorities, are they more hopeful? When they know what really matters in their lives, are they more able to handle the farm stress that comes their way? When they set goals and use a form of goal-directed management, will they be more hopeful for the future in farming? Will my research give me these answers? In order to answer this, during my second interview, I asked the questions ‘what gives you hope?’ and ‘what drains your hope?’

### **Summary**

In this chapter, I outlined the gap that exists in farm research, and the difference between urban stress and farm stress. The impact of the high costs of inputs, low product price, and weather are having a toll on the financial situation of many farms. Farm stress today is very different from the way it was in the past; the declining number of farms is evidence of farmers pursuing alternatives. Farm sizes are increasing, and therefore, farmers have a higher debt load, increased work load, and more management responsibility. With that comes the need for more employees, larger equipment, and deeper pockets for financing. There is a surfeit of information available about chemicals, fertilizers, and grain varieties. Diversification brings with it the need for specialized equipment for new products, and sharper marketing skills. There are so many more choices and decisions to make about inputs to buy, and so many more limitations in terms of government policies and regulations. Farmers complain about information overload. The demand for improved farm business management education is evident in the areas of production, marketing, finances, and human resources. Is that the answer?

In this chapter, I discussed work by Gerrard (2000b) that inspired my desire to define resiliency and hope as it relates to farmers. I outlined the gap that exists in farm research due to the difference between urban stress and farm stress. Although farming has always been cyclical with its highs and lows, the narrow profit margin is significant due to impact of the high costs of inputs, low product price, and weather. These factors along with information overload, diversification into specialty crops, and demand for increased management ability affect the farm finances and increase the stress levels. Farm stress today is very different from the way it was in the past; the declining number of farms is evidence of farmers pursuing alternatives. The study of resiliency, hope theory, and farm stress will help shed light on the situation of farmers in Saskatchewan today. Both these terms are described in the definition of terms, so the reader has an appreciation of what I mean when I refer to resilience and hope in this paper.

In summary, the literature indicated that there is research on farm families, but it does not reflect the reality of the storied lives of farm families living and farming in Saskatchewan in 2004. These narratives can best be explored through qualitative research, specifically naturalistic inquiry, where the farmers' narratives are their own experiences named, recorded, and validated, as described in the next chapter. The purpose of my study was to hear farmers' stories, understand, and describe their experiences to provide information that will contribute to a body of knowledge about the transition in agriculture today.

## **CHAPTER THREE: DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY**

### **Rationale for Naturalistic Inquiry**

A qualitative research approach was used to capture the essence of what is happening in Saskatchewan agriculture today. Qualitative studies are descriptive, inductive, and naturalistic; they are concerned with process and meaning. The primary goal of a basic qualitative study is to make meaning of and understand people's experiences (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998; Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Merriam & Associates, 2002; Seidman, 1998). Qualitative research design was deemed most appropriate for this study in order to thoughtfully explore and understand farmers' experiences, and how this shapes their interactions with others in the society in which they live.

The design of this research was a naturalistic inquiry informed by farmers' narratives, captured through open-ended interviewing using guiding questions (Appendix E). Naturalistic inquiry is a mode of inquiry that encourages people to tell their stories in a natural setting, such as the farmers' homes. Narratives are first-person accounts of experiences that are in story format and are powerful tools for understanding (Merriam & Associates, 2002). Mishler (1991) writes that narratives are social acts of how the stories are told. Narrative is the natural way to hear the farmers' stories, where human experience is made meaningful (Polkinghorne, 1988). I wanted to capture their perspectives as a snapshot in time, and to learn what they thought and how they felt. I am presenting "only a piece of the puzzle, a close-up of one aspect of one segment of a larger world" (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998, p. 198). As a naturalistic researcher with an intimate relationship of what is being studied, I was looking for the socially constructed nature of farmers' reality in their natural setting (Guba & Lincoln, 2000). I wanted to learn the



farmers' own understanding of their experiences, the construction of their world, and the meaning they attributed to their experiences. From a counselling perspective, I wanted to understand how people make sense of their lives.

All farmers have a story. Many farm stories have not been heard. I, as farmer, counsellor, and researcher, was the primary instrument to capture these stories in an interview format on their farms (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998; Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Guba & Lincoln, 2000). My presence and form of involvement were integral to the stories--- how I listened, attended, encouraged, interrupted, digressed, initiated topics and terminated responses (Mishler, 1991). Around the kitchen table in the farmer's home, I listened to each farmer share what it is like to farm in Saskatchewan today. The data collected was rich in description of people, places, and conversations. These sorts of rich descriptions are not easily handled by statistical procedures (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998); qualitative research best captures these narratives.

My research guiding questions (Appendix E) guide the interviews to achieve rich detailed information related to the research question. These guiding questions were formulated as open-ended questions about the meaning of events and activities to the farmers, and the influence of the physical and social context on these events and activities (Seidman, 1998). Open-ended questions are questions that encourage an explanation, discussion, or story. They extend the conversation in the direction that the farmer chooses to go, as opposed to closed questions that can be answered with a one word answer. Having a counselling background, I paraphrased, rephrased, and asked for elaboration and clarification in order to capture the context and meaning of what the farmers were saying (Mishler, 1991). Audio-taping the interviews allowed me to

investigate this topic in all its complexity, in context, thus qualitative research was most suitable.

As a researcher, I wanted to hear what the farmers had to say. We each select events or experiences that have meaning for us, interpret them our own way, and that story exercises a powerful influence on how we feel and behave (Wolin & Wolin, 1993). What prompts a particular story to be told that way? People learn about themselves, change, and grow from being interviewed in this interactive process (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998). As the farmers told their stories, and made sense of what has happened to them, they gained inner power from validating, understanding, and making sense of their story (Mishler, 1991). A narrative is not about generalizing; it is about developing understanding, learning anew, and reforming knowledge that is already there. It is capturing the richness and nuances of meaning in people's lives' (Carter, 1993). How do the farmers make meaning of their stories? This study is about farmers using their own language and discourse to tell their stories. I wanted to honour and empower those who have willingly let me enter their world and volunteered to teach me about it (Richardson, 1998). Naturalistic inquiry using open-ended questioning was a process of collaboration or working together whereby the farmers told their stories, and my job was to present their stories. I chose to do this using their words in natural text as much as possible. The reader can imagine their own uses and applications of the texts. Narrative and life go together, and so the narrative method can render life experiences in relevant and meaningful ways (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). This study, informed by narrative, helped me understand the way the farmers experienced their world.

My genuine interest, passion, respect, and empathy for farmers and the field of agriculture helped to build rapport and establish trust that enhanced this research (Siedman, 1998). A qualitative researcher who conveys personal involvement, partiality, and empathy toward participants is more likely to build trust and foster richer, more descriptive data (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992). I am a farmer, and an integral part of this world. My greatest asset was also my greatest detriment. At the same time as I was directly involved in the interview, using counselling skills of active listening, summarizing, and paraphrasing, I needed to remain objective and as neutral as possible in the process. As a co-author or co-collaborator, I needed to acknowledge and understand my personal connection to this research (Seidman, 1998). I also had a stance of curiosity, respect, and equality (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992; Merriam & Associates, 2002). Glesne and Peshkin suggest: "(a)s a researcher, you are a curious student who comes to learn from and with research participants" (1992, p. 41). My experience with farmers has been when you are a curious and good listener, farmers love to talk (Parry & Doan, 1994). Similarly, Winslade and Monk suggest using a "spirit of naivety" to learn more about farmers' experiences (1999, p. 28). Cresswell (1998) concurs, saying that the researcher's role is that of an active learner who can "tell the story from the participants' views rather than as an 'expert' who passes judgment on participants" (p. 18). Establishing rapport as a co-researcher and fellow learner was important during my initial contact with the farmer. In a naturalistic inquiry such as this, there are multiple realities that can be studied holistically with as many constructions as there are farmers to make them. The relationship between me as a naturalistic researcher concerned with developing stories rich in description, and the farmer as interviewee, was interactive.

Story-telling or self-narratives are important in how people shape their life experiences (White, 1995). As cited by Carter (1993) in *Educational Researcher*, Nel Noddings (1991, p. 157) writes: “Stories have the power to direct and change our lives”. Telling their stories encouraged the farmers to think about their lives, make sense of what was and is happening, and empowered them to talk about their stories and what it means to them to experience this time in agriculture. “People by nature lead storied lives and tell stories of those lives whereas narrative researchers describe such lives, collect and tell stories of them, and write narratives of experience” (Clandinin & Connelly, 1998, p. 155). Shared stories and communication generated shared constructions (Erlandson et al., 1993). Farmers talking about their experiences may help farmers as well as others to understand this culture by hearing or reading their narratives. Bruner (1994) suggests “narrative practices are situated, socially conducted narrative activities that are meaningful within a culture” (p. 44). Lieblich, Tuvol-Mashiach and Zilber (1998) state the value of using a narrative method to obtain unique and rich data (p. 9). My intent was to use an open-ended interviewing technique so farmers would tell their stories, which would help me to understand their experiences. There are many ways of learning to improve reading, analysing, and interpreting of life stories; a narrative approach is more suitable for this study because it allows a more personal approach.

### **Participant Selection**

### **Purposeful Sampling**

In order to obtain an in-depth understanding of what it is like to farm in Saskatchewan today, I used purposeful sampling to select the farmers for this study. Purposeful sampling is a method of deliberately selecting information rich participants

who have direct experience and knowledge relevant to the research question being studied (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998; Lincoln & Guba, 1985, 1995). Purposeful sampling seeks to maximize the range of specific information that can be obtained seeking both typical and divergent data that emerging insights suggest (Erlandson, Harris, Skipper & Allen, 1993). I chose farmers that would give me data rich in information about farming, and was able to achieve a variety of farming experiences by selecting cases according to a specific set of criteria, as described below. One method of purposeful sampling is criterion sampling. Qualitative researchers must characteristically think purposefully and conceptually about criterion sampling, thus contributing to quality assurance (Cresswell, 1998; Denzin & Lincoln, 1998b; Merriam & Associates, 2002). Criterion sampling is “picking all cases that met some criterion” (Erlandson et al., 1993, p. 83). Criterion sampling is choosing participants using a set of criteria, thus controlling the scope of the data collection. I selected farmers for inclusion in my study who met the following criteria:

1. English-speaking Saskatchewan farmers who are actively managing their farm
2. Belonging to the average age group of Saskatchewan farmers, specifically forty-five to fifty-five year old individuals
4. Comfortable sharing their stories about farming
5. Willing and able to be part of this research study

The average age range of farmers in Saskatchewan is between forty-five and fifty-five years old (Farm Financial Survey, 2003). These are people who are likely to have experienced both highs and lows in farming. This informed my criteria for selecting individuals for this study. I wanted to interview farmers who lived within a reasonable

proximity (fifty kilometres) from our farm home to enable me to meet with them in the winter months. I explored a network of persons who could suggest farmers who might meet the criteria for the study. Friends and colleagues in agriculture made suggestions of people they knew that fit my criteria. I contacted potential participants by telephone a week before the interview, discussed the criteria with them, the nature of the study, and confirmed their interest and willingness to participate. A few who did not fit my criteria suggested others who may. For example, one woman I asked said that although she would like to be part of the study, she did not consider herself an active farmer (a person actively managing the farm). Although she is in charge of the home and family, she does not engage in the farm production, finances, or marketing of the products. She suggested another person to interview. I selected English-speaking farmers, two men and two women, who farmed within a fifty mile radius of a centre with a population of less than 5,000. The farmers had differences in land location, community, rural municipality, type of farming (ie. straight grain or mixed with livestock), landscape of land, soil type, and farming operations. For example, one fellow uses discers that till or plough the ground by turning over the soil; another farmer uses zero-till equipment which does not disturb the soil or expose it to the drying air. Participants farmed land in at least four different municipalities. Two farmers were mixed farmers; two were grain farmers. Some land was hilly, some flat; some land was stony, some was stone-free; and the soil consisted of different soil types. Two farmers said they were honoured to be invited to be part of the study; the other two farmers readily agreed to participate. Each of them explained the difficulty in setting up a time due to a busy schedule, one working in the community and two painting their homes. One farmer at first said I should be talking to his wife.

Although he is the active farmer, the farm originally belonged to his wife's parents.

During the interview, he talked more about farming his in-laws' land. All of the farmers in this study described having experienced drought conditions in their area for the last three or four years.

### **Data Collection**

Data refers to the rough material researchers collect from the world they are studying (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998). I collected my data using semi-structured interviews, field notes, and journal writing.

### **Semi-structured interviews**

According to Fontana and Frey (1998), interviewing is one of the most common and powerful ways to try to understand our fellow human beings. An interview is a conversation with a purpose (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998; Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). "The goal of understanding how the person thinks is at the centre of the interview... Good listening stimulates good talking (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998, p. 97).

Qualitative interviews vary in the degree to which they are structured (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998). I conducted two one-hour semi-structured interviews with each farmer. A semi-structured interview is an interview that is loosely structured and less formal than a structured interview. The format is non-standardized; the interviews are partly interviewer-led, partly interviewee-led. The interviewer has a specific agenda to follow, having previously selected the relevant topic areas and themes to pursue (Arksey & Knight, 1999). These interviews were focused on farmers' stories with the farmer playing a stronger role in defining the content of the interview and the direction of the stories (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998; Holstein & Gubrium, 1995; Mishler, 1991). Unlike a

structured, focused or standardized interview, the semi-structured interview is concerned with the unique, the idiosyncratic and the wholly individual viewpoint (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). According to Denzin and Lincoln (1998a), semi-structured interviewing provides a greater breadth than a structured interview; it gets to the heart or essence of the research question, ensures rich data collection, and fosters the meaning-making process. The interviews took place at a location chosen by the farmer, thus seven interviews took place around the kitchen table in the farmers' homes, and one in a church office. I asked each person to describe his/her farming experience in Saskatchewan today; the farmer's narration led the interview. Semi-structured interviews involve the use of guiding questions that guide the conversation, yet allow for flexibility. The guiding questions I used gave the conversation focus when needed (See Appendix E). The questions were formulated about the meaning of events and activities to the farmers, and the influence of the physical and social context on these events and activities (Seidman, 1998). For example, when they described an event, I asked them to explain more about it, and what it was like for them experiencing that event. The farmers answered in light of what they deemed important, choosing to say what they wanted about a particular topic. I listened to the farmer, following and not leading the conversation. This process was used to find out how the farmers "understand and make meaning of their experience" (Seidman, 1998, p.17). As interviewer, I was able to follow up their ideas, ask for more information, and explore what they were saying by using both open and closed questions. Open-ended questions are questions that encourage an explanation, discussion, or story. They extend the conversation in the direction that the farmer chooses to go, as opposed to closed questions that can be answered with a one-word answer. Open-ended questions



encouraged conversation of what the farmer wanted to talk about, thus there was an “improvisational, yet focused, quality to the interview” (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995, p. 77). The semi-structured interview allowed for this flexibility.

Gaining trust and establishing rapport is essential to the success of the interviews (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Leininger, 1994). My background as a farmer was important to the farmers. I treated the farmers with respect, and believe that we had an egalitarian relationship, where I, as researcher, and farmers as interviewees, were on equal footing (Fontana & Frey, 1998/ 2000; Maxwell, 1998). The farmers interacted with me in a comfortable, relaxed manner, and shared openly. They talked freely about their points of view, thus producing rich data that revealed their perspectives. “Good interviews are those in which the subjects are at ease and talk freely about their point of view” (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998, p. 95). I believe the data will enable a deeper understanding of these four farmers’ experiences.

I conducted the interviews using an active listening approach. Active listening is a listening approach that involves both listening and attending. I encouraged each farmer to openly tell his or her story, and I attended by using active listening comments such as, ‘Sounds like...’ or ‘It seems to me you are saying...’ I provided the opportunity for the farmer to confirm, clarify, or give a further explanation. “Good interviewers communicate personal interest and attention to subjects by being attentive, nodding their heads, and using appropriate facial expressions to communicate” (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998, pp. 94-97). I paid attention to the verbal and nonverbal messages with interest, acknowledgement, and encouragement. “The way an interviewer acts, questions, and responds, shapes the relationship, and therefore, shapes the ways participants respond and

give accounts of their experience” (Clandinin & Connelly, 1998, p. 165). I was interested in encouraging the farmers to be comfortable with saying what was on their mind, without any leading or discouraging on my part (Clandinin & Connelly, 1998). The farmers responded openly and fluently to the open-ended questions and active listening style, which resulted in rich data. I audio-taped and digital recorded the interviews to be verified by the farmer. I assured the interviewed farmers that if they found the discussion to be emotional, the tape recorder could be turned off at any time. None of the farmers felt the need to exercise this option. They were also informed that if the interview resulted in distress or discomfort, professional counselling services would be available to them.

### **Field Notes**

As a researcher, I used a variety of methods and techniques to ensure the integrity of the data collection, including field notes. Bogdan and Biklen (1998) write that field notes are "the written account of what the researcher hears, sees, experiences and thinks in the course of collecting and reflecting on the data in a qualitative study" (pp. 107-108). Connelly and Clandinin (1998) refer to field notes as active reconstruction whereas Cresswell (1998) refers to field notes as reflective notes. I wrote about setting up the interview, wonderings before my arrival at the farm, first impressions, experiences, and conversations we had before the interview. When the interview was finished, I jotted down notes and took pictures that related to my study. I chose not to take notes during the interviews, because it may have been distracting. I wanted to give my full attention to each farmer as he or she was speaking. However, I did try to make mental note of expressions, affect, and reactions that both the farmer and I were experiencing during the

interview, and immediately after I left the farm, I made notes of my observations and did journal writing of my reflections of the experience. "Field notes combined with journals written of our field experience provide a reflective balance" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 104).

### **Journal Writing**

Journal-writing was a natural way for me to record the research process with the participant and the interview. Clandinin and Connelly (1998) describe journaling as: "a powerful way for individuals to give accounts of...and make sense of their experiences by writing about their thoughts, activities, and stories" (p.166-7). Journaling helped me as a researcher to grow and critique my experience (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; VanManen, 1997). After each interview, I wrote my observations, my intuitions, and theoretical hunches about my experience interviewing the farmers. I recorded thoughts, feelings, and reflections, which helped me to understand my experience, and remain as objective and neutral as possible in my role as researcher. Journal-writing was helpful for noting a gain in insight, reflecting on ideas for counselling, and thinking about topics for further research. It was my way of recording observations about the phone calls, contact plans to drop off the transcriptions for review, and the next meeting details. I also recorded descriptions of the persons I encountered, the landscape of the land, and the farmyards and homes. Reflexive journaling was my way of recording my own thoughts, emotions, and transference from interactions with the farmers.

### **Data Analysis**

For me, informal data analysis began simultaneously with data collection (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998). After the first set of interviews, I immediately did journal-writing and

made field notes by jotting down words, phrases, and ideas on paper, and then typed these on the computer.

Merriam and Associates (2002) state that:

simultaneous data collection and analysis allows the researcher to make adjustments along the way, even to the point of redirecting data collection, and to ‘test’ emerging concepts, themes, and categories against subsequent data...and so all the while looking for common patterns across the data (p. 14).

The one-hour interviews were taped, transcribed, coded, categorized, and analyzed. I recorded the interviews using two tape recorders with an external microphone. I also used a digital recorder from the transcribing company that I hired to transcribe the recordings. I requested detailed lined transcriptions that picked up hesitations, laughter, and sighs in order to capture the essence of what was being said. Listening to the tapes while repeatedly reading the transcripts provided me with vocal variety including tone, expression, and emphasis. I could pick out key features of the speech and focus on the detail of the words, which gave clues to emotions. I worked with these original transcripts for data analysis, noting any ideas, themes, or patterns that appeared to be emerging. I also employed a spirit of scepticism to question my own assumptions.

Mishler (1999) considers the interview a process, whereby there exists a context of social relationship in which two people enter a dialogue. The text may be viewed as co-produced in that setting. Mishler (2003) refers to transcription as the “re-presentation of speech as text” (p. 304), and emphasizes the need for researchers to “conduct the dual process of close and repeated listening to taped speech and transcript reading” (p. 317),

which I did. He writes that this method will lead to the discovery of patterns in the talk that we had not recognized initially, causing us to arrange the text a certain way that helps to deepen our understanding. After the second set of interviews, I dictated my observations, thoughts and feelings into the digital recorder. When I typed later, I added more to my reflections. I looked for similarities and differences in the transcriptions, field notes, and journal-writing, and considered how what the farmers were saying was linked to the relevant theory and literature. In this study, analysis was on-going using a constant comparative method of analysis. This is an inductive research design used with multiple sources of data. Analysis begins early in the study and is nearly completed by the end of data collection. Bogdan and Biklen (1998) write: “While analysis is complicated, it is also a process that can be broken down into stages...so that data analysis...takes on a more friendly cast” (p. 153). They suggest “leaving the more formal analysis until most of the data are in” (p. 158). When the transcriptions came back from the first set of interviews, I listened to the audiotapes checking the lined transcriptions first for correctness and completeness. Then I searched through the data for regularities and patterns as well as for topics the data covered, and started noting words in the margins to represent these topics and patterns (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998). After the second set of interview transcriptions, more analysis occurred. I started looking for emerging themes, and again wrote in the margins. I read and re-read the transcripts, listened to the audio-tapes repeatedly, and read my field notes of observations, journaling, and reflections from the interviews. As I listened to the tapes, I listened for what seemed important to each farmer, noted changes in emphasis, and reflected on their stories. For example, I noted that one farmer laughed slightly whenever he spoke about

money. During this process, I made a list of all the categories, coded the data by searching for similarities, exceptions, and patterns in my data according to what fit together, and writing down words and phrases to represent these (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998). When coding, I first included everything that might fit as a code; I looked for patterns, similarities and differences. Next, I tried to form tentative hypothesis about what was behind certain features of the language, and check these against the data. I checked and re-checked the data to be sure I did not miss the meaning. As I searched for categories in each transcription, I explored themes and the meaning (Clandinin & Connelly, 1998). Cutting and pasting the lined transcriptions helped me to bring order to the story and further explore the themes in the farmers' narratives.

### **Trustworthiness**

In qualitative research, there are different ways of ensuring trustworthiness of the research. Trustworthiness is about repeatedly “making sense” of the meaning. The semi-structured interview allows for an array of data collection from a variety of sources and in a variety of ways to have some measure of credibility, demonstrating truth value and consistency (Erlandson et al., 1993). My goal was to tell the stories true to the lives and experiences of the farmers interviewed. Narratives may be better judged by their emotive force or their capacity to engage the reader emotionally in the story being told, by their verisimilitude, authenticity, and integrity rather than their verifiability (Clough, 2002). In qualitative research verbatim reporting of sources is important.

### ***Thick Description***

Purposeful sampling was used to deliberately select farmers who were able to provide rich data or thick description that addressed the research question. Thick

description was the detailed descriptions of situations, events and experiences as revealed in the farmers' interviews, my observations, or field notes. It was making extensive use of verbatim citations, which is a marker of good practice in qualitative research (Guba & Lincoln, 2000). With thick description, the data is more authentic and relevant, thus increasing the confidence of the reader.

### ***Triangulation***

One way of ensuring trustworthiness is a common social science technique called triangulation. Triangulation is a process carried out with respect to data, whereby different sources of data collection are employed. By obtaining data by combining multiple sources of data collection, the information derived from one source or by one method or one investigator can be checked against other sources to ensure credibility. There is less chance of making errors or drawing inappropriate conclusions than if a researcher was relying on one method. This is an important data analysis procedure, which increases confidence in research findings by using different methods or sources of data collection for the purposes of confirmation and completeness (Arskey & Knight, 1999, Bogdan & Biklen, 1998; Denzin & Lincoln, 1998b; Erlandson et al., 1993). It is a criterion of good practice in qualitative research using several methods that “often lead to contradictory evidence which reflects back on the research process” (Bauer & Gaskell, 2000, p. 367). Triangulation can address different but complementary questions in the study, can reveal how the ideas were similar or different, and can help to understand how or why one set of data differs from another set. It “provides insights about the same events or relationships” (Erlandson et al., 1993) which leads to a fuller understanding of what is being studied (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998). It contributes to the trustworthiness of

the data by comparing it with at least one other source (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992). The technique of triangulation is one mode of improving the probability that findings will be found credible. In this research, my data was triangulated with interview transcripts, data collected from family stories, pictures, newspaper clippings, documents, souvenirs, field notes, and personal reflection. I used different methods of data collection, such as transcripts and narratives from in-depth interviewing, observation, field notes, and journaling (Crabtree & Miller, 1999; Denzin & Lincoln, 2000).

### ***Member Checks***

While triangulation is a process carried out with respect to accuracy of specific data items, member checking is a process carried out with respect to constructions and overall credibility of the data and the stories (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Member checking is checking with the farmers from whom the original data was collected to be sure the data was understood as intended. It allowed the farmers the chance to authenticate their transcripts. This procedure is the story-teller verifying their story. Unless I, as the researcher, had reason to question the integrity of the farmers, member checks are a “reasonably valid way to establish the meaningfulness of the findings” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 315). When telling farmers’ stories, I tried to use as much verbatim text as deemed appropriate to illustrate the points the farmers were making. I utilized member checks for farmers to review the transcripts and the stories I wrote, and make additions, deletions, or changes of wording. I checked with the interviewed farmers to verify the authenticity of the transcripts and the stories. Because I had used a digital recorder as well as a tape recorder with an external microphone, the quality of the recordings and thus of the transcriptions was excellent. When I gave the transcripts to the participants, I



gave them a smoothed narrative, having had removed the ‘uhs’ and ‘ums’. Each farmer commented that the way they talk in conversation does not look the same as they write. One farmer had a change with one word in his transcription. The farmers confirmed the authenticity of their transcripts and stories, ensuring that the data, their narratives, were their perspectives, not that of the researcher’s. As a researcher who has received agreement from the farmers in my study on the credibility of my work, I have established a strong argument toward convincing others of the authenticity of my work.

### ***Reflexivity***

Being reflexive is about being involved in a critical, thinking, and reflexive research practice. My researcher background and positionality was stated at the onset of this paper. It was important to clearly articulate and be transparent about my background as a counsellor, teacher, and farmer in the agricultural community. It was important for me to recognize that my background was both an asset and a detriment. Bogdan and Biklen (1998) suggest that data analysis would be informed by my perspective as a researcher, my theoretical position, and by the dialogue about farming in which I am immersed. My intent was to understand that interest through my journaling, reflecting, and personal psychotherapy. By using field notes and reflexive journaling, I was able to think critically about what I saw, felt, and experienced so I became more than a recording machine. “These texts are social facts; they are produced, shared, and used in socially organized ways” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000, p. 640). Also important to me, as a qualitative researcher, was to be a person who at each point in the research process, was self-interrogating and asking difficult questions of both myself and the interviewed farmers, such as ‘how was that for me?’ and ‘what meaning do you make of that?’ I

attempted to link farmers' perspectives to the systems in which they are enmeshed by asking more questions (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998). According to Mason (1996), this is an effective way of producing qualitative research that is intellectually sophisticated. As well as being more enjoyable, easier to conduct, and socially relevant, the research is also ethically and politically acceptable. Purposeful sampling, triangulation, member checks, thick description and practicing reflexivity all contributed to the trustworthiness of this study (Guba & Lincoln, 2000).

### **Ethical Considerations**

Because the objects of inquiry in interviewing are human beings, extreme care must be taken to avoid any harm to them (Fontana & Frey, 1998). Each of the participants either chose or was given a pseudonym. Any identifiable factors that may jeopardize the farmer's anonymity were eliminated or changed. This study followed the ethical guidelines set out by the University of Saskatchewan Advisory Committee on Ethics and Behavioural Science Research (See Appendix A). The study was interactive requiring informed consent and protection of individual privacy and confidentiality. An Informed Consent Form was signed by each participant before the interview took place (See Appendix B). A Data/Transcript Release Form was signed by each participant upon completion of reviewing the transcribed interview (See Appendix C), and a Sign-off Release Form upon completion of reading the narrative in Chapter 4 (See Appendix D). Interview audio-tapes were only available to the researcher, supervisor, and transcriber. Data will be securely stored for the required five years in the office of my supervisor in the Department of Educational Psychology and Special Education, in accordance with University of Saskatchewan regulations.

## **Summary of Methodology**

My study was naturalistic inquiry informed by narrative. This study took place in a natural setting and was more concerned with the process rather than with outcomes or products. I used semi-structured interviews with open-ended guiding questions to seek to seek to achieve detailed information about the farmers' experiences. Open-ended interviewing encouraged and stimulated the farmers to tell stories about some significant event in their life and social context. This methodology resulted in unique and rich data that could not be obtained from experiments, questionnaires, or observation. The transcriptions were analyzed to ensure integrity, character and quality of the research. Purposeful sampling, member checks, triangulation, thick description and practicing reflexivity all contributed to the trustworthiness of this study. This research will serve to develop a fuller understanding of the farming experiences of these individuals. In the next chapter, readers will encounter the stories of four farmers.

## **CHAPTER FOUR: PRESENTATION OF THE FINDINGS**

### **Introduction to the farmers**

Introduction to the four farmers will consist of a brief description of the setting, context, and dialogue of the interview. These narratives will enable the reader to become acquainted with each of the farmers and their narratives prior to the discussion of guiding themes and subsequent conclusions. All but one of these interviews took place in the farmers' homes around the kitchen table. The interviews were conducted between November and March. The farmers discussed what it is like farming now, compared to what it was like in the past, and what concerns them about the future of their farms. "People live stories, and in the telling of them reaffirm them, modify them, and create new ones. Stories, such as these, lived and told, educate the self and others" (Clandinin & Connelly, 1998, p. 155). As much as possible, I asked open-ended questioning during interviewing, and then used the dialogue of the farmers in this chapter. The farmers can hear and read their own stories, and readers can hear the farmers talking. The titles in each section are a phrase from the content of each farmer's narrative that represents a theme.

## Harry's Story: "I don't want a u-haul behind my hearse."

### "What life is really about for me..."

Harry is a person who has a strong faith in God, who places great importance on his relationships with his wife and family, and who values people over material wealth. What keeps him going and what motivates him is his relationship to God and responsibility to his wife and family. Although Harry repeatedly used the words "discouraging" and "frustration", he also used words of hope, such as "if", "when", and "right now" that I italicized for emphasis. He uses laughter in his dialogue. In terms of farming in Saskatchewan these days, Harry explained both the potential and the challenges:

There's huge potential if you can get hold of the right thing that works for you personally and the climate. Some guys have done very well because they just happened to hit the right thing for them. Some guys are better managers than others. (slight laughter)

On the one hand, I think there's a lot of opportunities, but on the other hand, I think there's a lot of *frustration*...because we just seem to be continually running to try and keep up with the huge debt load. There just doesn't seem to be a lot of payoff *right now*. I guess part of the frustration is that everybody else seems to be able to kind of set the price for what they're doing in the world, and yet we seem to be like sort of a hostage to the middle men and retailers at the other end of the food chain (slight laughter).

And the interesting thing about agriculture is that we're at the mercy of the weather, and I don't know if there's any other business that's so much like that. There are so many things that are out of your control. *If* it doesn't rain, you can have all the best equipment, best technology, and everything, and it doesn't matter, *if* it doesn't rain.

I recognize that life isn't really about money, because *if life was about money, I've drastically failed*, and I would be a failure. What life is really about for me, and again this is related to my faith in God, and just raising a family and the satisfaction of your kids growing up, and being a contributing part of society. I'm not about trying to amass a fortune; I don't want a u-haul behind my hearse. I'd be much more satisfied *if* I had a good relationship with God, and felt I'd done a decent job of raising my family.

What takes away my hope is the frustration of trying to do a good job of something and yet seeing little return for it. The more you try and put good seed in the ground and look after it and fertilize it and all that, and yet *if* it doesn't rain, well, that's it. It gets *discouraging*. It's not so much wanting to get rich, it would be just nice to be able to make sure the bills are paid up in a good timely fashion and not have to think so much about that.

Harry's values showed through as he discussed what is important to him.

### **“We got off to a bad start”**

Farming is challenging enough to get started without the first year being a year without a crop. Harry described what it was like to farm when he started fifteen years ago, at a time when there was a drought in Saskatchewan. He named goals he had set for himself when he came back to the farm, and explained how matters have not worked out the way he had planned.

Our first year was 1988, which was a very dry year in this community, so we got off to really a bad start for a first year. But on the other hand, we have been able to build some equity over the years, but in the last few years that seems to have stagnated. We've really hit four years in a row of drought now. It seems like we're just banging our heads against the wall, and it's *discouraging*.

One of my goals was that I would be able to earn enough on the farm that I wouldn't have to work off the farm. When we moved here the farm was small with cereals type grain farm, and very traditional. I tried to move in directions that would expand the farm. We made the farm bigger, added livestock and gave myself way more work. For the extra work, I'm not sure I'm generating the extra income to make that worthwhile, to make ends meet.

When we started farming, I thought in about fifteen years we'd kind of be over the hump, that things would be getting a little easier financially. Now that time has past, I think after fifteen years, I'm closer to being in the poor house than I was at the beginning of those fifteen years, and that's a *frustration*; there's no doubt about it. We have never been big on building some big financial empire or anything like that. People are very much more important to us than how fancy a car we drive, but it would be nice to be able to get all the bills paid in a timely fashion, and maybe go out for supper once a month or something like that. Instead we pay the phone bill. (laughter)

Harry's initial goals involved being able to generate enough income working full-

time on the farm, and now Harry wonders if his goals were unrealistic.

**“We had a few heart to heart talks...”**

Farming with two or more generations is a common, but not easy, undertaking. Extended families can bring hidden pressure from expectations that need to be met. Harry talked about the experiences of farming with his wife’s parents and described farming with another generation. He discussed the changes he has made in farm practices, and how the two generations were able to come to understand each other with communication.

In retrospect, I think they (my in-laws) are sorry today that we came to the farm because of the financial pressure. We've had to work hard, and yet we don't seem to be able to get ahead.

Here's something that was a bit of a challenge on the farm that created friction sometimes. We were living at the other end of the yard from the older generation with different views, values and ideas about how things should be done.

There were more expectations from my wife's parents when we first moved here. Probably I was a lot less secure in myself then, and it was more important to me to try and meet their expectations and please them. But we had a few heart-to-heart talks, and they know that we have our own way of doing things, our own lives to lead, and they've been pretty good with that.

There has been a huge change in technology in the last fifteen years. I was the first one that grew lentils in this area. The previous generation often has trouble understanding all of the reasons behind the specialty crops and the diversification, and the different mindset of balancing things out (animals vs. crops).

Diversification and technology have played a major role in addressing challenges in farming for a profit at this time.

**“The debt burden is a heavy weight...to keep the balls bouncing to keep going...”**

Financial debt is one of the heavy burdens that farmers face from day to day. Each time Harry spoke about money matters, his habit of laughing slightly appears to

indicate the seriousness of the topic for him. I noted how often he stressed the weight of the debt load and the importance to him of paying his bills in a timely fashion.

Just the debt load, too. That's a weight for me, anyway. It's a weight, too. For me, it's important to fulfill my financial obligations, and so it's a weight on my shoulders to try and make sure that all gets kept up, and sometimes it doesn't get kept up as good as I would like it to.

I'm getting to the place in my life where I'd like to start thinking about slowing down a little bit, but the biggest downside for us is just the financial burden right now, trying to keep all the balls in the air, and keep going.

The big shadow is the tremendous financial burden of the debt...the burden of limited resources trying to keep everything paid up and raise a family and hopefully, at some point, being able to set a little aside for *when* a person is ready to retire.

And it's just a really tough tread-mill to try and keep the bills paid, and so that's probably a bigger challenge.

The price of our commodities has not anywhere near kept pace with the costs of inputs.

I hear that Canada is one of the countries that has the lowest percentage of our income used to buy the necessities of life. Sooner or later, people have got to realize that they have to pay for what they eat. We've got to make a living, too, not just the guy in the middle, and the guy at the retail level.

In general, husbands and wives tend to view money matters a little differently. Men don't maybe view security in quite the same way as our wives do. And I think for Sally, it's been more challenging because money's been very tight for us, and I very often feel like we're only a quarter a jump ahead of the bank.

Harry outlined the factors involved in creating the heavy financial burden for him, and how difficult paying bills is when money is tight.

**“We've tried to diversify...”**

Diversification, such as starting another enterprise or growing different crops, is promoted in all areas of agriculture in Saskatchewan. Harry explained the challenges he experienced when he diversified into specialty crops as well as expanded into cattle.



We've tried to diversify to balance out the highs and lows within the livestock industry and the dirt farming.

Because you diversify (from wheat to lentils), you need more specialized equipment, different or better equipment, and that puts more of a financial load on.

And because we have a sort of a diversified operation, we have cattle and some other livestock (chickens and turkeys) as well as the grain, there's always a lot to be done....It's a challenge to try and do a good job of wearing all the different hats that you have to wear to keep up. There's so much more information that comes out every year. My perception is that the government requires more and more of us all the time; things become more complex, and again, it would be nice to let somebody else at least do some of the wearing of some of those hats, but when you're short on cash, there's no money to do that. (slight laughter)

I don't mind the long hours, but you know, by society's standards a lot of times of the year I probably put in a lot more hours than a lot of other people that are taking home quite a bit bigger pay cheque. The longest days we'd ever put in would be eighteen hours, but in our slow time of year, I probably put in maybe eight or nine hours a day. When you do your income tax at the end of the year, and you see what really the margin is of what you've actually put in your pocket to live on, and per hour, it's not very much. (slight laughter)

Harry outlined other challenges, such as the need to play many different roles, to be knowledgeable about agricultural information, and to put in long hours, without recouping many dollars per hour.

**“Time and money are so intertwined...”**

Farming today is very complicated. Harry talked about the challenge of keeping up with all the information about new products. The cash flow deficit impacts the strategic marketing of his grain, so the timeliness of bill payments dictates the price he can get for his grain. The shortage of cash also affects hiring of help to complete a task, which again impacts the timeliness of the job done. Sometimes this ends up costing him more money in the long run. This discussion reminded me of Gordon Lightfoot's song "Sometimes I feel like I'm winning, but I'm losing again."

There's so much new seed coming down the pipe all the time that I try to keep fairly up on seed varieties, which is more expensive than bin-run seed. There are more types of seed owned by companies that only supply the seed, pedigreed or certified, every year so seed costs are all over the map. Fertilizer costs have changed so much the last couple of years. Herbicide costs would average about pretty close across the board at \$20 an acre. Fuel has become a much bigger expense than when we started to farm, and it's getting bigger every year. Everything has got more expensive except our product. I think I could iron out in timely marketing, but you're always on this treadmill of getting to pay the bills, and you don't always market things maybe when you think you should, just because you need cash flow. This bill's due now, and I need the money, so this has got to go, even though usually the normal high for that product might be in the spring. We need it now, so it goes now.

But if you don't have the money in hand, well then, if you think you need it bad enough, then go borrow money, (laughter) and then you have another obligation to fulfill.

Because of the financial pressure, you're trying to do things yourself, something doesn't get done in a timely fashion, and then it ends up costing you more money. *Time and money are so intertwined.* There's only so much time. If you have the money to get somebody else to do some of these things, it frees up time for maybe some of the more important things that you need to spend more time on, but you don't get enough time for them, because you're doing some of these slower jobs that could easily be done for somebody else. (laughter)

The less money I have around, the less I value my time at; I work a little harder and a little longer and get it done myself, and I've sometimes saved myself some money. Sometimes when you look back, you think, 'No, I would have been better to have got somebody else to do that'. A skill that a person needs to develop is knowing when the right time is to say, 'no, somebody else needs to do it', even though maybe there isn't a lot of money. Making sure all the bases are covered, and yet trying to absorb some of these extra things to save money. There's got to be a balance there, There are jobs that I don't particularly have the right or best equipment to do, but sometimes I do them, because I try to balance the risk of doing them against trying to save that money, and *sometimes you win and sometimes you lose.*

When I hire, is in direct proportion to my perception of how much money we have around. But for me, the job that I don't think anybody wants to do is probably the one I'll be most likely to do myself, but usually, the things that I'll farm out, I farm out. I'll let somebody else do the things that I don't feel that I have the skills or possibly the equipment to do well myself, if I think there's the money around.

Farming is challenging. Knowing what to do each time is difficult because each

year is different. Harry described that he finds it difficult to make decisions about expenditure of time and money, when both are in short supply. Spraying is an operation that he sometimes hires done.

**“Hindsight is always twenty-twenty...”**

Harry gave an example from a few years past when he used to do a particular job himself. In the end, it cost him more money to fix a broken tractor axle than if he had hired the whole job done. Another time that Harry described as hard to predict is at spraying season, as he described below:

When we had a little more cash around, it was a little easier to justify having somebody around to pick up more of the loose ends.

Sometimes I've made decisions that were tainted by knowing the money was tight. Sometimes it would have made you money, if you'd spent the extra money. *Hindsight is always twenty-twenty*, especially spraying. Money's short, so you do it yourself; then it ends up becoming a weed problem later on because it wasn't done in a timely fashion. There's always this trying to juggle this balance between getting everything done and making wise use of your financial resources, and it's tough for us.

That's another challenge of farming –every year is so different, and what was great last year may be absolutely the wrong thing this year.

Another thing that discourages us is this whole BSE thing. You make a decision to keep the calves, thinking the borders probably going to open up by March, and prices will be better, so we keep them and feed them and then this second BSE case comes along, well, I didn't do the right thing. But how could we have known that back in November when we kept the calves?

The *hurry kind of pressure*, I tend to give the family members less slack. I tend to get short with them to 'come on, smarten up, get going here' kind of thing. When there's time pressures, I'm not afraid to get up earlier if I've got a busy day, or stay up later, or miss meals, or just whatever it takes to try to alleviate that time pressure.

There's only so much time in your day. With livestock around, there's so many unexpected things come up. Scheduling is always a problem; you have to learn to be very flexible.

As far as the *mental stress* part within myself, it's harder to get motivated if I'm feeling discouraged because of the way things are, and yet the silly part of that is that I know the best thing I can do is get going. When I don't get motivated, I'll just be less productive. I'll be inefficient and spend too much time on fiddly things.

Harry explained the challenges he faces with unpredictable situations that exist with the cattle. Every year is different, with uncontrollable weather affecting crops. He underlined the flexibility required to deal with this uncertainty and stress.

### **“The downside of that...” (Working with others)**

Often farmers will attempt to save money by forming partnerships or alliances with other farmers. Harry discussed the pros and cons of working with neighbours to reduce costs when a piece of equipment is critically needed only for a few days out of the year. Those critical days are not the same for everyone. He underlined the pressure involved in partnerships, including expectations from partners who may be in a different financial position or frame of mind about joint equipment purchase and decision-making.

I have a somewhat loose partnership with somebody else on a few pieces of equipment that we felt could be shared. We're able to purchase better equipment because of doing that. On some smaller things, too, I joined up with somebody else to spread out the cost of owning some of these things.

Some jobs it's just easier if there's two people involved; one person on the seeding equipment and there's another person running for seed or fertilizer or whatever else needs to be done.

The downside of that...everybody's kind of got to almost be willing to think that they need to put in a hundred and ten per cent, or one person gets kind of stuck doing all the maintenance and looking after it all the time.

### **“It could be a wonderful time together...”**

Farming can benefit the entire family. Harry highlighted the opportunity to work with his wife and family on the farm.

Mostly it's a good thing. It's an opportunity to do something with your spouse that maybe you wouldn't normally have, and it can be a wonderful time together,

depending on your attitude. Sometimes I have a bad attitude; sometimes my wife has a bad attitude; but generally when we do things together, we enjoy each other's company, and enjoy working at something together.

Our kids are getting old enough where they are a big help; we feel it's important for them to have some responsibilities, I have complete confidence that things will get done even if I never went out there. My oldest son was a huge help with haying this year; he's old enough to take quite a bit of responsibility there, to just go and do it, and our kids have been really good and helpful, and that helps a lot to deal with some of the pressure times of year. It gives them exercise, a change of pace and fresh air when they get home from school. You explain the risks to them and teach them as you go.

As he sees it, farm children have an opportunity for work ethic and responsibility that many other young people do not have the chance to experience.

**“It will be better next year...”**

Everyone has a different way of dealing with the stressors and frustrations they encounter. Notice the emphasis Harry put on being an optimist. During discouraging times, he said he draws on his strong faith in God, and good communication with his wife, as described below:

Two main things would be my belief in a God that is very interested in me personally, and being able to communicate with him daily on a personal basis. My wife and I have good communication. My marriage is very important. *If* we're at odds with each other, that puts pressure on all kinds of other things, too, and God's always ready to listen. (laughter)

What would really help us out is *if* it would rain decently (laughter) and again, that's out of our control.

I was born an optimist and will always be an optimist and I always think that *next year will be better*, but maybe I need to be more realistic, and view it as though it won't be better next year. So, we need to learn to deal with the way it is now, or get out, one or the other. (Laughter) And we have really thought actually quite a bit about that for the last two or three years, especially like ‘is there any point in going on?’ Like we just work and work and work, and it seems like you bang your head against the wall all the time. (sigh)

Things always look better in the morning. My faith in God is a big part of how I'm able to cope and re-energize myself. Because of my relationship with Jesus Christ, I'm able to give it to him, and that does huge amounts for me.

I tend to be an optimist. I think I'm less of an optimist now than I used to be. It's harder to be optimistic when there's been more down side than up side, but I still think very optimistic kind of things. I think of the potential for the kids here, *if* one of them decides to stick around. I know that someday maybe we'll get over the hump and there'll be a few extra dollars around, but I'm more of an optimist than a pessimist. There's no doubt about that. I usually tend to think that *it will be better next year*.

Although farming during this economic time may be difficult, Harry's resources help him cope. Even with the hard knocks, he tends to look at the brighter side, believing things will improve next year. Being optimistic may be what keeps farmers going from one year to the next.

**“We live in a very good place to raise a family...”**

Although farming is an occupation, it is also a way of life. Farmers can schedule flexibility in their lives. Harry talked about enjoying this flexibility to be with his kids. He outlined the benefits of raising his family on the farm, being physically fit, and being surrounded by “his kind of people”.

One of the rewards is being a master of your time. Even though there's a lot of times when your schedule is somewhat dictated to you, there is flexibility there, too.

Our kids have had a wealth of experiences; they learned how to do things, to participate in the work that's going on. They've learned work skills, and have a work ethic. It's time to go to work, we go out there, and we get at it and we do it. That's one of the benefits of owning your own business.

Our older two kids are more aware of our financial situation; they're more perceptive, we talk more with them; we have a pretty good relationship with our kids, and they have more understanding.

We're a lot more mobile society than even thirty years ago, too, it's good for the kids to experience and try new things.

I think we live in a very good place to raise a family, and family is important to us. Physically, I get plenty of exercise, and I think it's good for my health. I enjoy being just out. I enjoy the challenge of trying to develop and build up a farm on my own, sort of an entrepreneurial kind of thing. We have been able to build some equity; there will be some money there. At least according to a net worth statement, there will be some value there, (laughter) but we can't see that a lot of days. It's nice to be your own boss, although many times you feel like you're a slave to your debt. Certain jobs need to be done in a timely fashion, but if you really feel like you want to have a day off, you could. The kind of people that are in a rural area like this, being able to rub shoulders with them—that's a reward, too. They're my kind of people.

Rural people are down-to-earth, common sense people. To me, a lot of urban people have maybe a lot of head knowledge, but they don't have a lot of common sense. The people that live out here recognize that we are kind of in this together, and we need to kind of help each other out whenever we can. Everybody within five miles of here you know well enough to talk to them on the street. People are friendlier; we're less stuck on the sort of 'me' attitude. You think more outside of yourself or what you've got going on. We are more isolated so maybe tend to draw together more. My neighbour I can relate to because we have a lot of things in common. I think to rural people, family and spousal relationships are probably more important. You can always tell the farmer when you go to the city...he waves. We have an open door policy at our house. You don't need an invitation to stop and say hello to pretty much anybody.

As Harry compared the differences of living on the farm in this community to living in the city, he confirmed that he lives in a good place to raise his family.

### **“If we did have to quit, what would I do?”**

Farmers have many transferable skills. In order to be a farmer, they need to understand how to perform many different tasks and play different roles. Harry wonders what the future holds for him. He said what he thinks and what he hears about agriculture are not necessarily the same thing. In terms of what is happening in agriculture today, he does not think the government always has the best idea. He hears that farms the size of his are not going to exist in the future. What is important to Harry is providing a satisfactory lifestyle for his family. He talked about his fear of failing, of not being able to make it, and the embarrassment that goes with it.

If we did have to quit, what would I do? I'm not trained for anything. When you start getting to be around fifty, you don't really want to have to start again. There's still a little peer group thing there, and you don't like to look bad to anybody else.

It's important to me that I be able to provide for my family in an appropriate way that they would be able to at least have some of the things that their friends have, and that my wife have a reasonable level of satisfaction in her lifestyle, and that she doesn't have to run to the outhouse behind the house. It bothers me. It's something in the back of my mind all the time. (laughter)

I hear that people our size are not going to exist anymore, that we're headed towards a lot of big corporate operations, and yet, what I think, is corporations run on profit, and the margins are tight enough in agriculture that I'm not sure how interested the big corporations are going to be in investing millions and millions of dollars into something that may only give them a small percentage return.

The government tries to give us ideas about where we should be going. I'm not sure it's always the best idea. They say one thing and then ten years later, they change their mind and say something different, because they can see that their first idea wasn't working.

Farmers are trying to make a living, whereas government bureaucrats have less invested in the outcome. Politicians may suggest theories, policies, and recommendations that may have worked for farmers that particular year, but as Harry said earlier "Hindsight is always twenty-twenty." For Harry, the bottom line is that he wants to be able to provide a decent living for his family. He does not believe that corporations will invest in a business that has such a small return.

**"Will our kids farm? I have no money to help them get involved..."**

Harry said he would like to see his kids involved in the farm, and cannot see that happening the way things are going at the present. He believes he has the land base, but not the financial backing to help them get started. He also talks about the improvements he would like to see in the yard, if there were more time and money.

I've got a family that's growing up, and you wonder if one of them might be interested in getting involved in some way, shape or form. And you think, well



there's lots of opportunities out there, and yet they see that it's been tough for us, and I'm not sure, at this point anyway, if any of them really want to get involved because of that.

I've tried to leave that possibility and option open, but I haven't pushed them that way at all. I don't want them to feel constrained to do that in any way, shape or form. They have their own lives. It would be nice if one of them became interested, but if there's another person involved, well then you have to somehow generate more cash flow to pay another person involved. You better have somebody behind you with some money to help you get going or it would be just about impossible. (laughter)

We have the land base, and if they really want to be involved, I think there's things they could do here and make a living at it. But it's a hard sell at this point for the kids. I would probably like to see our land base expand a little, because it's going to become increasingly hard for somebody with the size of land base that we have to make ends meet. I would like to see our livestock operations expand somewhat, too.

Harry said it all when he said “what life is really about for me...” What really matters in life is his faith in God, and having the satisfaction of raising a family and watching his kids growing up, and being a contributing part of society. He stated he is not about trying to amass a fortune; he does not want a u-haul behind his hearse.

### **Frances' Story: "It's all a guessing game..."**

#### **"It doesn't work economically; it just doesn't work..."**

Frances, a farmer and landowner, lives with her husband and family in a small community in central Saskatchewan. Her sons are the fifth generation to farm on that land. Their ancestors built the house in which the family lives. Frances has always played an active role in the farming, as well as working off-farm. She discussed the changes that have taken place in farming during the years in which they have been on the farm. When asked what it is like to be farming in these times, Frances replied:

Well, in all honesty, for the last three years, it's been quite devastating to my family...It's been very, very hard on them. This year, for example, we're finding that financially, it's going to be really tough. For numerous reasons, we have been keeping our farming practices the same throughout the years, as far as fertilizing, spraying, and chemical, but we're finding that we're going to have to cut those ones back next year, which is a little disappointing for everyone concerned, because 'will we grow the same crops?' Maybe we will get rain next year; maybe things will be better. So do you want to cut back on those (inputs), saying maybe the crops won't be as good? And then you financially lessen the situation again. I think it's been very stressful for the three, my three men in the family. I have a tendency to avoid sometimes discussions, because it has a tendency to upset me, which isn't really fair to them either, but that's just the way I guess I cope with things.

Sometimes it's out of control what happens. Grain prices are low, chemical costs and fertilizer input costs are so high, and if there was more of a balance. And the price of machinery is so high, and you just cannot get paid for your product, and be expected to make money. It doesn't work economically; it just doesn't work...If you're not getting the money for your product, the end result is you're not going to make too much money.

Decisions are difficult for farmers when their livelihood depends primarily on the climate. Frances described the difficulty of making both short-term and long-term decisions with the reality of no rain, the anticipation of grasshoppers or the threat of early frost. Yet cutting back on inputs could limit the potential for a higher yielding crop.

You know, we have to try to take care of the land the best we can. We're going to cut back on fertilizer and chemical. We have never done that before, but we just have to make some more cutbacks and that's where it is going to come. You just slowly go down and you prioritize things. You slowly go down the list, and you hope you don't get to the bottom of that priority list, but we're slowly sneaking down...which is too bad, because what if it's a very good crop? What if we do get a bumper crop, and then your bushels are down because you haven't put the inputs in there? You know, it's always that. What if? What should we do?

We're going to start shopping around, because we know we're able to get it (fuel and chemical) cheaper at other places, which will save us another substantial amount, probably a saving of ten thousand dollars on those two things alone. But it's a very sad thing in a way, to me, because both these people that we won't be dealing with anymore are very good friends of ours.

So in the farming community we are getting away from loyalty to certain businesses because we have to become more business like and we have to go where it's more competitive. And I find that's so sad, but it's a must. We can't lose money just because we're friends with that person. The margins are just too narrow and you have to take your profit where you can get it.

Farmers today are faced with decisions to make and alternatives to consider.

Frances stated the impact of some of these decisions on the family. She described mixed emotional feelings she was feeling about her son's decision to farm or to quit farming to work in another career. While discussing this issue, she told her son, "well, you know, you probably would be better off financially in the long run if you did do that". Frances reflected on these mixed feelings, when she said, "but it's really hard, because he...both of my boys do love to farm as well as my husband".

One of my boys has considered quitting farming so that it would make room for the other one to come in and maybe make a better life style out of the farm...it just upset me so much. I was, in a way, so sad that he was thinking about quitting farming, but in a way I was feeling good because I know he would probably be better off in some ways, not farming, but then, he's not going to have what I was able to have.

One positive thing with him is he's looking at courses he can take to go to school. So one way or the other, that is a good thing, because education is a good thing. If he decides not to farm, he still has more education. You know it's a good thing, so that was one positive thing that came out of it.

My other son has university so that's good, you know, something to fall back on. My husband and I, if the farm was to go down, I know we'd do fine. I'm not even worried about that. Like we're both able to work and we both have our health...I would be (fine) and he would, because I could help him be emotionally fine.

You would have to have a little bit of lighter outlook on things, too, and say, 'you know, it's not the end of the world.' It's just not the end of the world. Life goes on and there's a whole world out there to experience.

In spite of the challenges in decision-making that her family is facing, throughout the interviews, Frances often made statements that displayed an enduring positive outlook.

**“Life will go on, and things are going to be fine...”**

When I asked Frances, what does 'things will be OK' mean to her, she said:

My boys will still be here in ten years, and grand-kids will be raised on the farm. I know that my husband will still be farming in ten years. He will never quit farming, because that's all he ever wanted to do. If our farm can financially hold together, I know emotionally our farm will hold together because of our communication.

I don't know. Maybe it's the way I was raised. I have no idea. But I always know things will be fine...It's just the way I live my life. It's just the way I feel and there's no fact that says it's going to be like that, but I think we're all in charge of our lives, and we can all direct them the way we want in some sort of way.

You can either be a negative person, and say, 'yeah, my life is going to fall apart.' Or you can be a positive person and say, 'well, everything's going to be OK'. And you try to make it that way; do the best you can to the best of your ability. So there's one way or the other. And I choose to pick the more positive route and I try to give that to my children, too. I try to say '*things are going to be fine.*' From all negative, learn something positive. From all these things that have happened, we'll learn from them and carry them forward.

I've just always been an optimist. I've been seeing more of a negative come out of me, which scares me sometimes, because I'm just not a really negative person, so you still want to have that optimism to keep the optimism of my husband and my children up. I just think being optimistic makes for a healthier mind, body and soul, so you try. I think if a person is a worrier, you're going to be mentally

and physically sicker or not well. So the more optimism we can have, even if that optimism is not as strong as it used to be, I think it's putting things into perspective. It's not as if someone has died, and we still have a good quality of life. We're still eating. We still have a roof over us, and this is putting things into perspective.

But I've always tried to have a positive outlook on the farming situation. I've tried to be, 'OK, you know, things are going to get better', so you just kind of have to say, 'Well, if things do go bad, we'll move forward and things will be alright'. It's kind of a switchover. Instead of saying, 'well, farming's going to get better' which, I don't know. I'm kind of having the attitude like everyone else in the community. You sort of give up, and think 'well, maybe, they won't get better', so if things happen that they don't get better, we'll move on and do something else and life will go on.

Farming is interesting and challenging. You know everyone hopes that their life will go through without a ripple, but we all have ripples, and if *you can just learn from the ripples*.

Farmers today are faced with many challenges, opportunities, and choices when farming in the current economic situation. Frances chooses to learn from the adversity of farm life rather than letting it get her down.

**“The bottom line is...for twenty-five years, we've had a good life...”**

The opportunity to farm provides farming families with benefits that reach beyond the monetary field. Frances described how she and her husband have positively portrayed farm life, and have never been negative people. She emphasized the gifts of living on the farm.

I've raised my children here, and in the earlier years, I was able to stay home and raise my own children, which to me was a real benefit because I'd rather raise my own children, give them my own morals and thoughts and ideas than have someone else do it... We have a roof over our heads, we can do what we want when we want usually, we don't live high on the hog, but still we're able to maintain a fairly decent lifestyle. So who's saying that farming isn't good? I guess you have to put things in perspective. *The bottom line is...for twenty-five years, we've had a good life, our kids are happy, our marriage is OK.*

You know, my boys are very, very close, and I think that is attributed to the fact that they're only a year apart, but they were raised on the farm. And they're best friends, so that's one nice thing about having been raised on a farm.

My family, my children especially...that was my priority in life...was to become a mother and raise children, and now that I'm getting to the stage where my children are out on their own and becoming independent, I'm putting more of a priority on my own well being, and my own care, and maybe that goes to where I'm saying that maybe I don't want to participate in the farm activities, because I want to explore myself now more, and what I may want to do. I've even been throwing around the ideas of maybe even going back to school, or there's so many things that I can do and would like to do. So that's a big priority. Another priority is trying to balance out family and work and farming, and that would be another big priority.

I was happy I could raise my children on the farm. I would like to see my boys be able to do that with their children as well.

My boys have probably seen the worst years of farming, which is very sad, but my God, they still want to do it. You just wonder, you know, I don't know.

You know, I've always tried to point out to them, that living on the farm is a great thing, which I truly believe it, and being raised on the farm is a good thing. If they could raise their children on a farm, it's a good thing, and you've got to have a positive outlook.

Frances and her husband are an example of a small number of farmers who have young people involved in the farm family business. The family works together, and makes decisions together. Although both sons hope to continue with this arrangement, the possible lack of economic viability could jeopardize their futures.

### **“I've got equal position in this farm...”**

Farm women play an integral part of the farm operation. With farm and family responsibilities, role conflict can be stressful. Spousal support is crucial. Frances talked about gender equality on their farm. She discussed the roles she plays, demands on her time, and limitations on her freedom to do tasks. These include making meals,

gardening, cutting the grass, and doing numerous farm chores, such as driving the truck and tractor.

I feel like I've got equal position in this farm as much as anyone. My husband has been very equal in our relationship and in our marriage. I respect that. I don't think a lot of other wives have had that opportunity. He's always shared farming with me.

My oldest son expects it from me. He doesn't feel like a woman is unable to do anything a man is, which I have great respect for. Sometimes it's a pain in the ass because I don't want to be out there doing certain things, but still on the other hand, I respect that. I respect it because he doesn't feel I'm less of a person than he is.

Although it's a real honour to be classified that you can carry the workload, and I do enjoy doing it, I like to do it at my own leisure. You're kind of pulled, and of course, you know where you go. You go out and help them to keep the ball rolling on the farm...because that is your priority at the time...that's where your bread and butter comes from. Timeliness is of the essence. Weather is a factor, also. There's just a certain amount of time to get things done, and you want it done in that period of time, or if you don't get your spring seeding done on time, then your harvest is late, so everything just falls into place, and you have to go when you have to go...

There are many women in our community that work off-farm, and I think that's where it stops and ends. They work off farm; they make the meals, but not a lot of them are active in the decision or running of the machinery. There's a few that are, but I don't think there's a lot of women.

With everything that goes on, it gets so busy, and you just get so tired, not that the men do as well, get busy and tired, but I feel farm women when they're very active in the farm, it's like overload, and it's just sometimes too much, especially when I've been working full-time off the farm for two years.

You just organize, and spread yourself here and there. It's a lot of organization, and I think women are very good at multitasking and organizing things. Some men are, too, but I think the majority of women are probably better at that.

Although she has always been an active participant in the farm labour, Frances would like to play a less prominent role.

**“What really scares me is...”**

Farming on the Saskatchewan prairies is quite unpredictable. Weather plays a prominent role. In spite of the worries Frances faces, her optimism shows through.

We have picked up land in the last few years... What really scares me is, if we do get a wet year, and trying to take all this off with all our old machinery, but you can't worry about it until the time comes, but things always get done. The crop always gets in the ground; the crop always gets taken off. You know, farmers are the worst worriers in the world, but things always get done... We had flax out over winter once, a hundred acres of flax... we took it off in the spring. It was absolutely fine.

When you think about some of our grandparents and such, living through the depression... I wouldn't classify this as a depression, but I think it makes you appreciate the things you have, maybe a bit more.

It's like any crisis situation that you go through in your life; it's either going to build things up, or it's going to rip you apart, and I think everyone in life has choices. ... I hope we make it through and come out the other side, but life will carry on, and you'll go forth and things will be fine.

Anytime a farm expands, it puts more of a financial burden on the farm, because you have those inputs... for a whole year you don't get the outcome of the benefit financially, so that will be another burden.

You don't expand unless you can do that on paper. You might take a bit of a risk, but you certainly don't go... I'm a true believer, if you don't have the machinery or the manpower, something's going to lack, if you expand too big too fast.

I honestly hope that they don't expand for a while because the way farming is, they just can't afford to do it, but that's their decision. You cut back on what you can here; look at the priority list again. I guess you step down, and watch, and it's just a 'wait and see' sometimes.

And I keep putting my input into it. But sometimes, like I said, lately they've had to hogtie me and get my input, because I'm sort of getting, 'Oh, I just don't want to talk about this anymore.' But as long as they keep talking, I listen. I do a lot of listening. I know what's going on. Even though I might not talk, I listen.

Frances discussed having heart-to-heart emotional discussions with male farmers who are friends and neighbours.



## **“What’s going on out there?”**

Some Saskatchewan farmers are renting their land to others, some are selling out, and others are expanding their farm operation one way or another. This was a mystery to Frances.

Everyone talks like, ‘oh, we should quit.’ But they don’t. They just keep finding the money somewhere. I really think it’s getting to the point where people are going to start leaving. On the other hand, there’s land that’s going for exorbitant amounts of money, and where are these people? Like there’s money out there and then there’s not. Like some farmers are broke, and others are buying this land for an exorbitant price. So it makes you question, ‘what’s going on out there?’

Farms are going to get bigger, corporations might come in, and there’ll be less and less smaller farmers.

It’s a really big question how some of these people can afford to buy this land. And if we were put up against having to buy land at these prices, we couldn’t do it, or we wouldn’t do it, because we feel it’s just too much. You’d think the price of land would be dropping, but it’s not.

We’ve had trials here, but I can’t imagine if some of these farms do have these huge debt loads how they cope. I can’t even imagine. It must be horrible, or maybe after a while, you just don’t care. Maybe you just keep going and going and going, until it’s done. Just to keep gambling and gambling and gambling....

Well, in this community that I live in, is a very well knit community, and your neighbours will come in and help you. In past years, we’ve had five or six combines come over and help us finish up, or we’ll go down and help them...it just joins everybody together...it knits the community, and it’s not only the combining; it’s the time after the combining, the fellowship, and sitting around the table having a drink, or having supper...that is one of the nicest things. ...the guys still talk and reminisce about the good time, you know, what a good fun time it was. And even though the crop was being taken off later, all those anxieties seemed to go out the window when people knit together like that. It’s very, very nice, very nice.

Farming communities can provide a strong support for community members, which is essential for the well-being of farmers.

**“They’ll make the right decisions...”**

A farm business requires persons who focus on all aspects of farm business management---production, marketing, human resources, and financial management.

Frances described the attributes of her family in dealing with these elements.

I have the total faith in them that they’ll make the right decisions, which lets me off the hook.

Fred is very financially knowledgeable. He’s a type of person that faces things head on, doesn’t procrastinate when it comes to a problem, which is a very good thing. My oldest son is good at finances; both he and my husband are worriers, which makes you confront things usually.

We’re very business like. If we do rent land, it’s always drawn up in a lease agreement on paper, and then even within the family, but I think that’s just good business sense.

My husband is very well organized when it comes to, to getting seed cleaned, because he always allows for the shorter (growing season) crops. He’ll put extra seed in the bins just for that main reason. Or we’ll go and see what there is around to plant...that’s always an option, to adjust to your variables and what you can seed, you have a plan, and then you can change that plan if need be.

Farmers have to be very flexible...with the fluctuations in (cost of) fertilizer, chemical, estimated amount of what you may be spending, but you never know exactly what you may spend. As a wage earner, they can budget themselves probably right down to ten dollars a month, whereas us, we’re talking thousands of dollars where there’s variables, which is very hard

...our cost for fuel for our tractors can be going right through the roof or...if a piece of your machinery goes down, and you have to take your tractor in, and it’s a ten thousand dollar engine, you know...it’s just all these things you think you might be able to count on, but your can’t always...because you need a tractor.

Some of our land...we sprayed six times for hoppers, and finally...we decided we’re going to spray one more time, and that’s all, and there’s nothing more we can do, because the cost of spraying was rising above the cost that we’re going to make off the land, so how far do you go?

With all of the fluctuations and unpredictable variables in the farming environment, farmers face a lot of stress in their lives. In spite of this family's open communication, Frances said she still finds it a challenge to keep everyone sane.

**“Keeping everybody sane...”**

Farm families are under considerable amounts of stress, particularly in the spring and fall. Frances described her role in keeping the stress levels manageable.

The positive thing about my three men is that they have a very open communication. They don't hide the fact that there might be problems in farming. They talk about it very openly which is very good. With the open communication that my family has in this household, they seem to get their feelings out, which I said, is a good thing. You know whether the discussion is a heated discussion, or discussion sort of goes along, either way, it's a good thing. You know these people are talking. Whereas some families don't talk, which would be much harder.

My oldest son has a strong personality...and it is a struggle with him as well as it was with my husband and his father or my father and my brother, or many fathers and sons throughout the generations. That's one struggle.

You see it many times with father and son combinations that the dad cannot let go of the control of the farm. I'm seeing that with my one son and my husband which makes for many conflicts outside of the farming game. Plus it is not outside of the farming, but it's just sort of intertwined into it, which even makes more stress on the farm situation.

My husband has such a hard time of letting go of making decisions. When you have a farm and you all farm together, all of the decisions do have to be made together. Finances can be separate, but the farm decision of when you're going to seed what, or those kinds of decisions have to be made, and there's many struggles with that.

My second boy just goes along, and 'Yeah, O.K.' and you know what, one day I hope he gets stronger opinions because I think it's just healthy to have input into things.

With me, I sort of gave up years ago deciding what was going to be put in on my land, because my husband would do those decisions. He would ask me first, 'well, what do you want seeded here?', and I would say, but he'd do something different anyway, so that was neither here nor there, and I trust him to make good

decisions. You know, I'm not going to have a big fight over it, and he's not making decisions that will harm me or harm my finances on the farm. I know that.

My husband's not one to procrastinate when it means getting in and talking to somebody about a bill that he owes, trying to work out some sort of compromise, or talk to them. Well, he doesn't hide if someone phones and says, 'well, you need to pay this.' He says, 'O.K. I'll come in and see you'. He does it, you know, which is very good.

They came out and we had a little bit of a family meeting here about three weeks ago, and they asked me, 'Well, what do you want to do?', and I said, 'Well, I think whatever we do, we'll all be fine.' If we do end up selling the land or not farming anymore, life goes on and we'll all carry on to be just absolutely fine mentally or physically or however, but I think their decision is they're going to try it for another year, but *it's always next year country*, right?

I said, 'With the three of your guys, you make very good decisions about farming. Whatever you want to do is fine with me, and I'll support you.' And that was an honest opinion. I'm not going to say that I want them to shut things down, but I just hate to see things get so bad that they do lose land, but like I said, things will carry on. There have been many people that have lost their farms and are financially better off.

Farmers face many challenges, as outlined by Frances. Although the family meetings and open communication aid in helping this family to work together to make these decisions, Frances regrets that not all farmers are able to communicate in this way.

### **“It's really sad when...”**

Communication is essential for any business to run. Family businesses can be more difficult because of the power structure in the business. Frances described that some families do not communicate well; some farmers have no one to talk with about their difficulties.

It's really sad when it comes to the farming situation because I don't think a lot of farmers talk within themselves about the stress they're going through or the difficulties, because it's: 'well, if we let them know that we might be losing something, then they'll have a negative attitude towards us'. It might be a very general conversation about the price of grain, but there's nothing about how the men are actually feeling.

I don't know if it's a man thing or what, but they're very private. But I guess, people, when they're having financial difficulties, are private. They don't want the whole world to know.

A lot of men maybe don't want to trouble their wives about things that are going on...Some of these farmers around here, I don't know how they deal with it when they don't have anyone to talk to.

People just don't talk about it either. Not unless they're having a few drinks, and they let their guard down a bit. It's like a pregnancy that isn't supposed to happen or something. People just hush-hush, and they don't...they try to keep it to themselves. Men won't get to the nitty-gritty unless it's one on one.

You know I think right now it's getting to the point where people have kind of said, 'oh, well, that's the way it is.' And they just have *lost the fight*...Which is sad, because if there's no fight left, it's kind of like *giving up*, and I guess maybe they think, 'well, what's going to happen is going to happen.' And that's depressing in itself.

My guys seem to go and talk to Farm Credit Corporation a lot, so I must give them great kudos, because they really do help them out. He says everyone's pretty well in the same situation...You hate to be in a hole by yourself; if some other people are in a hole, too, then it makes you feel O.K., which is an awful way of looking at things, but it's human nature.

Frances said she reminds herself of the value of the three men having each other to talk things over with. She said sometimes she feels like there is too much discussion, but she believes that 'it is a good thing', that her family may be opposite to many in the way that they openly discuss struggles.

**“I am getting really disheartened with our grain transportation system...”**

Transportation of grain and oilseeds in Saskatchewan has changed, which has increased the cost to the farmer. Elevator closure means hauling grain longer distances, or hiring someone else to truck, which limits their income to pay farm expenses.

There's a big challenge, because it's a smaller elevator, and he hasn't been able to get in the cars that the larger grain establishments can. It kind of makes you wonder if you're going to have to change over to a different grain company. I feel that the transportation system is really not that favourable...and they could do a better job in getting our grain to port, and that is causing us a lot of the

problem. Right now we can't haul in grain, which is making us have bills and paying interest which is putting us even more in a financial state.

You know, so it's just another thing that is really a negative, and I am getting really disheartened with our grain transportation system, but when they have a monopoly like they do, well then, they can do whatever they darn well want.

We've got grain sitting on the farm that we can't move right now, and we've got cash advance that we took out, and we can't pay those, and so it's just another, it always seem like you get things going, and then something else hits you.

At harvest my husband's and my malt barley were going to go for malt, whereas my boy's barley was not going for malt, so my husband and I decided that we would hold ours back to see if later on we could mix it off so maybe the boy's would go. Now we got word that my husband's and mine won't go either. It's just these little things that kind of, you know, one thing after another after another, where you need that income, but it just happens that something happens and takes that away. It just seems to be lately, the last three or four years has been one thing after another.

Another thing is 1988 we had a drought, and it took us probably six or seven years to dig a hole out of that one. When you get two or three in a row like this, you kind of wonder how long is it going to take us to dig ourselves out of this one, or are we going to dig ourselves out of this one, and how long can our finances keep going down and down and down.

The drought and the transportation system both negatively impact farm finances.

### **“I've always tried to work off farm...”**

Many farms in west central Saskatchewan have low net farm income, due to the farm expenses and the drought that has occurred for the last three or four years. Off-farm employment helps Frances supplement their farm family income.

Another thing I have issue with is in our farm household, since my kids got older, I've always tried to work off farm to help bring in, pull in a little extra income for the farm, but my husband has a real problem with finding an off-farm job. I do get cranky at him, and I'll say, “Why don't you go find a job?” But it's just that he doesn't feel like he needs to, and I've never been able to understand why he feels he doesn't need to when we certainly could use the extra income. It has been an issue in our marriage, and we do have the occasional squabble about it.

In the past, farmers farmed full time and the farm was expected to make payments

as well as pay for the family living allowance. In the past few years, the farm has not made enough money to make land payments, pay farm expenses, and also support a family. Frances' husband believes that farming is a full-time job, and that in order to do manage the farm properly, you need to focus on the farming. To him, it makes more economical sense for the spouse to be employed in non-farm work.

**“I’m not wanting to be as active...”**

Many women who are employed off the farm in non-farm employment have little time and energy to look after the family as well as do extra work on the farm.

And they have to get a hired man. I know that's not even an option, but it was like “I don't want more land. I don't want to do this anymore.”

Where I know if they get more land, I'm going to have to keep doing it, because I'm not going to see them suffer because I'm not out there driving a tractor. So I sort of left it up, ‘Ok, I'll do some of it.’ You know, I sort of backed off which I said I wasn't going to do, but probably next spring, you'll see me out there and next fall, you'll see me out there.

This year, I more or less told my family that I want to...I've been running tractors, combines, you name it, for the last, I don't know how many years, and I've told them that I want to get out of that end of it, which I don't know if it is fair of me either, but I'm just getting a little tired of doing farm work and working off farm and taking care of a garden and taking care of our yard and making the meals, and maybe that is a selfish thing on my part, but I think my boys (and my husband) are old enough to fall into that role and they can pick up the slack or do whatever they have to do.

I'm ready for that to maybe start to subside, because I'm getting...just with working off farm, and all the other things that I have to do, I'm going to probably take time and do that, and I've told them. But I also will still help them, like I said, on the farm.

I'm not wanting to be as active in the day to day activities, probably, or mainly because I'm getting older and physically, I can't ride a tractor like I used to. I have a bad back bouncing around on the tractor and have to go to the chiropractor the whole time that I'm driving tractor, so I guess that physically, I can't do it.

But that's been an issue around here, too, because I've been kind of forcing that issue. Now when I say that, I know I won't totally quit doing it, because I like to do it...I'm going to stand my guns on that, too, you know. I think it's time.

Although Frances knows that she would like to *wind down* and relinquish some of the farming responsibility, she said she also knows she will continue to contribute to the farm work when she is needed.

**“It's all a guessing game...”**

The uncertainty of farming is something that every farmer experiences. When there is a low profit margin, an inability to service the debt, and a diminishing return on the investment, farmers start looking at alternatives. Frances described a tendency of uncertainty in her community, about such major decision-making as to what to do with the farm.

There's a tendency that they're really wondering what they should be doing. It's the same with ours. What should we be doing? Should we be trying to sell our land? Should we be trying to rent our land? I had an emotional conversation with a man a couple of weeks ago, who said, 'I just don't know what we are going to do.'

I've had numerous conversations, and both of a couple of guys I've talked to have said, 'Well, yeah, we don't know what we're going to do, whether we want to rent, whether we want to sell, what we'll do afterwards'. They're thinking of going in and getting some advice from financial advisors, and finding out what they should be doing. One has another business. He's just not sure what the right thing to do is. I certainly can't tell them what I think the right thing to do is, because I can't tell my family what I think the right thing to do is.

Some farmers are plagued with indecision about what would be the wisest investment decision. Will the land hold its value? Will the rental price be secure? Should I expand? Should I quit? Frances, too, has experienced these quandaries.



**“We can’t afford to, so that’s just the bottom line...”**

Farm financial planning is essential to be a successful farm manager today.

Farmers need to be diligent about their business management decisions. Farm expansion is one of the recommendations by farm advisors and consultants. On the one hand, using the capital investment to farm more acres of land, the cost of production is decreased. On the other hand, does that farm have the debt servicing capacity to meet its commitments? Would expanding the farm require a higher capital investment in machinery? Can this farm afford that debt? Frances described how one of the hardest things to do is to plan your money wisely, and make decisions about purchases.

My boys and I were going to split the cost, and we cancelled that, because we just don’t know (what will happen this year), which was a good financial move, because we don’t absolutely have to have one. It would make the farming operation maybe run a little bit quicker.

But when you don’t know if you’re going to have the money, you’re not going to spend it either...But we’re going to have to spend eventually, because our machinery is getting so old, but we can’t afford to, so that’s just the bottom line as of now.

My husband and I were hoping to go to Cuba in February this year, but we decided we can’t afford it. To me, it’s not a big deal. I could care less if I went on a trip. If we could go out for the evening or away for the weekend, to me, that’s good enough. I don’t have a problem with that.

When I walked into this kitchen, it looked so old and dingy. I was getting really depressed about it, and that’s odd that things like that can bring you down. So it’s all ripped apart and it’s already making me feel better. So I guess your environment has a lot to do with how a person feels sometimes, too. And it’s given me a project. If I’m not busy, I’m crabby, so it’s good to have projects.

We fell across a very good price on tiling last week, so we decided we’re going to tile my main floor of my house. If you tile, well, we better paint. My cupboards are forty years old, so we decided we would sand and paint them, as well as do the walls, paint the walls, so I’m quite looking forward to this, because we’re having a wedding this summer. My oldest son is getting married on the farm which is nice. I had a little bit of a stress over that, but everything will work out. It’s one day. It will come and go. What happens, happens...

Although planning to spend your money wisely is important, and spending decisions are difficult; sometimes for little expense, aesthetic satisfaction can be worth it.

**“Farming is like a marriage...”**

In the farming community, a popular saying is that “a farmer is married to the farm”, so when Frances drew this comparison, it seems significant to me. She said:

Farming is somewhat in comparison like a marriage. You live in that for such a long time that you become so comfortable. It’s like you become comfortable in your marriage because you know that person so well, and you also become comfortable in the farming routine, because you’ve done it so long. You know there are a lot of comparisons, and it’s like sometimes when you have hard times in a marriage, you have to work through those things as well. If you’ve had a hard time in farming, you have to work your way through those things, too.

This also demonstrates more of Frances’ attitude and philosophy of life. When you have hardship and misfortune, you face the adversity and work through it.

**“Farming is like a roller coaster...”**

Farming today has many ups and downs similar to a roller coaster ride. Frances outlined some of the characteristics of the farmers in her world.

My husband was into the city yesterday and he must have talked to thirty farmers, and he said not one of them had a positive outlook for farming. Yet on TV last night, the announcer comes on and says, ‘Everyone’s very optimistic’, and my husband couldn’t believe it. He said, ‘That reporter didn’t talk to one of those farmers in there, because the outlook is totally the opposite.’

No one is buying anything; one of our friends is a machinery dealer, and people just aren’t (buying).

Farmers are very resilient. If we have good moisture conditions, everyone’s spirits will be up, and they’re just amazing creatures...farmers...because they can be so down, and then they get a good rain, and the crops coming up, and they’re happy, and then it starts to dry up, and everybody’s....It’s like a roller coaster.

They’re probably the worst crabbers in the world, too, but they are very resilient. They can be very pessimistic, and for example, even last year when we were getting a little bit of moisture, my husband would come home from town, and say

‘you know, I just can’t believe that everybody’s still depressed, and now they think we’re getting too much moisture, and can’t anybody ever be happy?’

Frances explained how resilient farmers can be, especially after adequate rainfall. She described the contrasting optimism and pessimism farmers can have.

**“You do what you have to do at the time...”**

Family support in a farming community is often essential. Because of the many tasks that need to be accomplished and the different roles that family members are responsible for, role conflict can be overwhelming. Close family nearby can be a strong asset for farm families. Such is the case for Frances and her family. Her family experiences mutual support in times of need, without interference.

If I needed my mother to get groceries for me, she was more than willing to do that. My father would always help. My sister and my brother...they’re all close. And if they’re asked for help, they’re more than willing to give it, where we are with them as well.

But they’re not ones to intervene, if they’re not asked. That’s a good lesson that I’ve learned from my family, and Fred has also learned from his family...you just stand back and wait until you’re asked advice, and if you’re not asked, then you just keep your nose out of it.

And when the children were small and I would be wanting to go out to the field, or having to go out to the field, I’d take the children with me, but then there’s only so much that I...my mother may come over and baby-sit, or my sister, which was just unbelievable help in that area. Or neighbours, we’d share that, too.

When you have little children with you driving the truck, you tell them to stay, but things happen, and it’s sometimes out of your control what happens. And it’s tiring. My husband used to take the children with him, too, which isn’t safe, and I’ll be the first one to admit it, but you do what you have to do at the time.

You just always had to be watching and sometimes...I can see how accidents can happen so quickly, and I always feel so bad when I hear of a farm accident, but I can understand how it can happen. No matter how careful you are, you can never be assured that something’s not going to happen.

My husband has taught my boys very well ...farming practices, because he is very cautious, which I am thankful for that. He may have been harder on them at times than what I wanted him to be, but it's a good end result. I always thought my husband has expected a lot out of my boys... They do have a good work ethic.

When my two sons decided that they were going to start farming, they needed land to put down, so they could get a loan from FCC (Farm Credit Corporation). My husband and I weren't able to do that at the moment, so my father put a half of his section up for them, so that they could purchase a section of land. That's just a bit about the support system in my family. And now the land is turned back over to him, because they've made their payment, they've paid enough on their land, that he can have his land titles back.

Back in the 1980's, my father rented me three quarters of land from his farm, which is sixteen miles away from here. So I got a quota book, and we would travel up there, and farm that land for five years, which got me started, that I was able to put a down payment on my first quarter, and that has enabled me to put another down payment on another quarter. So I am buying a half section right now, and I also rent three quarters, which I've rented for twenty-three years.

Whether providing meals, child care, or financial support, extended family help is welcomed and appreciated.

**“It's like a rope with knots that you keep on trying to get to the top...”**

Farming on a family farm has financial pressures and family tension. Sometimes it is easier to owe money to a bank than to family members. Frances talked about a few of the financial pressures that affect her family.

His father has had some financial dealings which haven't been good, which has left him with a lack of income, which puts more stress on my husband. His father wants him to buy a quarter of land from him right now, and we're finding that a tough go, because we just don't have the money to do that, and his father is needing money, and so that's just extra stress.

We don't have any RRSP's; we don't have any mutuals. We've taken them all out, so we're just hoping that our farm land is worth something when it comes time to....

When we pass on, everything is insured; we both have very good life insurance policies. That's an awful way of having to look at things...for someone to die, but everyone would be all right. And if both of us were to go, the boys would

inherit the land, because they both farm the way things sit now, and our daughter would get money.

Weather is the drainer. If you don't get rain, you're not going to get a crop. If you get early frost, and the railway system has a lot of drain. If they can't get us cars, or if the elevators are plugged, and we can't...*it's like a rope with knots that you keep on trying to get to the top*, because if they can't get us cars to get our grain, out, so we can't pay our bills, which means we have more interest to pay, interest alone on a farm is so substantial, and it's so accumulative.

And I think there's a conspiracy between the banks and the railways (laughter) I'd like to see us growing good crops, and getting a good price for our crops.

Intergenerational family farming can create undue pressure for each generation in the farming operation.

**“They feel like they are disappointing the generations...”**

Farming the land in a family for generations is like passing on a legacy. There are pressures on farmers who are farming their ancestors' land. Frances talked about some of these feelings.

It is very stressful for the men when they are the fourth and fifth generation, and the struggles they have in even thinking about maybe losing their land, because they feel like they're disappointing the generations, whether those generation are dead, or still alive, it's just like they feel like failures, and I'm sure it has a lot to do with how these men feel when they know that things are slipping, because they feel like they're letting past generations down. And when their great grandfathers and grandfathers have gone through adversity, why can't they make it through the adversity. And that is a big, big worry for them. If there was just their family to contend with, it would be a much easier thing, to let things go, but it's not.

My husband and I talked about it once back in '88 when he had our last drought, and he absolutely felt like a failure, because he felt like there was nothing he could do. And that's where my optimism came out, and said, 'No matter what happens, we're going to be fine, and it's beyond your control sometimes. You've done the best you can with the financial end of it, with the farming end of it, there's only so much you can do. You've got to let it go. If that time comes, you've got to let it go.'

We wonder...whether we should be re-mortgaging some of the land; whether we should be selling some land to maybe lessen up or pay off some of the bills that are outstanding now...I probably would be willing to rent the land out or sell the

land, but he's...the boys are the fifth generation farmers on this farm, which is a very hard thing for him to even consider doing that, because I think he feels like he would be....a failure...

I think he would lose a lot of his identity. It would be really starting a whole new life, which is hard. But he would be devastated, because 'what do I know how to do now?'

The farmer and the farm are tied up together. Where does one identity start and the other end? This struggle is common to farmers. Frances discussed feelings that farmers have that are not common to people who work in a salaried position. A person who is employed can find another job. It is not easy for a farmer to continue farming once he has lost his farm.

**Mary's story: "Death is like a voyage..."**

**"Today it's far harder..."**

Mary farms with her husband in a mixed farm operation. They married and came back to the farm in the seventies when farming was doing well. But the farming environment and economy have really changed. Mary compared these differences.

We started farming in the 70's, and at that point in time, we actually thought things were not too bad. It rained. We didn't have grasshoppers. We had crops, fairly decent crops at that time. The price was up. Even though we just started out farming, we didn't have the stress that we're under today. Today it's far, far harder to farm than it was when we started. It's not the lifestyle I would choose for my son now.

I think farming today has become more difficult than it ever was...more challenging and more difficult than we ever thought it would be. Today it's far harder to farm than it was when we started.

The difference in our generation that has never happened before is we've had to adapt and change. They talk about how they have seen all the changes from horse and oxen to little tractors to big tractors to air conditioners in combines. To me, those were the easy ones, because they were all beneficial. What we've had to do, is change our whole concept of farming, and our whole way of farming, and it's very hard, because even our parents do not understand how or why these changes were crucial for us to keep farming. It makes it very difficult because that generation is still trying to give advice out of the goodness of their heart. You're battling all the time. It's hard for them to understand where they'd spend a thousand dollars on fertilizer and spray, we're spending seventy thousand. They just don't understand how things have gone up and changed.

You hate to come off sounding unhappy, frustrated, bitchy, whiny, poverty-stricken, because there's still good moments. It's what you make of it. If you were sitting here, you would just look at the negative which is pretty easy to do at year-end. If you did this interview in [last] May, you might have got a whole different interview. You think of May, there was hope...things were looking good. The crop had come up, the hoppers hadn't started eating yet, the wind hadn't started blowing; we didn't need rain. So your mood, your outlook, everything evolves around the kind of year you're having with farming. If you'd done this (interview) before Mad Cow... By now, I think I've done a little more of a reality check and cranked some more numbers, and thought this really isn't paying. *That's the bottom line.* But I can tell you, you'll see a smile on my face out there digging in the dirt (in the spring). And that's all part of farming, so you're never going to completely kill that in us.

**“It’s a rat race...”**

Farming today has become more complicated with diversification, specialty crops, and scientific practices. Mary emphasized the stress involved in working straight through harvest this year. With no rain this year, the crops came in early, and it was a long stretch of no days off through harvest. She compared this to other jobs, and stated her distress and disillusionment with the situation.

Farming has become so scientific, such a major job, and such long hours, that weeks will go by and you don't find any peace here anymore. It's a rat race. I think of this fall when we were expecting another week or so before our crops came in. They came in and we were twenty-eight days without a break; we just kept combining; it was just too long a stretch without a break. You'd never do it in any other job, work twenty-eight days in a row for sixteen hours a day, ever, no matter how much you loved it.

This was an exceptional year—hot, dry, grasshoppers we sprayed right up until we started combining. If there'd been a time where somebody would say, 'Do you want to get off the farm?' my answer lots of days would have been 'Let me out of here. Just pack my bags and let's go.' Last year we did not have a crop. Unfortunately, we got a rain in July that cost us a lot of money because we had to spray everything. If we'd never got that rain, it would have been much nicer.

Mary explained her devastation with the last two years, and the impact that has had on her attitude. Between grasshoppers and untimely rain she has had enough, and is ready to leave.

**“I don't know how many years we can do that...”**

Mary discussed how they have had four drought years in a row, and how the high input costs are eating up their equity. She lamented about how unlike other products, the price of the grain is so low. Even though farmers are supplying the world with food, it is the middlemen and the end men that are getting the money.



Basically, it's been four years since we got a crop here, so every year you're taking money out to farm another year, because maybe next year. I don't know how many years we can do that.

They keep telling us it's changing—that we're moving into a desert here, and we have to adapt to it. So that's a fear. It may never change around. We may never get rain; we may never get snow here.

We've had bad years; no crop, price of grain falling, and hailed out. Your input costs are so extremely high and getting higher every year. This year we sprayed entire fields two and three times for grasshoppers; that knocks any profit out of that field you're ever going to see. In every other industry, if your costs go up, the price goes up on your product. But that's not the case with farming, I'm just not sure why, because you know the world needs food, and that's what we're producing, but it seems like it's the middleman and the end man that are making the money, and *the bottom line is* ...it's not there.

You know, we brought our flowers in to bloom for Christmas and grasshoppers hatched and hopped all over the room.

Nothing else goes for free; not the fruit, lumber or oil. I'm not quite sure why they think our stuff should.

I keep thinking 'Gees, I don't know if I want to come back to this mess.' With the price dropping out of the cow, you're going 'Is there anything else? Anybody else want to dump on me today?' So the last two years have probably been the hardest. I think it's partly because we're getting older and we just don't want to fight the battle day after day after day. Keep thinking, "Gosh, there's got to be something a little easier than this."

The challenges Mary faces on the farm are distressing. She expressed her discouragement and frustration with the way farming is today.

**“It's probably a bit of madness that we're still doing it...”**

Mary described a progressive nature to their farming practices, as they try to do what is best for the land. She outlined some of the complications of farming, saying she would not recommend this occupation to a young person; there are easier ways to make a better living.

We've changed our farming practices so much since we started farming; we direct seed. If we summer fallow, it's chem-fallowed. We're trying to do the best we

can for the land. We're still trying to save the land, and the last two years, we've seen fields blowing day after day, and thank God, they're not ours. We've got pride in the fact that our fields weren't moving this year. But farming practices have changed, the machinery's got bigger, the gamble's got bigger. You can put in a hundred thousand dollars worth of inputs, and not get a penny back, and know that when you're going into it. There is not many other places that a person does that year after year, hoping for a return. It's probably a bit of madness that we're still doing it, in reality.

Because of our lifestyle, we pray year round. We pray for rain all year, and all winter we pray for snow. We're always praying for moisture. I was sitting out in the spring, and I thought, 'this is pretty close to heaven, but could we just get a little moisture?' Farming would be an excellent way of life if you didn't have to worry about the weather. You can do everything right and still end up with nothing at all because of the weather.

If a young person asked me today [about farming], I would never recommend it. It's just too tough out there. We haven't given the kids tools to face what we're having to face these last few years. They're not prepared, and I'm not sure they're strong enough that they could survive it. Emotionally, I don't know if they're strong enough to go through it. Kids nowadays don't want to be deprived. Even though they've watched their parents, they're not prepared for the hours on the tractor, the hours in planning, and the hours in bookwork. You have to be so many things when you're farming, or you go broke paying somebody to do those things for you. You have to do your own books so you know where you're at, market your own grain, and decide when is the right time to seed. You have to make long term and short term plans as far as machinery, land rental, and selling of grain for tax purposes. There are so many things, and I don't believe we have prepared our children well enough. I think we've done a poor job of giving them the reality. There's too many other ways to make a better living easier.

At one time, we really wanted our son to farm, and we'd have done anything in the world to let him farm. Now we actually think it would be *child cruelty*, and we should be put in jail if we make our kids farm. It's too stressful; it's hard to get ahead right now. I don't know how they could start up now, and make a go of it. I just don't see it. As I go through the books, I'm thinking, I don't see it. He does have some land; we bought a quarter between us. I wouldn't be surprised once it's paid for to see it sold. He realizes there's just no money coming off it, to make land payments and have a life. I think he's come to the realization that farming used to be wonderful, now it's a lot of stress, huge expense for very little pay. If you've got to start out farming now, I don't think it's feasible at all.

Mary said she will not encourage her son to farm; it is not economically feasible. She explained how stressful and unproductive it would be for him to farm unless the economy is different.

**“Being a Canadian is not a big thing for me...”**

Mary used to be proud to be Canadian and from Saskatchewan, but now she feels unsupported in this province and this country. She described a frustration and growing resentment for the attitude and lack of understanding that the urban population and the government have about agriculture.

I guess it's frustrating, because I look at the people in the city, and they think everything's being given to us. It used to be the jokes were funny, you know, 'bury a farmer with his one hand up so he can still get the cheque at the post office box', but in reality, it's not so funny anymore; I don't find it quite as amusing. They don't understand that we pay a lot of taxes. We certainly pay our share, and they look at this as always giving the farmers something, and they are subsidizing us, but we're not getting the subsidies of other countries, not even close. Our government won't give subsidies. I'm very frustrated with politics in general. I'm finding they don't really care. I think they really think we're so stupid that we'll just carry on anyway. Even if we're not stupid, we're too passive to actually stand up and say, 'enough. You either pay us for our product, or we're out of here', and that may come; it may make a change, but I don't think it's going to. We keep hearing that they want to keep us in the province, and they don't really want to keep us here. I don't feel support here in this province; I feel no pull for this place—absolutely none. If the Americans wanted to take us over and call us the States, I'd go all right. Being in the agriculture business, the government really doesn't care.

BSE is a problem. I think I'd rather be an American right now. Already, they're supporting their farmers and giving them money because of this BSE. It's going to cost us (in Canada) an extra \$50 a head to get every cow we butchered checked for BSE; that's going to come right off our cheque. When we put in the new ear tags and they had to be scanned, that cost us \$6 an animal just to sell them. Every new little thing that comes in, come off the cheque. They (the government) do things so it looks good on TV or in the paper, or a promise and it ends up costing us more money. I feel Eastern Canada doesn't really care about us. I think they'd like us to separate and just leave the oil and lumber. If we even became part of Alberta, we'd be better off. I don't know when I particularly changed; it's been building, but *being a Canadian is not a big thing for me.*

Mary explained that due to her experiences in agriculture as well as with the health care system in Saskatchewan and in Canada, the alternatives across the border are looking better to her all the time.

Until you've dealt with it, and gone through it with a loved one, you honestly have this false sense of security about our health care system. I just find the whole health care system in this province frustrating. That was one of the things that used to draw me and think 'I'm glad I'm a Canadian.' Now, it's not such a big thing for me. Being Canadian doesn't mean what it used to be, not just because of the farm, but because of the way the whole economy's gone. I think our price of land would sky-rocket if we became part of the States.

Mary's said her experiences with family members in the health care system have led her to be disillusioned and less patriotic.

**“You're a funny breed of person if you're a farmer and farm for long...”**

Mary highlighted some characteristics she sees in farmers. She outlined the skills, abilities, and education of farmers in her age group. She spoke with anger about an encounter she had with a teacher who she felt demonstrated his lack of respect and recognition for the role of farmers.

They (farmers) are tenacious and stubborn. You have to stick in your heels and say, 'this is the way it's going to be' and get on with it. You have to be a self-starter, and be able to do a lot of different things. You have to educate yourself.

The one thing about farm life that I've found, I am never lonely, but I like to be alone, and I don't know if that's typical of other farm women, but I do not need people around me, and I need time alone. But I'm not lonely. I'm not depressed. It's a regenerative thing. It's a distressing period, and we enjoy doing mindless tasks like pulling weeds and things like that because it gives you time to think and be alone.

I can remember being extremely frustrated by a teacher saying to my son, 'well, *you're not going to be anything but a farmer anyway*. Why do you need above a sixty-five percent?' And I just looked at him and thought 'most of the farmers have degrees or further education. There's very few farmers even in our age group that have not got something else'. To be a farmer, you have to be mechanically inclined, to be able to fix and repair things and anticipate what needs to be done. A lot of foresight goes into a farmer. They are *optimists* in the

true sense, bordering on stupidity. We always think 'next year'; we're looking forward.

A lot of the women don't drive trucks, can't drive a combine, are scared of the machinery and the responsibility of trucking grain and stuff. But I have a neighbour lady who has the same interests as me. We'll sit down while we're getting a tank of water about six in the morning and we'll discuss farming. They feel a lot the same as we do; they're just not sure it's worth it any more. The problem is, at our age, to branch out into something else that you're going to enjoy, is going to be very difficult. It always comes back to, you can have a really bad day or week or spring, and the weather change, your mind changes, and you're right back into it. *We're funny people that way.*

We've got a funny mentality, farming people do. *I don't know how many times you have to be whacked with a stick before you smarten up*, but it seems like a lot. We've got thick skulls.

Mary explained how you cannot be “just a white-collar worker” and exist on the farm. You need to have a variety of skills and abilities that are both technical and managerial, as well as certain personality traits.

**“Farming the land is in his blood—he has the pull of the land...”**

Mary grew up on the farm, helped with the farming, and always knew that she would leave. She contrasted this with “the pull of the land’ that her children experienced.

I grew up on a farm helping my dad all the time, and when Dad was ill, mom would help us fill the drills and tractors, and we put in the crop that year. And I always said, 'I'm never going to marry a farmer. I'm never going to be on the farm. Thank you very much, but I'm going to be somewhere else and move off to the big city.' But my son never felt that way. He was a farm kid through and through. He did go off to the city for two years of education, but he was never happier then when he came home. So his heart is definitely in the land, and it would break his heart if we sold the farm and moved away. It literally would. He'd feel that strongly about it.

I have mixed feelings. If farming turned around, I would love to see him come back to the farm. As it is now, I firmly believe that a full-time job gives him that stability he needs for his family. Our friends showed their son the books, and he said, 'that's all you make; I make more than that.' *So what are you going to give up to call yourself a farmer?* You have to give up a high paying job if you're going to be a farmer. The guys with the big money that are farmers are old farmers or inherited farmers.

Just two years ago we sold quite a bit of my dad's land that we thought would be in the family forever, but it's still there. We can still go see it. If we want to go up and walk through the trees [that mom planted] and we want to walk across the land because it was our heritage, we can still do it. We have the pull of the land also.

Our daughter loves the farm with an absolute passion, but it wasn't so much the land as the animals that she could have, and we had every animal that ever was, and we learned a lot from the animals. She learned to be very gentle, kind, and nurturing, and will have a career working with animals. We have just made the decision here to get out of cattle when the price comes back up; she was pretty devastated by that.

Mary owned her mixed feelings about farming today. If the farming situation were to improve, she would love to see her son farming.

**“I didn’t need a psychiatrist as long as God made the grass grow...”**

Mary talked about a love of the outdoors, a gratitude for sunrises, and an appreciation for the green grass and the dirt blowing in her face.

When we moved to the farm, we had to make changes. I've never regretted for one minute my choice to give up work; I would prefer to be outside and working in the dirt or cutting grass. I always said I didn't need a psychiatrist as long as God made the grass grow so I could cut grass. It gives you a lot of time to work things out...your frustrations, your anger. After you've ridden around with the dirt blowing in your face for two to three hours, the things that seemed really important at the time, really weren't. Sometimes I get claustrophobic if I'm inside too much. I'm an outside person. And cutting grass or working on the land—there's something marvellous about waking up in the morning, and knowing that you don't have to be in an office, that the day is yours.

I'm a person that doesn't sleep a lot so I usually get up before sunrise between four-thirty and five, and I go out into sunrise, every single morning. I've had the most magnificent sunrises; you couldn't get them any prettier anywhere else. When the license plates came out 'Land of the Living Sky', I never realized that I appreciated the sky.

Mary described the joy with which she greets every morning enjoying her coffee in her veranda facing the east.

**“My neighbour moving was a devastating blow to me...”**

Mary sadly explained what it is like to lose neighbours. She expressed her appreciation for living on the farm, and also her missing for the women who have moved to town to work. Mary does contract work that is flexible for seeding and harvest.

The young people have quit and left for a real job; the older people have moved to town and retired.

One neighbour lady moved to town. I was devastated, because she was very much a mother, a sister, and a caregiver to my children. I literally loved her like I did my mother. After I lost my mom, I kind of used her for a sounding board on everything right from farming on up to the kids. When she left and moved to town, it was a devastating blow to me. It was just like my family had been ripped out, I mean she was only in town, but I'm not a town person. I'd just as soon stay out of the crowds; I need my space and I get my space out here. I get my fresh air; I get my sun.

A lot of the farm women around here that are my age and a bit older, most of them have left. Once your children grow up, they are just tired of fighting the battle. Go into town where you can have a green grass and no wind and bugs, and life is a little simpler. Their husbands are farming, but the women are not active (farmers); they work off the farm to keep the farm. I do contract work and always liked it because it works around my family. Some months I'll work like mad, and then I take seeding and harvest off; I've got to be here to help out. You never know when you have to combine, truck, swath, move augers, or just move people around. I would not go and work full time to keep the farm anymore; at one point, I would have. Now if things get that tough, I would rent it out, and work, just keep the money, because *it (the farm) is a bottomless pit*. I know that when you retire and sell out, you have your investment, but it's a hard way to work an investment. It's really, truly a hard way.

The one thing we're really fortunate about is it doesn't take a whole lot to make us happy. This friend of mine who is working off-farm just got a new fridge and stove; it's the first new one she's had and she's forty-eight years old. She thinks she has died and gone to heaven. This is a huge thing for her. I just did a renovation and got rid of wall board and put up plaster board; I think I've died and gone to heaven. People that have it easy expect that. Our expectations are a lot lower. She hasn't got a dishwasher because all the money goes into the farm. Her countertop is too short for her and she's had a pain in her back washing dishes for more than 20 years, so that's the next improvement. She can hardly wait. It doesn't take much to make some of us happy.

Mary underlines some of the low expectations for material things that she believes farm women have compared to the general population. The farm comes first.

**“We work twenty-four seven with our husbands...”**

Mary highlighted the advantages and disadvantages of working with a spouse. She said it takes an extremely strong marriage to survive farming.

I mean if you have a problem out here, the person you're going to vent to is the one that usually caused it. It's easier, because you can tell your boss to go to hell at any time, and get in the car and go to town or Saskatoon or wherever, and do what you feel like doing for the day, and say, 'OK, you've pissed me off one time too many today...like do it yourself' But it's not easy, either. And I think it can make you or break you. You've got to work at it.

Having a bad day is hard, because we're one of the only professions where we work twenty-four seven with our husbands. We eat with them, sleep with them, and we've got to go to work with them every bloody day. Even though you're equal, he still thinks he's the boss. He's still telling you what he wants done today even though you might have ten things to do. We've got our own work to do along with the things that he's got scheduled for us. I think it takes an extremely strong marriage to survive farming, because you are together all day, day in and out, and long days when you're tired, not at your best. I think it takes an extremely strong marriage to stay together on the farm. You've got to work at it; the frustrations are there.

Working with one's spouse is like a double-edged sword. On the one hand, Mary believes it is easier because you can express yourself, and on the other hand, it is harder because of the role conflict.

**“We're a strong support for ourselves out here...”**

Mary emphasized a very strong network in her community. She explained how this support manifests itself, and how important it is to each of them. She believes there would literally be suicides in the barn without the community support for each other.

And that's the one nice thing about living in a community. The people are doing the same thing as you; they're going through the same stress as you. You know they're having bad days just like you are. There's good days, too, and we share those. We're a strong support for ourselves out here. Neighbours need a hand;



they don't even have to ask. Everybody's there to pour a sidewalk, fix a bin, or work on the combine. If it looks like it's going to rain, and there's some crop out, you'll have three combines pull into your yard without being asked. It's a great community here. We have an extremely strong support system in this community. It's amazing!

If you've got a problem as far as a weed or whatever, you go and find somebody that's going to know the answer, only after you've asked everybody in the neighbourhood. I either look it up on the Internet, or call the university.

I think growing up on a farm has given you that sense of responsibility to family. We have a network between neighbours, children, brothers and sisters. So when it comes to becoming older and having a problem, they have no one to fall back on except their friends.

Support is absolutely imperative for you to keep your mind and keep sane; if you didn't have that support, I think you'd go crazy. If we lost community, you'd see people hanging, literally, in the barns. I firmly believe they keep us all from committing suicide. Everybody's in the same boat, and I guess misery loves company because we're quite happy all being miserable together.

Family and community can be a strong support in a farming community. Mary emphasized how important the support from friends, family, and siblings is for her.

**“I foresee this farm just being bulldozed under, which breaks my heart...”**

As Mary discussed what the future has in store for them, she talked about the loss of what she thought would be there at this stage of her life. Their retirement has been postponed, perhaps for another ten years. At one time she had thought one of their children might live in the farm house, but holds no hope for that now. Several times during the interview, Mary mentioned a bullet hole [target] that is a place to go in the winter which is away from the farm. She feels fortunate for this diversion each winter.

We were always told the land will always be worth something. Invest in land. But that's not true. I'm not sure what land would be worth right now but it's down, and if you could find somebody to buy it... You know, everybody else put money into a pension plan, and if it's not there, the government steps in and makes sure it's going to be there for them, where that doesn't happen in farming. Nobody really cares. So your pension plan is depleted. What you thought was going to maybe be something your children could inherit isn't there, so all the

plans and dreams that you had when you were young, you found out that *that's not really the way life is*.

We had hoped to retire at fifty-five; that was kind of our aim in life, that 'freedom fifty-five' bullshit, but we realized that after the last five years where you have got behind farming, and pulled out of your savings, it's just not going to happen with the cattle and everything that's hit us in the last three years. We put it off to sixty, or no more than sixty-five. We're not going to retire in this province. At one time we actually thought one of our children would live in our house, and now we realize, nobody will live here, so it will be sold or burnt or torn down or whatever. I foresee this farm just being bulldozed under, which breaks my heart.

We're going to have to give this a shot, and hope we can *eke out a bare bones living*, so that we don't have to dig out of our savings for another ten years. And see if we can live off poverty income for the next ten years, and hope that there is a corporation or somebody that's willing to buy our land.

I don't plan on being here any more than ten years max. *I'll be crazy if I stay here more than ten years. It's in the count down.*

Some of the people are having a really tough time now, emotionally. They don't have anywhere to go to yet. Once we finally bought, it's made it easier. You had a *bullet hole*, something you could run to, and in more ways, it's made it easier. You can get out there, straighten your head out, and then come back. We're fortunate; both of us feel we've found a spot we can go.

Two or three years ago, people were still thinking, 'Ok, there's got to be something we can do different. We're going to grow different crops. Now, the talk is. 'OK, how can I hang on long enough to be able to sell out or get out? How can I cut back and make money doing something else, and just keep the farm as a hobby?'

I don't think the price (of grain) is ever going to go up sky high. I hate to pray for world disaster, but that's pretty near what it would take. My dad always said, 'What it takes to straighten out an economy is a world war.'

As Mary lamented about what might have been, she also named gratitude for having had a chance to spend winters away from the farm. She discussed their plans for the next ten years, describing their voyage away from the farm.

### **“Death is like a voyage...”**

This is a profound and emotional metaphor that Mary described. She likened the process of death as a voyage which can also be a metaphor for leaving the farm. She related a story she had heard from a doctor when a loved one was dying. Mary explained ways that she was already distancing herself from the farm and starting the voyage.

I had a doctor tell me that death is like a voyage. You walk with them (a cancer patient) to the train station and you're holding their hand and you're visiting, and then you get on the train with them and say good-bye' and 'we'll see you'. And you get off the train you expect them to be looking out the window and waving at you and smiling but they're not. And as the train pulls away, they don't wave, and it's because they have already started on their voyage. They've already distanced themselves and pulled away.

And it's not that they or you don't love it any more or less, the person or the land, it's just that there comes a point in time where it's almost like the death of the farm, and you start pulling away. And I can see myself starting to do that in small things. Like I'm not sure I'd get linoleum that's guaranteed for twenty years anymore, that sort of thing. So, I'm distancing myself, I've already started it. It's been brought on the last few years by the drought and the hoppers and everything else. When I think about it, I'm just like a cancer patient preparing myself for another voyage.

And so when you think it's hard to leave, when you know it's the best thing, and I think that's how we will be, and I've got this little ten year mark in my mind, I think I may feel the pull. But I think you will realize, it is the time, and it will be easier to leave. Marking your time down, and you start thinking about it, but it's never easy to let go and move on to something new in life, you reach a point where you realize that is the only decision, the only thing left to do.

I know the kids can see us distancing ourselves, too. They're very aware. I think it's not only just the farm family. I think anybody in our age group starts this process. They don't recognize it maybe, but they start making different choices, different decisions, and it's all part of the process. You're leaving one thing and onto the next. We're making different decisions now. Decisions that we never thought we'd be making at this point in our lives because of the way things are going. You're looking at keeping things in a workable condition, but not progressing, just hoping to survive. And so, it's changed that way.

I've got ponds and waterfall, but I'm making a new one, and I'm making it transportable this time. At one time, everything was permanent. Now even with my side-walk, I put blocks instead of pouring cement. And my pond and

waterfall is made so I can take it apart and take 'er with me. *I've already moved.* I'm *starting to distance myself from the farm.* At one time I thought it would be a huge pull to leave the farm and retire. But already...

I see a lot of farm wives doing that. My friend said, 'You know, I'm doing the same thing, but I didn't realize what I was doing.'

Mary and her friend are starting on the voyage of leaving the farm. They are doing this without realizing it, perhaps in preparation for the journey. Many farmers are leaving the land in Saskatchewan today, and perhaps getting ready to leave long before the actual move takes place. The question Mary asked about the migration of farm families is:

**“Who's going to farm all this land in fifteen years?”**

Mary explained how her community has no young farmers, and everyone around is about to retire in the next ten years. She suggested perhaps major corporations or the government will end up owning the land.

There's no young farmers in the community, absolutely none. We have neighbour's houses standing empty. Who's going to farm all this land in fifteen years? Because in fifteen years, everybody in the community will be ready to retire. So we're not sure who will even farm the land in this area. It is a concern. You're always thinking you can sell your land or rent it out; we're not sure who to because we go a lot of miles and in fifteen years, there won't be anybody left here.

Who's going to farm it? I think it's going to be major corporations. I think the government will end up picking up this land for a song, and then saying, "O.K., I'll pay you \$80,000 to manage twenty-five sections. You can't buy machinery anymore. How can you afford to upgrade it to new stuff? At \$350,000 for a combine and \$250,000 for a tractor, that's not economically feasible. So in ten years, everybody's machinery will be worn right out. Nobody can afford to come back on this farm and farm, so it's going to be big corporations. I don't think there's any way around it. And they'll be just hiring people to farm.

**“Well, next year...”**

Farming has always been about 'next year', and in the meantime, Mary's

family will continue farming. The hope for a better crop the next year keeps farmers working the land from one year to the next. Will this ever change?

As long as this puts food on our table, clothes on our back, we're probably going to keep doing it. Unless the Hutterites come, and offer us a whole big mess of money, like they have some farmers, and the temptation will be there.

But you work your way through it. This year gave you a bit of hope. We're the biggest gamblers in the world. I can't play bingo, or go to Vegas; I gamble every single day of the year. You keep thinking, *'Well, next year...'*

## Neil's Story: "Who's going to farm all this land?"

### "You feel kind of helpless..."

Neil lives on a farm with his wife and children in a small community in Saskatchewan. When he started farming in the seventies, the prospect for agriculture looked optimistic. Neil compared the farming economy then to the way it is now. Neil said he is losing hope for any improvement in today's farm economy. As you read his story, note the disillusionment that Neil feels for himself farming and others farming at this time. At one point, he said, "I hate thinking negatively." Financial constraints are a major issue today. Another major concern for Neil is that as farmers are leaving the land, there are no young people to come to take their places. Several times throughout the two interviews, it was evident that he felt strongly about new entrants in the farming industry. "The future of farming kind of disturbs me---who's going to farm all this land?" This question summarized Neil's opinion of the farming environment at this time. About the farming environment today, he said the following:

Farming in Saskatchewan today seems to have more responsibilities and more debt. It seems like you need to have more knowledge, and you don't seem to be making any more money with all the harder work you do and the debt load you take on. It seems to be a never-ending battle. You take on more debt and you're not really getting ahead.

My outlook on farming is not really that good. I try to look down the crystal ball and see what may be there, what could happen if prices increase, and there just doesn't seem to be anything there. *You feel kind of helpless* when you're relying on somebody else to determine the price of your grain. It makes things tough.

We're *going from one year to the next*, really. If we just say there's no crop next year, I'm not sure where the money comes from. I don't think there are a lot of people that can stand another bad crop. I'm one of them.

The problem with my generation is *we're tied to the land*. Our fathers farmed it, our grandfathers farmed it, and we farmed it. And we've got some ties to this air. If it was strictly a business dealing, sentimentality has nothing to do with it, but it

does have in farming. It has a great deal to do with it. And I think that's why you always think, 'Well, gees, it would be nice if my son farmed. If he likes and wants to go farm, it would be nice to have that'.

My mother has asked me more than one time '*who's going to farm all this land?*' I think it's on everybody's mind. Guys who are getting close to retirement are thinking, 'well, maybe I should sell now, because in ten years, are there going to be that many buyers out there to buy this land?'...Maybe we don't have enough young people here to buy this land; maybe it's going to be a buyer's market. I don't know. That's a very good question. I don't think the Hutterites can farm all this. If anybody knows there's a glob of land out there for sale, they're not going to bid a high price for it, you can bet your sweet biffy on that. They're going to get as low as they can, so it's going to get interesting, I think.

Not only does Neil anxiously question the future in agriculture, but his mother who has experienced many more years in agriculture, has asked Neil the same question, 'Who's going to farm all this land?'

### **“I was hoping for a spike in the economy...”**

Farming in the seventies was a time farmers Neil's age remember as one of the most profitable times in the history of agriculture. That was a time when new entrants to farming left their jobs in the cities and returned to the land to farm. He explained how he used to enjoy farming, and he still enjoys living in this community.

Farmers were brought up on a farm to start with, and know a little bit about the challenges. You work out, get to see the other side, how other people live, and maybe farming isn't that bad. Like *if* I had to do it all over again, I would have still taken that path. I've enjoyed farming up until the last few years. It's been a very good living, and the community has been nice to live in, too. We had a lot of young people come back about the same time I did, so it was good. *Farming was kind of always in my blood.*

In the 70's, we were growing some pretty good crops; money was pretty good; everything was working right; it was the way it should be. There was a lot of money around at that time. There were a lot of young people around; it made the community work good. We had a lot of kids around so it was fun. There was always something going on every weekend, ball in the summertime, or curling or hockey in the winter. We didn't have to travel very far like the way we do now.

I remember thinking one time, that when I get to be fifty years old, when I buy a half-ton, I'll just open my bank account and say 'here, I'm going to pay for this half ton'. Well, I'm fifty years old, and it's 'can I borrow some money, please?' So it's kind of *discouraging* that way. I was *hoping for a spike in the economy* like that (70's), and I don't think it's going to happen.

Reminiscing about farming in the seventies brought smiles to Neil's face as he outlined his former experiences.

### **“What am I doing here?”**

This is a question farmers are asking themselves at this time. Farmers, like Neil, who have been farming for thirty years are in the mix of people who are facing these difficult decisions. Neil described the difference between farming in the past, when he first came back to the farm, and farming today. He compared farming in a lifetime to harvesting a single crop---*you are never sure of it until it is over*. He spoke with disappointment about last year's crop, starting with adequate moisture, and then drying out. He expressed his disenchantment with farming at this time in the following quotations:

It just took the wind out of a lot of guys' sails. It hurt. It really hurt. Everybody's kind of down on that. It's like farming. *You're never sure of the crop till it's in the bin*. That's been said millions of times, and we all know it. We've had some good looking crops, and they've gone to pot on us. You wait till the end, and then you pass judgement on that.

My father farmed, and he loved farming. My wife's parents were farmers; they liked farming. They had good years; they had bad years. Right now we have some good years and some bad years and we're still not getting any farther ahead. It makes you wonder '*what am I doing here?*'

When we started farming, you could take some ups and downs, but it seems like now, a bad crop can hurt badly. Back in the 80's, we had bad crops and we've gone through that and kept going. Now when you get a bad crop or two, it sets you back a long way.

I'm kind of waiting until I get to be sixty or sixty-five and get out of this thing. *I've had enough*. It seems like we're putting more money into the crop and getting less returns all the time, and the droughts haven't helped us out either---gives us a



bad taste in our mouth. It seems like if we grow a big crop or get a big price, we've got chemical companies and machine companies all there to take up the slack. Whatever money I could put away is all taken up again.

I've got to *prepare myself for retirement* at some point in time, and I would like to have money to retire. I'm in a position where my son could be twenty-four years old when I come sixty-five, and as I see it right now, I don't think I'm going to have the kind of money to retire on to let him take over the farm. I'm not sure that I'd really like to see him farm. *I don't think things are going to get any better.* I would really like to see somebody farm in the family, but I think the kids would be further ahead if they got themselves a job and worked from there.

This land your father might have farmed a hundred years ago, now you're losing it? *I mean you've got to feel like you're a failure.* That's the way I would feel anyway, that I've failed somewhere along the line. And maybe you haven't; it's just circumstances have just got beyond your control.

Neil named factors that contribute to his disappointment and that of other farmers with whom he has spoken. He reflected on the past, describing changes that have taken place in agriculture.

**“Technology is fine, but when it doesn’t work....”**

Technology has played a prominent role in advancing agriculture, with improvements in chemicals, fertilizers, and global positioning systems for equipment.

Neil’s dependence on expensive machines and technical services has escalated.

Technology is fine, but when it doesn't work, it's going to cost you a lot of money to get it fixed; it's going to take people with a lot of money to farm. At one time, you could figure out what the problem was and fix it yourself, but now you've got to get somebody with all the gizmos to figure out what is the problem. When they walk out of the shop, the clock starts ticking. Our service industry is moving farther and farther away from us; our machinery is getting more complicated, and you're going to need somebody that knows what they're doing to work on it. And if the combine breaks down in the middle of the afternoon, and you wait three days on a weekend for somebody to come out Monday morning, I guess that's part of the game you're going to have to play.

Like other farmers, Neil has to rely more on repair persons who travel farther distances for repair and maintenance at his expense.

**“It can happen to anybody...”**

Saskatchewan farmers are experiencing higher costs, risk, and debt in farming today. Neil highlighted the impact of the changes in transportation, diversification, and debt load. He explained his anguish and frustration related to changes in transportation. Whereas he used to haul seven miles to his local elevator where he knew and trusted the agent, now he hires an unknown trucker to haul out large truckloads of specialty crops farther distances to processors. He discussed this dependency on unknown others, and the fear and stress that he incurs worrying about the risk of not getting paid. Another risk and expense is diversification into peas and lentils. It involves an opportunity to make more money, but “there's more unknowns in it.” Neil said he is dealing with larger cost, more risk, and less profit.

[Not getting paid] is a terrible thing to have happen, but it can happen, and you're always kind of eerie about that. Well, now, what do you do? He didn't do anything wrong. He may have trusted somebody and got burnt. So how do I handle it? And probably nine times out of ten, nothing does happen, but there's always that one time that it can. You start asking more questions of who are we dealing with. You're taking the word from somebody else that they know. I've seen solid companies go broke. It can happen to anybody. It's less money you've got.

When you take more risk, you presume there's going to be more reward there for you. We're taking more risks and the dollars and cents don't seem to be there; this is a worrisome thing.

How much debt can you take on? *We're not making enough money to make a go of it to start with.* To borrow money is no problem now, but *how do you pay this money back?* I mean, do you just pay interest and go through your life like that, and when it's all done and finished with, you just say, 'that was nice' and walk away from it all? Is that how they want things done? The problem is we're not making enough money to make a go of it to start with. I can't make enough money to pay off what I've got now, so how is more money going to help me? I don't know how government figures agriculture. I really don't know.

We're dealing with bigger figures. But *the bottom line is...I don't think the net value to me is getting any bigger; it's shrinking.* It's got where it's getting close

and closer and I'm not making any money out of this. Income is lower, and the federal and the provincial governments have kept whacking up their income tax, and that takes a bite out of everything. It's a cost you've got to deal with.

I was just talking to a neighbour here, and he was saying that Farm Credit has got loans there that all you've got to do is pay off the interest. What kind of a ...? How's our farming moving here? Is this just to make a living out of it, and when you leave the land, it's somebody else's? That's why our forefathers came here—because a lot of other people where they came from owned the land, and they said 'to heck with that'. They came here to own their own land. We seem to be reverting back to that—*we're the servants*. I guess it's a way to make a living, but I would kind of like to have equity when I'm all done, and I was kind of surprised when I heard that. I always thought the price of land should go down somewhere along the line, and it hasn't. And I think that Farm Credit is keeping it as artificially high as they can.

*I'm not sure what an average size of a farm is any more. To take on more debt at my age and more land just doesn't make economical sense. And that's where the new people, the younger ones have to come in, but if they're going to take on a debt load that's going to consume them, there's not much sense in farming at all.*

Farm financial advisors and agricultural consultants are encouraging farmers to assume more risk by increasing their land base. This is based on the economies of scale, assuming that farming more acres decreases the cost of production per acre. Buying or renting land to expand the farm would also mean increasing the financial debt, and this does not make economical sense to Neil. The gamble is greater.

**“I want to farm; I don’t want to be a burden to the taxpayer...”**

To operate a farm business today, farmers need to be knowledgeable about financial business management. This includes being informed about various government programs, such as stabilization, crop insurance, and retirement opportunities. Neil spoke with disappointment of the lack of consistency in the government’s planning and the government’s support for western Canada. He outlined his irritation with having to rely on government programs rather than receiving a fair price for his grain. Neil

lamented his frustration with farming being about bookwork and government programs, rather than production. He said he wants to grow a product and be paid for it.

I want to farm; I don't want to be a burden to the taxpayer. I want to make my money off the land, not off the governments.

I would like to see some government come out with a plan 'this is how we're going to do it for twenty years', and give you an idea that yes, the governments are getting behind this. I wished governments would say either we're going to stick with you and help you, or we're not going to help you, none of this wishy-washy stuff. It's hard to plan anything. I wished they would say 'we're going to make agriculture work in Canada'. I understand how agriculture works, and I think all our policies come out of the east, and they're all (the programs) are geared to the eastern farmer, and they just kind of adapt it to the western farmer, and leave it at that, and it has its misgivings. We've got programs in place; we have no idea how they work or how you figure out how they work. Make it so we, as farmers, can understand how it works, and once we get that figured out, then it takes a little stress off, it really does. They've got it all so complicated that the average farmer does not know how it works.

Neil is speaking about an income stabilization program that was set up based on the federal government pension plan model. It was set up as a retirement fund and also as a stabilization program, so in poor years, farmers could cash out some of their funds. He said farmers were just getting it figured out when they changed to another program.

I know that 99% of the farmers don't understand it. They just don't have a clue what's going on, and the government seems to think this is the greatest thing since sliced cheese.

Whether you get the work done is secondary; the bookwork has got to be done. The government wants to know this and that, and record-keeping is stressful, too. Nowadays working hard is not the problem; it's get those books done and government programs--- make sure you know how they work, and it's sad.

My father always said, 'The biggest challenge I had was growing a crop. I've gone through three years here that we got burnt out. Now I'm starting to realize what he's talking about. As a farmer, producing the crop is the number one stressful thing. If we could get a half decent price for our crops, we wouldn't need government programs. I think there's always going to be government programs, because I don't think they want to charge the consumer too much for food, and we're just going to have to go along with that and then rely on the government to give us money to keep us going, which is a sad thing, but I guess that's the way

life will be....And you're not going to make much of a living on what the government programs are going to be.

Neil highlighted his frustration with dealing with the perplexity of using both the metric system and the English system in agriculture, especially in busy seasons, such as spraying time, when timing is critical. The calculations for usage take time and patience during a period when farmers are in a hurry. Farmers have to come to a standstill, and compute the amount of chemical (in metric) required for the field size (in imperial).

*People who are in the trenches* doing the jobs (of spraying) don't understand what that means, and you've got to start converting over, and it takes time to do that, and especially with chemicals, you can be open to mistakes. It seems to be written in a different language than what we're used to. I kind of like to figure things out so I know what's going on.

Neil's anxiety was apparent when he spoke of the lack of long-term government planning. He is discouraged by government programs, the metric system, and the multiplying amount of bookwork required to farm today. Although he is perturbed with the situation in farming, he also is bothered about his negative outlook on the future.

**“I hate thinking negatively...”**

To be a Saskatchewan farmer at any time requires a faith in what will come. Neil explained how he has always been an optimist in the past, and that he is changing. He spoke his regret about becoming disillusioned.

I've always been a person who's always thought things will always get better. You get down in the mouth, but things will always get better, and I look at farming, and I just do not see where things are going to get any better, and I hate myself for thinking like that. I hate thinking negatively. I like to think positive, but it seems that there is nothing positive out there to draw from. It seems every year it gets worse and worse all the time. We're beating our heads against the wall for nothing, and that's a terrible way to think. I always thought a farmer was always optimistic, but I cannot for the life of me see how we can be optimistic any more. The big crop does not mean a better standard of living or a few more dollars in your pocket. It doesn't mean that anymore.

I enjoy farming; I enjoy the springtime; I enjoy the fall time. I don't enjoy the stress that goes along with this stuff in the fall. We've got to beat the weather. But now the way pricing is, it seems like "God, you've got to get it off, and it's got to be #1, or it's got to be the best, and there's years you just get rain in the fall and there's nothing you can do about it. It goes from #1 to #3 and years ago, the price difference wasn't that big. Now, oh my goodness, that's a major catastrophe, and that's more stress. It just compounds things.

In spite of his growing disenchantment, Neil's face lit up when he talked about the enjoyment of farming in the springtime. This was a contrasting reaction with discussion about the uncontrollable climate, which can impact decisions that may cause a major catastrophe for the farm business and community.

**“We're losing neighbours all the time...”**

Farm families have been impacted by financial crisis with the downturn in the farm economy. Money is tight, families are leaving, and schools are closing. Neil described that an error in farm business management and/or decision-making can cause a major problem.

It's sad. You hate to see your neighbours and friends work their silly heads off, and finally end up with nothing at the end, or close to nothing, or they're gone broke. Work wasn't the problem; managerial skills, I guess, is more than real labour now. You want to be conservative in your thinking.

We're losing neighbours all the time...

It has a big impact on the community. There are less people to do the work to keep it going. We haven't young people to come in and do the work and have new thoughts on how things should be done. It's all the same old ones and we're getting older and work's getting a little bit harder, and pretty soon the rink may not be operating in a few years; that's what we're faced with.

If we lose a family or somebody retires, it impacts on the community. We realize that's another person that's gone from us, and it gets smaller and smaller.

It's a very supportive community. If anything happens, everybody is right there to help give support. It's a caring community, very caring. We realize we're in the same boat together. That farming's our livelihood and *as farming goes, we go, too.*

Everybody's hurting. Everybody has different financial means. There's some that may be not hurting as bad as others, but they all feel it.

Neil highlighted that in spite of all the hardships farmers in his community are experiencing, they draw their strength from each other. Despite the fact that Neil does not have faith that farming will work out, he does have faith in the community support.

### **“How fair is that?”**

Farmers, as in the general population, value fairness, honesty, and integrity. After the drought in 1988, some farmers lost land or had financial write-down of portions of their debt load. Neil shared his frustration and anger at rumors of how some farmers may have taken advantage of the system. He said those who bought land at a high risk of paying for it, and then went through the Farm Debt Review Board, may be further ahead than others like himself, who were more judicious and conservative.

How many farmers got their debt written off and are doing well today, and I'm slugging at it because my pencil wouldn't come up with what they were paying for land? It kind of makes me a little mad that this is the way it went. That Debt Review Board had me a little bit stirred up. I just felt we were starting to pick people who were going to survive and who weren't at that particular time, and the guys that hunkered in and didn't go through that; well, I'm not sure we're any better off today than those guys that went through the Debt Review Board, and again, we've got to have the mechanism that if you make bad management decisions, you can go broke, and I'm not so sure whether that rule applied there at all.

It looked like, and maybe it still is today that the more debt you pile on, the better the banks take care of you, because they don't want to lose. They have money invested in you that they can't afford to lose, so they've got to keep you going. I like to sleep at night. I don't want to take on a whole bunch of debt. I don't have much, but what I've got, I've got paid for.

Neil's value for fairness was emphasized as he lamented about the unfair trade

policy with the United States, and the unfairness of the banks that appear to be more supportive to those farmers with larger amounts of money borrowed than the smaller farmer.

**“In the long haul, would it make a difference?”**

In Saskatchewan today, farmers are caught in a cost-price squeeze. This situation is a result of increased costs of inputs, machinery, and taxes when grain prices have not increased to keep up with the expenses. Families experience financial pressure, have a reduced family living allowance, and are compelled to seek non-farm employment to pay the bills. Neil discussed the impact of low farm income on his farm and his family.

We need a lot of rain to get a good average crop. Prices will be the next question, but it's nice to grow a good crop. It makes you feel like you've accomplished something and then you worry about the prices after. You kind of say, 'Well, we did something right for a change', and then you take the prices in that you get after harvest and you start to say 'Oh, it's that bad, is it?' But for a while you feel good. It lifts you up. These last few years of the drought years, it's kind of depressing, and we know with drought, you can't do anything about it, *that's just part of the game*, and in years gone by, you used to sit in the combine, you'd have a good average crop, and you'd think about maybe buying grain bins. But now, the crops not there, so you're just kind of existing, going from one year to the next, and it's be nice when you do a little bit of dreaming that you could improve something, to put back into the farm..

Rain would give us a little better ray of hope, that maybe we are going to get a crop. *But in the long haul, would it make a difference?* I don't know what it would take to make a difference. *We've got to get more money into the hands of the farmers*, somehow. We've got to get more for our product, and I think *that's the bottom line*.

My biggest problem is my input costs. We've got to have more money for our crops, but my biggest problem is what I'm putting into the ground to grow that crop.

In the seventies, you'd probably buy a combine for a hundred thousand dollars or less; now you're looking at three hundred thousand dollars, so *our grain increases have not kept up with everything else*. And land taxes keep going up, and it all pinches a little bit every time it does that.



It seems like the wife's got to work off the farm now. Guys have got jobs, and they're trying to farm, too, and the wife's working. Life's too short for that kind of stuff. If you've got to keep pumping money into the farm from a job, then I question that. You're burnt out; it hurts the family. That's maybe why the young people who see the stress that's put on the family say 'we don't need to do that'.

*It's strange when farming can't pay its own way.* We've got to rely on some other income to do it.

I'm not sure just *who's making the money in agriculture*. I think it's the big grain companies. It would be nice if some of it was passed down to the farmer.

*If there was a decent price in our product,* then I could get more enthusiastic about it...*I don't think you can make it on your own.*

The price of our commodities is the biggest drain. You'd like to see it where you can make some money and maybe save some money, but with the present prices, it's awfully hard to do, and another thing, I'd like to see more young people come back, and *it's just not going to happen.*

The farms are getting bigger, and for the young people to come back to start farming, they're going to have to get along, either neighbours or families working together. They may be farming many acres, four or five people involved in it, and they're going to have to sort that out. It seems to be the only way the young guys are going to farm now to keep their machinery debts down, and purchase land. Combines are too expensive; tractors are getting too expensive; you have to have a big land base; they've got to rent land, and you've got to be careful of your debt loads. Instead of four neighbours having four combines, you may have four neighbours having one combine, and making payments on a good combine that'll do a lot of acres. Individuals will have to give up some of their freedoms, but it can work if you want to farm. Timeliness to take your crop off is important.

When you're working on stuff and you need a man and a half; you've got two men. One person can do one job or another; they both know what they're doing. You're usually working together and you talk over this, and you talk over that. The downside is you've lost some freedom. You may get on each other's nerves. You've got to learn how to accept that and move on. There's a lot of give and take in both people involved.

Neil explained how family burn-out can result when family members work long hours in an attempt to complete farm responsibilities, such as working off the farm. He emphasized that if there was sufficient price for the product, farmers could make a living without having to work off the farm. Although sharing machinery can be cost-saving,

one of the disadvantages is not having the machinery available when needed for the operation.

**“There may be a day of reckoning somewhere along the way ...”**

Neil described how the government influences agriculture, and how some of the government policies encourage farmers to make decisions that are not in the best interests of the farmer. These decisions cause problems in segments of the industry, at a cost to farmers. He named his anger at the lack of recognition for agriculture’s contribution to this country’s economy. Neil said he hopes that the government will recognize the impact of the agricultural industry on the country’s economic, social, cultural, and political future, and establish a long-term farm policy that is supportive of agriculture.

Governments have a cheap food policy to keep food as cheap as possible for the consumer, so they can buy other stuff or borrow money for cars and stuff like this.

We export a lot of wheat, and that brings a lot of dollars into this country, and a lot of other products that bring dollars in. They're more worried about the plants in Ontario than they are the farmers, and they just produce cars. Well, we produce something to eat. When push comes to shove, you can't eat a car, so...but they don't seem to realize that. That kind of makes you mad, that you're producing something and they're ignoring you. In the cities, if the farming industry is down, it doesn't seem to bother them, but I think it does to a great extent. Rural Saskatchewan pumps a lot of money into the city.

It seems like they (the government) want to have bigger and bigger farms. And in the last few years, they've been wanting to get more cattle in Saskatchewan and western Canada. They've done that, and now we've got a problem. In the provincial government, if their number one industry is agriculture and they're not putting any money into that to try to stimulate that economy...I don't know where the government sits on the whole thing. I think it's a long way down the totem pole. Maybe right now you can do without agriculture, but maybe in fifty years or a hundred years, you will need agriculture. If you're going to rely on US to supply us with our stuff and some bad years hits, and the US has a problem, they're not going to supply you. I think we better keep that in mind. I think they should formulate some kind of farm policy that will hopefully keep everybody going. *There may be a day of reckoning somewhere along the way.*

Neil’s feelings of frustration, anger, and feeling misunderstood are apparent.

**“They're not right in the trenches...”**

Neil described a general lack of understanding about agriculture, and emphasized the importance of education to make people aware of where food originates. He said he would like consumers to appreciate and accept farmers.

You listen to the guys on the radio that are all enthusiastic, but the funny thing is they're probably not in farming. They are related to farming, but *they're not right in the trenches*; that this is where we make our living.

The city people don't understand agriculture. They have no idea. They think they go to Safeway and there it is, and all you've got to do is pick it off the shelf. Well, there's a lot more to it than that. Our provincial government needs to teach the kids in school what it's all about, and I'm not saying we should be put up on a pedestal and say that we've got to have agriculture, but I think we should play a bigger part. We shouldn't be allowed to go broke. We can't keep everybody going, but if you manage things right, you should be able to survive.

It would maybe make you feel a little bit better if people appreciated what's in the food stores, that there is a face and a family behind who produced that. Maybe now people want to know what's in the beef, where it comes from, what it's been fed, maybe that is going to change some attitudes a little bit. Were they force fed animals or fed on the range animals? Maybe they'll take a little more note there, and start to realize the farmer is behind it somewhere.

Our agriculture farmers are such a small group now, and we don't have any economic clout. Whether we're ever going to gain any more acceptance, I don't know.

Neil's frustration showed through in his facial expressions and voice tone when he talked about what it felt like to be unsupported and unappreciated as a primary producer.

**“It's a sad situation when that happens...”**

Not only does the downturn in the farm economy affect farmers, it slows down the entire province. Low profit margins on farms in the rural community mean less money in circulation, which impacts the service industry, jobs available, and the population that remain in Saskatchewan. Neil explained the overall effect of this:

Businesses close down, you lose employees and their families, and the community numbers are down. It's a sad situation when that happens. People, when the hard times hit, won't spend, tighten the belt, and spend on just the bare necessities. Every time we go into a tail spin, the agriculture industry just seems to hurt rural Saskatchewan more and more every time. Just like those parts people, electricians, carpenters, and mechanics; they can't make a living, so they've got to go somewhere else. It's just terrible to see. 'I got to work or I've got to feed my family, so I've got to go somewhere' and you lose those (people), and it's a sad situation when that happens.

There was a call on the radio the other day. What was more traumatic: was it the bombing of Pearl Harbour or the 911? It depended what year you came from. For me, the more traumatic was the New York, but when the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbour, that's etched in my Mom's mind. They remember that day very well, so it depends what year you came from, which is more traumatic. Maybe that's the same way with farming. I don't think farming was that bad back fifty or sixty years ago, but for the people that were in that era, maybe it wasn't any picnic either.

At the present time, it's kind of 'let's hope we can hang on'. Let's hope it doesn't get any worse. We can keep our heads above water till I turn sixty-five anyway, and then I can say 'Well, I've had enough of this, and I'm going to get out'. I hope I can survive through this, and it doesn't get any worse. That's about the best I can do. Hang on to what I've got. Don't get too carried away with taking too many chances.

I feel I'm losing equity. I'm going to get into the position now that maybe I'm going to have to take some savings to keep the farm going, and I don't want to do that. *I don't want to start putting it into that deep hole*, because I'm afraid I'm not going to recoup it back out again, and it's worrisome. That is something that worries me. I don't want to start that, or maybe it's time to get out of it, and keep what you've got and leave the rest alone.

**“That would gladden my heart...”**

There are few new young entrants in the farming industry in Saskatchewan.

Neil strongly wishes that young people would come back to his farming community. His face illuminated, he smiled, and he spoke with enthusiasm about the good times in the seventies when agriculture was booming and young people were present. He would like to see this occur again.

I would like to see more young farmers here, and the farms occupied with young families. That would gladden my heart, but I don't think it's going to happen. It would probably give some of the older people a little bit of a lift.

Like you hear different people speak about what a wonderful province we've got; maybe we need more people that are enthusiastic...That's why I'd like to have some young people in here, and start things rolling, maybe it would change my view.

From Neil's viewpoint, young people are the only hope for their community to be viable again. Then the question of "Who is going to farm all this land?" would be answered.

**CHAPTER FIVE: MAKING MEANING OF THE FARMERS' NARRATIVES  
THROUGH THEORY AND LITERATURE, AND IMPLICATIONS FOR  
COUNSELLING PRACTICE AND RESEARCH**

**Integrating the Theory and Narratives**

*Do you feel the wind?*

*Do you feel the force of the wind, the slash of the rain?*

*Go face them and fight them, be savage again.*

*Go hungry and cold like the wolf, go wade like the crane.*

*The palms of your hands will thicken; the skin of your cheek will tan,*

*You'll go ragged and weary and swarthy, but you'll walk like a man.*

*Hamlin Garland (1946, p. 25)*

I learned this poem in a two-room elementary school in rural Saskatchewan, and wonder if it stuck with me because of the culture in which I live. Farming builds character, and has a culture all of its own. The above poem represents the heart, soul, and spirit that I heard in the farmers' interviews. The narratives as told by four farmers addressed the purpose of my research, which was to thoughtfully explore the meaning of being a Saskatchewan farmer today. Their stories answered the question of my study: "What is the experience of a sample of Saskatchewan farmers farming today?" I interviewed the farmers in their environment, looked at their emotional response and coping strategies, and explored how they are integrating their experience to make meaning. When I began these interviews, I was surprised and overwhelmed by the amount of financial stress the farmers reported. I did not expect this kind of reaction to the interview question. The farmers said that although they like farming and think of

themselves as optimistic, they are losing hope that there will be a future in farming for them or their family. Although the heavy financial pressures are creating stress in their lives, these farmers demonstrated perseverance, determination, and tenacity in dealing with the financial stress. At the same time as they said they were losing hope, they appeared to be looking ahead with a “next year” attitude. Such were the contradictions in the messages and themes that I found in this study. Farmers say they like farming, but they do not like the uncertainty. The one thing that *is* certain about farming is the uncertainty in farming. Why is farming uncertain, and why do farmers keep doing this? The bottom line is that farming has always been unpredictable, and still is. There are no guarantees. You never know whether or not you will get a crop. Each day farmers live with uncontrollable variables, such as the weather, the global market, and political policies that impact their income. Farmers say they are “price-takers”, not “price-makers”. In other words, unlike other industries, farmers do not believe they can control the price they receive for their product, whereas input prices keep increasing. Farmers keep farming year after year because of the feeling of satisfaction they get from seeding, growing, and harvesting a crop that can feed the world. Stan Rogers wrote a song with lyrics that describe how it is for many farmers: “watch the field behind the plow turn to straight dark rows, put another season’s promise in the ground”. With every seed planted, there is a promise of harvest in the fall. The problem today is being a good farmer is no longer enough. You can grow an excellent crop, and still not make a profit. Farmers are perceived as leading autonomous lives, yet they feel they have little control over their destiny. There are highs and lows in farming. Financial stress, struggles, and rewards are prevalent in this environment. The contradictions in the stories in this study

are like the many contradictions in the farming communities. On the one hand, farmers talk about having too much information to sort through, and on the other hand, they say they are being “kept in the dark” in terms of farm policies and programs. From a farmer’s perspective, farmers are bombarded with superfluous advertising of products, programs, and information from the government. At the same time, there is a shortage of informed resources to complete the bureaucratic paperwork. Farmers feel the “pull of the land”, yet they talk about leaving the farm because it is not a viable economic unit. Wanting their young to take over the land appears to contradict not wanting their children to farm. However, if the economics in farming were to improve, parents would feel differently. The early seventies brought the good times when the farmers in this study started farming, and since then, they have hoped for the highs and experienced the lows. They do not want their children to experience the fall, the danger, and the prevalent farm stress. Few parents would want that for their children. Mary related that she does not think farm children today are brought up to go through the stress and challenges she is experiencing. In a pilot study I conducted in the fall, 2001, the farmer stated that she and her husband tried to maintain their lifestyle as much as they could to protect the children from becoming discouraged with farming. Although they sold off land and machinery, they did not want to disillusion the children. Some farmers openly encourage their children to farm; some openly discourage their offspring from farming. Such is the inconsistency in the farming world. Farmers talk about strong family support yet give examples of disagreement on important decisions. Differences are natural, inevitable, and welcome in families. However, farm family members are often work partners. In a non-farm situation, you may be angry with the person with whom you work, but you do



not go home with them. In farming, you need to resolve these differences in order to maintain a healthy family life. The roles are intertwined. As shown in this study, while farmers are independent, unique, and self-reliant, they are also dependent on their families, friends, and community for nurturing, encouragement, and understanding. It is the self-sufficiency that makes them appear so tough and strong; it is the warmth, generosity, and benevolence that make them soft and vulnerable with the people who know them best. Although these farmers have the freedom to be independent, they perceive being dependent on the uncertainty of the weather, government, and international trade. If they make a mistake, they pay for it, in terms of time, energy, and money. Seeding and harvest (spring and fall) may seem sacred; the timing of the planting is crucial. The farmers in this study demonstrated signs of creativity, adaptability, and flexibility. When struck with adversity, they took an alternate route, such as diversification. The determination, perseverance, and tenacity the farmers described gives them the spirit to farm. It was a privilege for me to interview these four farmers who shared their passion for the people around them. It hurts, as Neil said, to see what happens when the community goes down. It hurts, as Mary said, when her neighbour cannot plant his crop. It hurts, as Frances said, when friends go under. Not only do they fear failing to keep the farm, as Harry described, they fear the disappointment and loss of the way of life. In the compassion and connections with others, including ancestors, farmers experience the heart, soul, and spirit of the culture.

Weather impacts the financial bottom line on their farms, and also the emotional, psychological and physical well-being of the family. Although these farmers each experienced similar drought conditions, they had different family, community, and

economic situations. They coped in different ways, and had varied responses. In spite of the financial stress, Harry outlined his faith in God and the importance of his family as his top priority. Frances described how she knew if financially they failed, they would still be fine emotionally. Mary discussed their goal to farm for a limited period of time as they make plans to leave. Neil seemed disillusioned with the reality of the farming situation today, as indicated by his thoughts, feelings, and actions. The elements of weather dictate much of what happens in their lives, so their implicit faith in something bigger than themselves is important. Each farmer deals with this stress in his/her own way. The key to farming in Saskatchewan today appears to be how the farmer copes with the financial stress. The farmers talked about how the finances impacted the other business elements. They also talked about the benefits of farming in the past, and how that has changed. As I reflected upon their narratives, I was able to draw out both common and unique threads. Although aspects of certain narratives appeared to be similar, each had his or her own perspective based on personal perceptions, beliefs and history (VanManen, 1997). Some emerging themes connecting farmers' experiences to relevant theory and literature were: "I like to think of myself as an optimist, but...", "The bottom line is...", "too many uncontrollable variables...", "We're at the mercy of the weather...", "We've had a good life here on the farm", "Let's hope we can hang on another ten years..." and "Who is going to farm all this land?"

In my initial literature review, I researched stress, resiliency, and hope theory. I found threads of resiliency and hope embedded in the transcripts and data findings amidst the stress that the farmers in my study described. The interviewed farmers spoke about wanting to be their usual optimistic selves in dealing with their stress, and not liking how

they are feeling about their future. Although they described how they are losing hope under the current circumstances in agriculture, I also noticed elements of hope in language they used, such as “if, when, and right now”. I heard about actions they were taking that indicated they were making plans for next year, such as buying inputs for next year. Each had his or her own way of coping with the stressful farming situation, yet they were all looking to the future. This indicated elements of hope. After the data collection and analysis, I read more about farm stress, resiliency, optimism, hope, and coping theory.

### **Farm Stress**

Farm stress impacts families. Fewer and larger farms, fewer people working on farms and greater off-farm employment for both men and women results in significant change in rural living. Stress is a part of life for rural families. Walker and Walker (1988) ranked farming among the ten most stressful occupations. Farming is stressful. This statement concurs with research done by others (Bartlett, Lobao, & Meyer, 1999; Carruth & Logan, 2002; Conger et al., 1992; Conger et al., 1994; Gerrard, 2000b; McCubbin et al., 1999; Meyer & Lobao, 2003; Peterson, 2000; Simkin et al, 2003; Swisher et al, 1998). Meyer and Lobao write that it is difficult “for individuals to view their futures as viable when an entire economic sector and the occupations within it experience restructuring” (2003, p.152). In their study, they found that economic hardship was a consistent predictor of stress and depression for both genders. Plunkett, Henry, and Knaub (1999) discovered that the perceived impact of the farm crisis was positively related to family stress. The four years of drought described in this study have

impacted each of the farmers, dampening their spirit. Odd to say dampen, since it is rain that lifts their spirits. It is the wind and blowing dust that smother their spirits.

McCubbin and Dahl define stressors as “those life events or changes that are so serious that they require changes in the family system”, and stress as “the family’s response to the stressor” (1985, p. 373-374). Stressors that are predictable and expected outside the family would include work and family strains or economic depression. When there is an excess of stressors, such as the farmers in my study described, the stress becomes greater than normal. Work-related stress associated with time pressure and separations can leave little time for home and family. This financial stress overloads emotions, energy, and other resources affecting the family structure.

### **Hoping, Optimism, Coping, and Resiliency**

#### ***Hoping***

Harry and Neil said what drains their hope is the fear of failing and not being able to go on farming; Frances said her hope comes from her optimistic outlook that “things will be alright”. Although Snyder (1995) stressed the importance of “doing” and achieving goals, Farran et al.(1995) and Jevne & Miller (1999) describe hope as a way of “being”. This also fits with Dufault and Martocchio’s description of hope as:

a multidimensional dynamic life force characterized by a confident yet uncertain expectation of achieving a future good, which, to the hoping person, is realistically possible, and personally significant”. It is a way of being, a “complex of many thoughts, feelings, and actions that change with time” (1985, p. 380).

Dufault and Martocchio (1985) discuss two spheres of hope, particularized hope and generalized hope. Particularized hope “clarifies, prioritizes, and affirms what a hoping person perceives is most important in life, and is directed toward a goal or a wish. It preserves and restores the meaning in life” whereas generalized hope carries an

expectation that the future will be positive, and “provides the climate for developing particular hopes and later rescues the hoping person when the particular hope no longer seems realistic” (p. 381). These authors also suggest that six dimensions of hope exist: affective, cognitive, behavioural, affiliative, temporal, and contextual (p.381-389).

#### *Affective.*

The affective component focuses on sensations and emotions as part of the hoping process. This includes an attraction, dependence, and reliance on the good, believing it is important for well-being. Frances held these characteristics in spite of the uncertainty. According to Dufault and Martocchio (1985), hope also has an uncertainty related to the unknown nature of the future. This hope amidst uncertainty was apparent in three of the four farmers’ narratives.

#### *Cognitive.*

Each dimension can affect other dimensions, such as cognitive thoughts affecting behaviour and feelings. “Hoping persons maintain their hope as realistically possible until they perceive they no longer are able to ground their hopes in reality” (Dufault & Martocchio, 1985, p. 384). Affective responses to uncertainty are “feelings of anxiety, nervousness, doubtfulness, uneasiness, tenseness, vulnerability, worry, and sadness” compared to “feeling calm, peaceful, invigorated, happy, grateful, relieved, and loved when people see evidence that their hope is supported” (p.383). All of the farmers in this study described experiencing affective responses to the uncertainty.

#### *Behavioural.*

In the behavioural dimension, individuals may take actions in the social and religious realms. These may be related to a belief in a Higher Power or God, and may

involve praying, meditating, or other religious rituals. Dufault and Martocchio also suggest that in order to fulfill the hope, individuals may call upon God to accomplish what they cannot accomplish, and may feel energized by their feelings and attitudes related to hope (1985). Harry, in particular, emphasized how he relied on his relationship with God. Neil mentioned his faith in God, Mary talked about praying for moisture, and thanking God for certain things, whereas Frances described an inner knowing that they will be fine emotionally in spite of financial loss.

*Affiliative.*

The affiliative dimension involves relationships with others (both living and dead), with other living things, and also with a Higher Being. Individuals are receptive to others' help in hoping and understanding their reality. All four farmers described their relationships with others as being significant to their well-being. Common to all the farmers were words such as "misery loves company" and "all in the same boat".

*Temporal.*

The temporal dimension involves past, present, and future, and hopes that are short-range and long-range. "Keeping hopes non-time-specific serves as a protective device; individuals are protected from disappointment when a hope is not realized within a specific time frame (Dufault & Martocchio, 1985, p. 387). Each farmer talked about how farmers look to the next year for improvement. In the last four years, they did not see a positive change, so their protective device is failing, and disappointment due to unrealized hope is evident.

*Contextual.*

The contextual dimension focuses upon those life situations that are for testing hope, such as loss, stress, and crisis. “Other contextual situations that contribute to hoping are those surrounding or giving rise to goal-setting, or readjusting goals or plans, reminiscing and reviewing one’s life, considering one’s values and the meaning of life, and anticipating and preparing for death” (Dufault & Martocchio, 1985, p. 389). Each of the farmers is experiencing this. Frances’ family made the choice to not purchase the tandem, not take the trip, and instead to do a kitchen updating by painting and changing the flooring. Harry is considering the future by looking at what he did before he went farming. Neil is also reminiscing about the past, and wondering if young farmers will be able to farm, and what he is doing here. Mary is building portable sidewalks and other fixtures, and already starting the journey to leave. She compared leaving farming to death describing death as a voyage. All four farmers are in a life situation that is testing their hope. The same context can provide opportunities for both hope and hopelessness. These are not opposites; nor is hopelessness the absence of hope. Some dimension of hope is always present, for hope is multidimensional and process-oriented. Edey and Jevne (2003) maintain that there is value in acknowledging hope, and de-emphasizing its relationship to realistic goals. Frances maintains that no matter what happens to their financial goals, what really matters is that they will survive emotionally. Harry was emphatic in stating that his priorities were God and family over money. Roset (1999) writes that hope provides individuals with inner peace, motivation, and mental energy to participate in the attainment of goals. It furnishes one with a positive disposition, courage, and the determination needed to face life’s challenges (p. 434).

Snyder, Sympson, Michael and Cheavens outlined the benefits of how hope relates to coping in many walks of life, writing that “hope appears to be a good predictor of positive adjustment and coping” (2001, p.118). According to Snyder et al., the effects of positive thinking, the benefits of thoughts and feelings characterized by hope, and a positive mental attitude all contribute to a person’s well-being. Although hope is directed at goal attainment based on mental motivation (as discussed in my literature review), optimism emphasizes the importance of both mental motivation and the ability to achieve these goals. Hope is different than optimism in degree of certainty. Whereas hope is a confident, yet uncertain expectation of achieving future good, optimism refers to an expectation that good things will happen rather than bad. Although all four farmers described themselves as optimistic, they all related how difficult it was to maintain this optimism.

### ***Optimism***

Three farmers in this study displayed signs of optimism, even when they described themselves as losing optimism. Frances said ‘I’ve just always been an optimist.’ Harry also used the word “optimist” repeatedly. Although he said “I think I’m less of an optimist now than I used to be”, he also said, “I was born an optimist, and will always be an optimist, and I always think that next year will be better...” Mary, too, optimistically mentioned, “well, next year”. Although Neil described himself as an optimist, he used statements that appeared to lack hope: “Let’s hope we can hang on” and “let’s hope it doesn’t get any worse”. He gave me a copy of a cartoon he had kept for the last few years. The combine was grinding to a halt in the dirt. This picture



epitomized how Neil was feeling at the time of these interviews. His disappointment in what is happening in farming today was very apparent.

According to Scheier, Carver, and Bridges (2001), “optimists experience less distress than do pessimists when dealing with difficulties in their lives” (p. 198) and “optimists are less distressed when times are tough, they cope in ways that foster better outcomes for themselves, and are more proactive in their responses to adversity” (p. 208), and “an optimistic orientation to life is beneficial...optimists emerge from difficult circumstances with less distress than do pessimists” (p. 210). These authors attribute this “optimistic advantage” to the coping strategies used. Optimists tend to face problems head-on; Frances described her husband as ‘the type of person who faces things head on, doesn’t procrastinate when it comes to a problem’. Scheier et al. describe pessimists as more likely to engage in avoidance coping, such as abandoning their effort to attain their goals. At this time, all four farmers are continuing their efforts to farm. On the other hand, sometimes disengagement of a goal is a necessity of life and can be a positive approach. Too much optimism could deter individuals from taking needed action to promote their future well-being, but most of the research indicates that this is not the case. Are the farmers too optimistic about their futures in farming?

Without hopeful thinking, farmers would not be able to continue to believe in achieving their goals in farming, and remain healthy in mind, body, and spirit. Peterson and Bossio (2001) link optimistic thinking to good health if a vigorous healthy optimistic behaviour exists. This concurs with other mind body connection literature in this field which postulate that good health is affected by a person’s mind, thoughts, and beliefs, and how the individual fits in his or her world (Cousins, 1989; Hay, 1987; Siegel, 1988).

## *Coping*

I related to Snyder (2001) in his chapter, “Dr. Seuss, the Coping Machine, and Oh, the Places You’ll Go”, where he described how Dr. Seuss offered early instruction about the coping process. Snyder compares people to “coping machines” that can moderate coping responses to a stressor. Coping is how you think, feel, and act to deal with above normal stress, and still live at a reasonably high level of satisfaction. Lazarus and Folkman (1984) advocate an influential theory of coping that depends on understanding how the stressor is construed by the individual. Any given stressor will not be interpreted by two persons in the same manner. For example, a person who is very high in hope will view a drought much differently than a low-hope person. Because of a previous history with a particular stressor, the person will interpret it differently than the person lacking such a previous history. Coping is a journey one takes, stage by stage, using one of two major pathways to coping –avoidance and approach. Although he does not say that one way of coping is better than another, approach coping is usually more adaptive. Snyder (2001) writes that personal history, particular situations, and individual differences all determine how one copes. If an individual can use choice, motivation, and flexibility, that person is using adaptive coping. A self-directed coping strategy (ie. emotion-focused) such as use of humour is an adaptive approach that is equally as beneficial as an environment-directed or problem-solving approach. Snyder’s view is that individual differences and coping processes join forces against the stressors; both personality and situational factors are interactively implicated in coping.

Mary’s approach to coping strategy involved having a target, such as a holiday-related job in the winter that she called a “bullet-hole”. She felt compassion for

neighbours who did not have a target, such as this. She also listed ways she acts differently by distancing herself from the farm, such as “making moveable ponds” that she can take with her wherever she goes. Frances described an inner knowing that “things will be O.K.” and described ways her family was using approach coping by doing things differently, such as altering spending decisions. Harry turned to God and family communication to help him through difficult times. He also talked about how his active life ‘prevented him from having a heart attack’. Harry described how he pushed himself to work harder when he felt less motivated. Neil talked about good days and bad, but his words displayed signs of losing hope. Each of the farmers in this study had their own unique way of coping with farm stress. Their thoughts, emotions, and actions were similar, yet different. When they were using choice, motivation, and flexibility, they were adapting and using approach coping. Sometimes coping styles work better than other times, and sometimes avoidance coping is what works. According to Snyder (2001), factors that impede the coping process are rumination, focusing attention on self, procrastinating, and experiencing hostility. Factors enhancing the coping process are: obtaining social support, finding meaning, using humour, comparing with others, revealing secrets, remaining active, learning distraction and mindfulness meditation, and forgiving. Communication with others was stressed by each of the farmers in this study as a positive coping strategy.

### ***Resiliency***

Wolin and Wolin (1993) write that a clear sense of purpose fosters resiliency in a person. Deciding to continue farming or to leave it could be a reflection of resiliency, if the decision was made in order to fulfill or pursue hope. Researchers state a strong

relationship between the role of the community as a source of social support and the health, well-being and ability of the family to cope with stress and change (Letvak, 2002; McCubbin & Dahl, 1985, p.388). Gerrard (2000b) concurs. She researched a definition of resiliency and external and internal barriers to resiliency. Gender stereotyping can also cause strain on family relationships. Gerrard reported that the lack of control or the perception of lack of control of one's life can be a combination of internal and external barriers to resiliency around farm stress. She reported internal barriers that seemed to paralyze people included age, fear, isolation, communication, lack of knowledge, and lack of self. Mary talked about the isolation in her community. Frances felt sorry for others who do not communicate in their families. Neil described farmers' lack of understanding of government programs and policies. Harry said, "If I did have to quit, what would I do?" At this stage of his life, he does not want to start over. He named his fear of providing for his family. Financial problems can be an external barrier to resiliency. External barriers also referred to the community environment, and how supported or lacking in support the person felt in that setting (Gerrard, 2000b). Although financial pressures are tough to deal with, the family, friends, and people in the community make the difference of making it or breaking it. My research extends the literature in this area by stressing the importance of supportive relationships in the four farmers' lives, even so far as Mary said, "to prevent suicides".

### **Supportive Relationships**

Snyder (2001) writes that building and managing of interpersonal relationships is crucial for coping with a variety of life stressors. Each of the farmers in this study highlighted the importance of supportive relationships with their families, friends, and

neighbours. They spoke with passion and gratitude about the people who hold them up. Frances appreciated the strengths in her family team---“knowledge, organizational ability, open communication, and good decision-making” and extended family, friends, and neighbours who helped in time of need. Mary, too, emphasized her closeness with her siblings, and how neighbours just show up when you are in a time of need or sorrow. Neil valued social support in his community and longed for youth to come back and inject some enthusiasm. He also valued the working relationship with his brother. Harry stressed family communication, and also that the people in his community were “his kind of people”. One thing they believed helps them is that “misery loves company”, that everyone is in the same “boat” or situation, and that most farmers in this area are experiencing the heavy burden of the debt load and financial crunch. Mary emphasized that this community support “keeps farmers from hanging from a noose in their barns”. Simkin (2003) names farming as a high-risk occupation for suicides. Supportive relationships in farmers’ lives can aid in mental wellness.

### **Feeling Lack of Support from Non-farmers**

Interviewed farmers feel misunderstood and unsupported. They said they do not want hand-outs; they feel disappointed in the lack of support by government and unappreciated and misunderstood by consumers and urban-dwellers, as did farmers in research done by Gerrard (2000b). Neil lamented “The city people don’t understand agriculture. They have no idea”. Harry said he believes that rural people are “down-to-earth, common-sense people”, and that one can always tell the farmer when he goes to the city because the farmer waves.

Three of the farmers in this study resented that “government policies are designed for people in the east”. Neil stated, “I wished governments would say they were going to make agriculture work in Canada”. He wants “to make money off the land, not off the governments” and complains that “all our policies come out of the east...and are geared to the eastern farmer”. Mary also agreed, “I don’t feel support here in this province” and “Eastern Canada doesn’t really care about us”. Harry “heard that Canada is one country that has the lowest percentage of our income used to buy the necessities of life. Sooner or later, people have got to realize that they have to pay for what they eat”.

Both Harry and Neil talked about perhaps being looked at differently or supported more by the banks and Farm Credit Corporation if they risked more by having larger farms and more debt load. They believe that the government that used to lend money only to full-time farmers now expects off-farm income to generate money to keep the farm going. This means many people are doing double duty and wearing themselves thin, creating more stress in the family relationships. Farm safety information indicates that more accidents occur in times of stress, such as seeding and harvest, where farmers are working long hours, long days, and long weeks (Swisher et al., 1998). The farmers do not believe that the outside world understands what is really happening in this culture.

### **Financial Stress**

With tongue in cheek, a young farmer recently told me that the main problem with farming is that people expect an income from it. Although the farmers in this study described both opportunities and challenges they have experienced in agriculture, they cited financial problems as being the biggest problem. They emphasized that the bottom line is not there. Frances stated “It doesn’t work economically”; Harry said “The debt

burden is a heavy weight”; Neil lamented, “We’re not making enough money to make a go of it to start with” and Mary reported, “Basically it’s been four years since we got a crop here”. The farmers explained that if they could get rain, the crop would grow, but the price was still so low that the high inputs costs overpowered any chance of profit. Part of the extra financial burden of the farmers in this study was the added expense of controlling the grasshopper infestation. Harry explained, “On the one hand, I think there is a lot of opportunity, but on the other hand, I think there’s a lot of frustration...continually running to try and keep up with the huge debt load.” The other three farmers also worried about loss of equity in their investment. According to his story and that of the other farmers, the bottom line was a shortage of cash flow, which influenced their decision-making in the other areas of production, human resources, and marketing. All of the farmers discussed low product price, high costs, debt, bills and mortgages, transportation issues, grasshoppers, and drought. They talked about feeling disloyal to friends in the local businesses when they shop around to spend more efficiently. The farmers spoke about how different things are in terms of expectations, information overload, and advances in communication and technology compared to the previous generations. They told me how much their financial situation affected the production and marketing of their crops, as well as who performed farm activities. As Neil said, “time and money are so intertwined”. He described how management decisions are impacted by his perception of how much money he has. He discussed how interrelated these elements are, how challenging it is to balance them, and how he tries to find ways to combat these challenges. This is an example of the ingenuity, adaptability, and flexibility that these farmers displayed.

In terms of production, the interviewed farmers emphasized the high input costs, low price of product, and a very narrow, if any, profit margin. Neil lamented, “The price of our commodities is the biggest drain.” Harry, with slight laughter, related:

I guess part of the frustration is that everybody else seems to be able to kind of set the price for what they are doing in the world, and yet we seem to be sort of a hostage to the middle men and retailers at the other end of the food chain.

Mary had the same concerns:

In every other industry, if your costs go up, the price goes up on your product. But that’s not the case with farming. I’m not sure why because you know the world needs food, and that’s what we’re producing, but it seems like the middleman and the end man are making the money, and the bottom line is...it’s not there.

Mary and Frances both talked about trying to do the best for the land, in spite of the high costs. Another stress Frances and Neil described was the transportation system. Frances felt “really disheartened with our grain transportation system”. Neil worried about the potential loss of not getting paid for a truckload of grain when it leaves your yard. He said “that’s a terrible thing to have happen”, “I’ve seen solid companies go broke”, and “you’re always kind of eerie about that”. The transportation of the grain is an extra cost as well as a worry that compounds the cost-price squeeze, and plagues farmers.

Although three of the four farmers compared farming in these drought years to farming when they started in the good years in the seventies, Harry started in a year of drought, 1988, which appears to be a significant year for many. Each of the farmers mentioned how it took several years to recoup from that year. Harry used a race as a metaphor “We got off to a bad start” and Mary stated, “It’s a rat race”.



All the farmers described the uncontrollable variables in their lives, including weather, which altered their bottom line in terms of money and spirit. Drought and grasshoppers have been plaguing them for the last four years. Harry said, “we’re at the mercy of the weather” and Frances hoped, “maybe we’ll get rain next year”. Mary explained, “this was an exceptional year---hot dry, grasshoppers...” and “they keep telling us...we’re moving into a desert here...so that’s a fear”. Neil lamented, “it just took the wind out of a lot of guys’ sails. It hurt. It really hurt. Everybody’s kind of down on that.” The uncertainty in their lives creates unexpected fear, sadness, and despair.

The relentless grasshopper infestation has played havoc with the psychological health of farmers and the farm financial well-being. Frances recalled, “some of our land...we sprayed six times for hoppers”. Mary spoke with apprehension about the ominous threat of their presence in the upcoming spring. She described how she and her neighbour brought in their outdoor potted plants in December to bloom for Christmas, and in the warmth of the house, baby “grasshoppers hatched and hopped all over the room”. The grasshoppers appeared to be the last straw. I, too, have experienced grasshoppers that attacked everything green in sight, and then in swarms clung to the side of a green building. With the invasion comes a feeling of violation, devastation, and disappointment. The following paragraph written by a neighbour aptly captures the essence of the grasshopper infestation:

In the flood plains, on the shores of rivers and lakes and seas bordered by arid regions, hordes of migratory locusts have been gathering for days. They are attracted by the ubiquitous moisture, but when the water dries up and the food becomes scarce they become concentrated in ever smaller areas. The crowding agitates the insects until the disturbance reaches a level that produces the swarming phase. Having a tendency for imitation, the entire horde begins to advance on foot as though under the influence of a mass psychosis. When the temperature is right they take to the air. Rivers are no obstacle, nor are cliffs or

huge chasms as they ride the wind north. For days at a time they darken the sky and come to earth in the evening when the temperature drops, covering everything with a crawling layer. They are vandals of the worst kind: where they touch down nothing remains, not even the bark of trees (Mourre, 2003, p. 15).

Like a plague, the impact of the uncontrollable weather, financial distress, and unpredictable changes are sweeping across the land and challenging the farmers' livelihoods.

### **Finances Impact the Business Elements**

The integration of the business elements---production, marketing, financial, and human resources----is evident. Frances explained how a financial shortage in cash flow impacts a production decision such as cutting back on inputs. She said “We’re finding that we’re going to have to cut those ones back...will we grow the same crops?” Although cost reducing, cutting back on inputs affects production by risking potential loss of a better crop. Harry informed me how a shortage of cash flow influences his human resource decision to hire what he needs done in a timely fashion when he said “Because of the financial pressure, you’re trying to do things yourself, something doesn’t get done in a timely fashion, and then it ends up costing you more money”. He continued, “when I hire is in direct proportion to my perception of how much money we have around”. In terms of marketing, Harry said his need for cash flow often clouds his decision-making around marketing. His marketing decisions are unduly influenced by bills that need to be paid “in a timely fashion”. He stated “I think I could iron it out in timely marketing, but you’re always on the treadmill of getting to pay the bills”. Although farmers recognized that they do have equity and net worth on paper at the present time, they worry about the land as an asset in the future. All four farmers

discussed alternatives related to major decisions about selling out, renting the land, and re-mortgaging or taking from savings.

### **Working with Spouse, Family, and Others**

Frances, Mary, and Harry each highlighted the advantages and disadvantages of working with a spouse and the importance of that relationship. Frances commended her husband as “very equal in our relationship and in our marriage”. Both women described the active role they played in farming. On the one hand Frances reported, “I’ve got equal position in this farm” as she described the expectations her son has for her abilities to work on the farm’, and on the other hand she described how her husband “does what he wants anyway”, and she has total faith in her husband and sons “that they’ll make the right decisions, which lets me off the hook”. She also claimed “I’m not wanting to be as active in the day to day activities...I’m getting older and physically, I can’t ride a tractor like I used to”. She spoke about back pain as a result of the physical work. This was similar to what Mary explained “we work twenty-four seven with our husbands...even though you’re equal, he still thinks he’s the boss” and “you’ve got to work at it; the frustrations are there”. Harry explained “mostly it’s a good thing. It’s an opportunity to do something with your spouse” and “it can be a wonderful time together depending on your attitude”.

With this working spousal relationship, there are many facets. Carruth and Logan (2002) suggest that farm women are at high risk for depressive symptoms due to “a multitude of responsibilities, environmental and social influences, and stressors” (p. 213). In my study, both female farmers work off-farm. Mary does contract work that allows her to be available for both seeding and harvest. Frances works full-time off the farm at a

local industry. Both Neil and Harry's spouses have extra income from part-time work. Since 1990, farm men and women have increased their off-farm employment (Census of Agriculture, 2001). Working both off the farm and on the farm puts extra pressure on the family, especially on the women (Berkowitz & Perkins, 1984; Carruth & Logan, 2002; McCubbin & Figley, 1983).

Mary lamented "you hate to come off sounding unhappy, frustrated, bitchy, whiny, poverty-stricken" and "there's got to be something a little easier than this".

Frances told me:

With everything that goes on, it gets so busy, and you just get so tired, not that the men do as well, get busy and tired, but I feel farm women when they're very active in the farm, it's like overload, and it's just sometimes too much.

Farming men reported a higher frequency of financial and job-related stress than do non-farming men. Women and younger farm men indicated higher stress levels than older men farmers. Increased stress levels on a farmer spill over into family and friend relationships. The impact of farm stress is serious (Carruth & Logan, 2002; Davis-Brown & Salamon, 1987; Deary et al, 1997; Gordon, 1987; Jurich & Russell, 1987; Thompson & McCubbin, 1987). When the whole family is involved in the business, as was described by the farmers in my study, stress impacts the way the family functions (McCubbin et al., 2001).

Harry also described pros and cons of working with family members, as well as forming alliances or partnerships with neighbours or friends to buy and use machinery and equipment. "Our kids are getting old enough where they are a big help" and "that helps a lot to deal with some of the pressure times of year". Carruth and Logan suggest that "the ever-present threat of harm to self and family members is one of the burdens

farm women face while balancing multiple family roles and responsibilities” (2002, p. 226). Along with this burden is a feeling of responsibility for the welfare of the family. Frances described encouraging her sons to farm, whereas Mary discussed how at one time they wanted their son to farm, and “now we actually think it would be child cruelty”. Both Neil and Harry reported hoping that they will have offspring who will farm. Intergenerational relationships add both benefits and stressors to the farm family.

Both Frances and Mary described benefits of neighbourly support in crucial times, such as seeding, harvest, or misfortune. Neil showed appreciation for working with his brother “when you’re working on stuff and you need a man and a half, you’ve got two men” and “you talk over this...and that”. “The downside is you’ve lost some freedom”. About working with neighbours, Harry said “some jobs it’s just easier if there’s two people involved” and “the downside of that...one person gets kind of stuck doing all the maintenance and looking after it all the time”. Working with others saves on cost, but can add emotional pressures to the independent spirited persons.

### **Diversification, Adaptation, and Flexibility**

Farmers have been changing and diversifying throughout their farming history. Mary described farmers as resourceful, flexible, and adaptive. Farmers in my study spoke about the diversification into the specialty crops, which added increased input costs in chemicals, fertilizer, and the need for specialized equipment. This may result in higher production, but not necessarily higher profit. Neil alleged, “Farming in Saskatchewan today seems to have more responsibilities and more debt. We’re taking higher risks and the dollars and cents don’t seem to be there; this is a worrisome thing.” Harry stated “We’ve tried to diversify” and Mary said “The difference in our generation that has never

happened before is we've had to adapt and change...change our whole concept...and way of farming". What seems to be different about this period of time in agriculture is that the interviewed farmers saw themselves as having had more of these resilient qualities in the past than now. Although the farmers reported that they like to think of themselves as positive, optimistic, and enthusiastic, they apologized for talking or thinking negatively.

### **Losing Hope**

In my second interview with each interviewee, I asked questions about what drains their hope and what gives them hope? All four interviewed farmers indicated that they are losing hope and enthusiasm for continued life on the farm. What drains their hope is a lack of finances to pay their bills, provide for their family, and make a decent living. They talked about being tired and worn down by the uncertainty and worry about the future of their farm, fearing that the next generation will not be able to farm. Frances said "It's all a guessing game", and wants to "wind down." Mary is "distancing herself from the farm" by making portable sidewalks and ponds. Neil talked about "hope we can hang on" and "I was hoping for a spike in the economy", while Harry said "what takes away my hope is the frustration of trying to do a good job of something and yet seeing little return for it...It gets discouraging." The farmers described losing faith in what the future holds for their farms, and finding it hard to set goals with the amount of uncertainty and uncontrollable variables in their lives. I sensed frustration and anger. Anger is a known reaction to grief and loss (Neimeyer, 2000). Although they do not like that they are not optimistic about the future, the farmers described a growing cloud of disillusionment, a sense of impending doom and gloom, and a fear of losing equity in their land. They said they are losing hope that farming will improve in their lifetime.

What gives them hope on a small scale are timely rains, growing good crops, and getting good prices for their crops.

### **Impact of Career Transition on the Identity of a Farmer**

All of the participants in my study have considered transition out of agriculture, and discussed trying to survive or hang on for another ten years or so, hoping for a change in agriculture. They said they are not sure how this can happen. According to Heppner et al. (1991), farmers who choose to leave farming have varying degrees of success with the transition out of agriculture. An investigation of coping styles and gender differences with farmers in career transition indicates that significant differences exist in the way farm men and women react to the stressors of the farm crisis. While men talk about lacking confidence in problem-solving ability and emotion-focused coping, women describe a lack of vocational identity and a perception of barriers to career change (Heppner et al., 1991). Neil said that he had assumed by the time he was fifty years old, he would be starting to get his finances under control. He is disappointed that this is not the case. He said farmers feel compelled to leave the farm or take full-time jobs off the farm in order to continue farming. Farmers are grieving the loss of their future, of what they thought they would be doing in the future. It is hard to let go of that anticipated future before they are able to create the future they will have.

Farming is a way of life; transition out of agriculture is more than an occupational change (Conger & Elder, 1994; Swisher et al., 1998). Work and family are intertwined on the farm, with family working relationships the norm rather than the exception. The effects of these working relationships spill over into spousal and family relationships and normal functioning of the family. My research contributes to this finding; farmers have a

hard time separating themselves from the farm. Frances stated that they live on a fifth generation farm, and that she believed her husband would feel like a failure if he was the one to lose the farm. Neil lamented “This land your father might have farmed a hundred years ago; now you’re losing it? I mean, you’ve got to feel like you’re a failure”.

Gerrard (2000b) concurs. The farmers in her study said they would feel like failures if they could not hang on to the land that has been in their families for generations. They spoke about blaming themselves if they lost the land. Matsakis (1996) says that self-blame or seeing oneself as blameworthy or deficient in some areas can be painful, however fairly normal under the circumstances. Helplessness and fear are at the root of feeling like a victim.

Matsakis (1996) writes that some of this “victim thinking” or seeing oneself as having been helpless or ineffectual must have been present before the onslaught of the drought. “Although we live in a culture that values self-confident, socially outgoing people over those who are introspective and full of self-doubt and remorse, true mental health requires a balance between self-doubt and self-confidence” (p 80). She recommends that people recognize their strengths and survivor skills. According to Matsakis (1998), during traumatic time, people mistrust others as well as themselves. What is most painful is “looking back and realizing how you failed to live up to your own standards or ideals” (p. 73). The interviewed farmers in this study were concerned about mistakes they have made that may put their families in a lesser position financially. When they are making decisions, they cannot predict the outcome for that year. Uncontrollable variables, such as weather, insects, and volatile prices all impact the bottom line for a farmer. Yet when farms go bankrupt, farmers blame themselves,



believing that they have failed themselves, their families, and even their ancestors, as discussed previously in this paper. Banks and government also have responsibility to assume in farm bankruptcies (Harder, 2000).

Each of the farmers in this study asked the question, ‘Who is going to farm the land?’ It is an emotive question I have heard repeatedly--on the farms, in the towns, and in this province. Differing ideas emerged from the interviews---Hutterites, First Nations people, big corporations, tenants, or hired managers. Mary suggested that big corporations will not farm it, because in business you have to make a profit, and that is not happening on the farm today. Who will own the land?

Possession reinforces and justifies family strategies for maintaining continuity of the farm, and family strategies strengthen the ties between the land and the family. This creates major responsibilities in maintaining status and honor of the land (Silvasti, 2003).

The author linked this ideal of continuity with the internal dynamics of the family, the division of labour on the farm, and the farmers’ relationship with nature. She examined farmer narratives concerning their work and relationship with nature, and found that there was a contradiction between farmers’ interpretations of and scientific information about the environmental risks of farming. They still considered their work as a harmonious and respectful cooperation with nature. Farmers in my study said they were worried about big chemical companies taking over and not caring about how the land is farmed.

### **Benefits of Farming**

What gives these farmers hope is the reward in farming that is not financial. Each of the farmers discussed the past benefits of farming, which included growing up on a farm, farming in the past twenty-five years, and the farm being a good place to raise their

families. Frances said, “I’ve always tried to point out to them that living on the farm is a great thing and being raised on the farm is a good thing”. In spite of the negatives she described, Frances repeatedly said, “Life will go on and things will be O.K.”, and “For twenty-five years we’ve had a good life.”

The farmers outlined how farm tasks help children develop confidence, learn responsibility, and build a work ethic. Harry said, “We live in a very good place to raise a family....our kids have had a wealth of experiences....They’ve learned work skills and have a work ethic”. In reference to her sons, Frances said, “and they’re best friends, so that’s one nice thing about having been raised on a farm”. Mary described how her daughter “learned to be very gentle, kind, and nurturing” working with the animals. Neil described how as a child he grew up learning how to farm.

Although the farmers in this study emphasized how tough the times are now and spoke with apprehension and anxiety about the future, there was still an element of hope when they talked about the possibility of a family member farming the land in the future. Mary said, “Farming would be an excellent way of life if you didn’t have to worry about the weather”. What comes down from the sky directly impacts a farmer’s livelihood. How do farmers live with this unpredictability? “Hope helps us live with the unpredictability we must face from time to time in our lives” (Jevne & Miller, 1999, p. 10). Farmers need to believe in “next year” or they would not continue to farm. I wonder if one of the benefits of farming involves breeding optimism. Although Mary’s son farms land now, she sounded sceptical about his future as a farmer. Frances said they will try one more year, hoping that there is enough of a profit margin for both sons to continue farming.

Being a farmer gives one an opportunity to be one with nature. The prairie sunrises and sunsets are breath-taking. The sound of the raindrops on the roof can mean money in the bank. The taste of fresh chickpeas straight from the plant is phenomenal. From the smell of the freshly tilled soil in the spring to the ripening grain at harvest, the farmer enjoys these sacred moments. Working the land can be a peaceful, serene, and spiritual experience.

### **Religion, Faith, and Spirituality**

What impact does spirituality have on wellness, hope and optimism, and coping with adversity? Harry described, “What life is really about for me”...as “having had a good relationship with God, and felt I’d done a decent job of raising my family”. Neil also expressed a faith in God. Mary said, “Because of our lifestyle, we pray all year round. We pray for rain all year, and all winter we pray for snow”. Frances described a faith that “life will go on, and things are going to be fine”. Human beings are ready at birth to develop in such faith (Fowler, 1981). Pargament, Poloma, and Tarakeshwar suggest that religion and spirituality would work well together in the pursuit of common goals to enhance an individual’s ability to cope. They write that as we grow to understand, there may be a “closer integration of psychological and religious thought and practice in our efforts to facilitate adaptive coping processes...By pooling our resources, we may be able to unleash the power of the coping process and in turn, enhance the psychological, social, and spiritual well-being of people” (2001, p.279). Meyer and Lobao’s findings suggest that affiliation with a religious group enhances an individual’s mental health and well-being (2003). Whether it is the support of the people in the religious groups or the religious faith, the overall health benefits are evident.

Religion and spirituality are not the same according to Elkins (2001). The word spirituality comes from the Latin *spiritus*, which has to do with “breath”, or the animating principle. He describes religion as institutional and personal, and spiritual as universal and mystical. He writes that spirituality is a human phenomenon; it is an inborn, natural potential of the human being. Authentic spirituality is grounded in our humanity. It is in the depths of the soul, and cultivated by the experiences of the sacred. “The soul comes alive when it is nurtured by this sacred energy, and one’s existence becomes infused with passion, power, and depth” (p.208). Is farming a spiritual experience? Elkins writes that spiritual life brings the tenderness of the heart, and is expressed through loving actions toward others. As human beings, we each attempt to develop our potential to become the fullness of who we are. Our understandings of the world, others, and our self impact our experiences (Polkinghorne, 2001). I wonder how self-knowledge affects each farmer’s experience. In Harry’s case, knowing what was important to him helped him stay grounded, and keep things in perspective. Mary looked forward to the “bullet-hole” in the winters. Frances knew they would be O.K. no matter what happened. Knowing one’s self is as important for a farmer as it is for any individual.

### **The Heart of Farming Today**

This study was grounded in the winter of 2003 to 2004 in west-central Saskatchewan with four farmers during stressful times. They said that although they liked to think of themselves as optimistic, they were losing hope for the future of farming. Hope plays a crucial part in combating adversity. I tried to make sense of what is happening in farming today, why it is happening, and how to help the farming

population maintain hope in order to cope with the farm stress. What theory do I propose that explains the current experience of farmers? Jencius and West (2003) state that:

Theories are grounded in local conversations that reflect the contexts within which people live---a certain time, a particular region, or a particular grouping... The act of interpreting life as well as the interpretations of data from previous research forms the foundation for the questions that are subsequently studied (Jencius & West, 2003, p. 346).

The farmers' stories in this study have many implications for theory about farming today. The farmers I know are honest, reliable people who pay their bills. They are open, friendly, and accepting. On a back road in Saskatchewan, when you meet people, they wave. A farmer will stop to help someone on the side of the road or give you the shirt off his back. The camaraderie amongst farmers can be spotted at any meeting place across the province, whether it is at the back of a half ton truck in the field, at an auction sale, or at the rink. Farmers are interesting, inventive, and proud people. They are creative problem-solvers and like to be their own boss. They are risk-takers who live with contradictions. Farming has always been changing. The potential of losing the farm due to economic crisis is a stressor common to all farm families. In many ways that is no different from the past. Technology has always impacted farming. In days gone by, farmers who did not switch from horses to tractors were gone from the farming game. Deary et al. (1997) write that the major stressors for farmers are farming bureaucracy, finance, isolation, uncontrollable natural forces, personal hazards, and time pressure. This is not unlike the way farming has always been, and was also described in this study. For many years now, governments have promoted efficiency of production. Farmers are excellent producers. Production is at an all-time high. In order to produce at this level, the high cost of fertilizer, chemical, and other inputs has cause a dramatic rise

in the cost of production. To overcome this cost-price squeeze, farmers have been encouraged to diversify into other crops to increase revenue and make a living. As I see it, farmers are adaptable, flexible, and ingenious. They are industrious people with an excellent work ethic. When they cannot support their family with farming income, they work harder. At the present time, more than seventy-five per cent of the farm family income is derived from off-farm employment. While alleviating some financial stress, this can result in little or no individual or family time. Farm families are suffering. Farmers are leaving the land. Fewer and fewer farmers under thirty-five are farming today. The average age of farmers is increasing. As farmers retire or die, their farms are becoming part of a larger farm. Accompanying this exodus from farming is depopulation, loss of community, and loss of farming as we have known it. The reality is that the family farm, the culture, and the rural way of life are disappearing. It saddens farmers and it saddens me to think that this will be gone. Many farmers love what they are doing, and do not want to leave farming. They work closely with nature year after year. As long as the crops keep growing, some farmers want to keep farming, even when the profit is not there. They believe the economy is cyclical, and good times will come again. But eventually, bumper crops or not, if the farmers are not making money, they will have to leave the land. This is the fear at the heart of farming today. As their world is changing, farmers are grieving the loss of their assumptive world. Even when a farmer is doing well financially, fear for the loss of friends, neighbours, and community is apparent.

Farming is not just an occupation; it is a way of life that is fraught with contradictions, challenges, and rewards. Farm stress issues include financial concerns,

feeling a lack of support from non-farmers, and losing hope. On the one hand, there is financial stress that can be crippling; on the other hand there are supportive family, friend, and community relationships that sustain a farmer's hope. The opportunity to be self-reliant, independent, and autonomous is overpowered by the farmer's lack of control in farming. While farmers' hope is waning, it is the resiliency in their character and the hope that remains that keeps them going. Why do some farmers leave and some farmers stay? Each farmer's story is unique; each farmer is an individual; each situation is different. Not all farmers react the same way in a similar situation. These stories are not intended to be representative of the Saskatchewan farming population. Although the farmers in my study shared openly and revealed rich data about farmers' lives today, there are other stories in the farming community that indicate hardship, heartache, and even suicide. In speaking with other professionals about how this thesis may be useful to them, I uncovered stories about farmers who suffered from loss of equity, land, and family. Whereas financial losses are often discussed, personal losses, such as loss of neighbours, friends, and community, are not always talked about. Farmers can have feelings of abandonment, feelings of having given up, and feelings of being cut off from their friends. One professional described that farmers losing their land "leave in the dark of night" to avoid the shame of facing fellow farmers. The coping strategies that they use to deal with these feelings can impact marriage, family, and the farm. A farmer's work is never done. It is important to keep the balance in life in relation to the work and the stress of the farming business. Taking time away from the farm is essential to help keep this balance. When farmers know who they are, what they stand for and understand their values, goals and priorities, perhaps they will be more hopeful. When they know what

really matters in their lives, maybe they will be more able to handle the farm stress that comes their way. When they set goals and use a form of goal-directed management, they may be more hopeful for the future in farming. Having a positive attitude, learning family communication, and pulling together in relationships all help people to be more resilient. As a farmer and a counsellor, I believe it will be important for farmers to know and understand their values. They will need to recognize their positive strengths, including work ethic, problem-solving ingenuity, and transferable skills, that will be useful in another walk of life. Whether remaining on the farm, retiring, or in the transition out of agriculture to a new career, farmers may seek counselling in dealing with farm stress.

Cumulative stress over prolonged periods of time has profound effects on their health, which can result in mental, emotional, and physical illness. Farmers tend to talk to people they know rather than to seek counselling, so sometimes the signs of stress leak out in conversation while doing business. The farmers may have had no plan to divulge their private affairs, but the emotions erupt when least expected. I heard from professionals who felt untrained to deal with the psychological, emotional, and mental issues that were unexpectedly dropped in their laps. Agrologists, creditors, doctors, and lawyers are not trained in dealing with these issues. “I am not a counsellor” was a phrase I heard from several people who work with farmers. While these people say they do not know how to help farmers, farmers are angry with politicians who appear not to understand or care. Understanding the farming culture is a challenge for some who have accepted rural positions with no agricultural or rural background. A pastor wrote about the need for him to understand his congregation which included both farmers and the



bankers who were foreclosing on them (Harder, 2000). When a farmer loses his farm, it affects the farmer, the family, and the community. At this time, many farmers are struggling financially and there is a need for people who work with them to understand their situation. As both a farmer and a counsellor, I find the uncertainty in farming difficult to live with. I see a need within our communities, in urban populations, and in government for awareness, education, and understanding about the reality of farming today.

### **Implications for Counselling Practice**

In my experience, farmers are more likely to have access and seek financial counselling than psychological or emotional counselling. Farmers tend to go to other farmers for support and understanding, although they may not discuss the real issue that is bothering them. It is not easy to set up counselling for farmers in small communities, due to anonymity. Farmers are perceived as stoic, independent, and self-reliant individuals. To need mental health counselling may be portrayed as a sign of weakness. In a rural area, there is a stigma associated with counselling, and a fear that others in the community may be aware when one is going for counselling. A neighbour may recognize an individual's vehicle in front of the counselling office or may see an individual coming and going from a counsellor's office, and that could mean the whole town and country would be aware of a sign of trouble. What constitutes safety to farmers in a counselling situation? Anonymity and confidentiality are crucial. Many individuals living in rural areas lack access to appropriate and effective mental health care, and go without needed mental health services (McCabe & Macnee, 2002). Letvak writes that limited resources and traditional cultural belief systems in rural areas disadvantage the

people (2002). What farmers need is a “culturally sensitive rural counsellor” who understands immediacy of farm-related priorities salient in the lives of farmers (Constantine, 2001, p. 19). She writes that rural women may suffer from isolation, role overload, and a lack of recognition for their contribution. Constantine stresses flexibility in therapeutic approaches, including establishing collaborative relationships with other health professionals. Another possibility may be support groups for farm women where the women feel free to openly discuss issues in a safe and trusting environment.

A rural counsellor that was warm, friendly, and approachable would be welcome in a farming culture. He/she would need to be empathic, understanding, and sensitive to the needs of farmers. A sound knowledge of the farming culture would be preferable. Farmers can relate to someone who is open, honest, and down-to-earth. Integrity, trust, and discretion are important traits that would contribute to assurance of confidentiality.

An active listening approach (as discussed earlier in this thesis) is one of the most important techniques that would benefit the farming population. The farmers in this study appreciated being heard. The second counselling technique that would benefit farmers is the positive asset search, helping the farmer to uncover and focus on the positive attributes, qualities, and strategies that he or she has utilized successfully in the past. “When a person with self-worth can be encouraged to see his potential and positive attributes, he is able to find his own answers and grow personally” (Mackinaw & Adler, 1995). Using active listening with a narrative approach in the interviews with the farmers in this study resulted in rich data that demonstrated the choices farmers make in their lives to cope with adversity (Miller & Crabtree, 1999).

Farmers may benefit more from a social construction approach which allows solutions to rest in clients and their social networks. Gergen (1999) invites counsellors to encourage a dialogue of social construction. It involves collaborative-based counselling with the client being honoured as understanding his or her own experiences (p. 344). Narratives give voice to the farmer's story; farmers will feel listened to and heard. Using a narrative approach, the counsellor's questions empower the client to explore, understand, and appreciate his own experiences and resources. Socially constructed narratives help people make sense of their lives (Bruner, 1994, 1996; Jenius & West, 2003; Parry & Doan, 1994; Polkinghorne, 1988, 2001; White, 1995). Farmers live in a social context that impacts how they see themselves in their world.

Some farmers may benefit from cognitive behavioural approaches that rely on addressing a range of client behaviours and cognitions that are creating problems for the client (Snyder, 2001; Snyder, Ilardi, Cheaven, Michael, Yamhure, & Sympson, 2000; Snyder, Michael, & Cheavens, 1999). These theories are connected with hope, focus on the here and now, involve homework assignments, and psycho-education as part of a process that involve the client in his or her own assessment and treatment. This involves collaboration and partners towards wellness. The counsellor encourages self empowerment as an ally against an oppressive world. Hope theory is about helping clients build a vessel of hope (Snyder, 2000a).

Reality or choice therapy is about choices, and choices sustain hope. Peterson and Bossio (2001) write: "wellness involves a zest for ongoing life, a fulfilling career, and satisfactory relationships with family members and friends" (p. 139). Choice is about having hope, and hope is about having choices.

According to Snyder (2001), narrative psychology is gaining momentum. “At the core of this approach is that people give meaning to their experiences by using a storytelling structure” (p.48). Stories represent human constructions that reflect the social and personal perspectives of the communities and individuals who tell them. The stories two people tell about the same event may differ, yet each can yield important insights into the meanings that shape each person’s perspective and responses. Narratives impart a distinctively personal structure to events in ways that demonstrate the self definition or identity. An individual’s narrative construction can be “a crucial aspect of their therapy experience” (p. 49). Winslade and Monk (1999) suggest that narrative counselling has a powerful impact in counselling students.

Neimeyer and Levitt (2001) suggest that coping is a “storied construction, created and sustained within a distinctively human meaning-making process” (p.64). Farmers relate well to other farmers, and do well in group settings, thus group counselling would be an effective method of reaching larger numbers of farmers. Snyder (2001) writes about coping occurring as part of a group setting, thus “it makes sense to increase our coping intervention efforts with group approaches” (p. 295).

Due to the blurred role responsibilities of the women in agriculture, a feminist approach to counselling would be important. This approach would benefit males as well.

Developing a sound therapeutic alliance based on a collaborative partnership is an important predictor of positive counselling outcomes. . . Egalitarian counselling relationships communicate to women and girls that they are competent, knowledgeable, and have the necessary resources for taking an active role in their own healing” (Enns, 2004, p. 298).

Pargament, Poloma, and Tarakeshwar (2001) suggest that religion and spirituality would work well together in the pursuit of common goals to enhance an individual’s

ability to cope. They write that as we grow to understand, there may be a “closer integration of psychological and religious thought and practice in our efforts to facilitate adaptive coping processes...By pooling our resources, we may be able to unleash the power of the coping process and in turn, enhance the psychological, social, and spiritual well-being of people (p.279).

Elkins (2001) writes that, as a counsellor, one must be in contact with one’s own soul. “Learning to nurture our own souls and develop our spirituality is central to our work as therapists... therapy is an apprenticeship in which clients learn to care for their own spiritual lives” (p. 210). Elkins states that one of the most important ways one can help a client is to “help the client discover those experiences that truly meet the spiritual needs of his or her own unique soul” (p. 210). When clients truly nourish their souls on a regular basis, spiritual development occurs. He also cautions that while integrating spirituality into effective therapeutic work can be highly effective, but using spiritual interventions to the neglect of other approaches might prove to be ineffective and dangerous to a client’s welfare. Coming to graduate school and writing this thesis have been integrated into my spiritual journey, which I bring to my future counselling practice.

### **Hope-focused Counselling**

Counsellors at The Hope Foundation of Alberta, a centre for hope research are currently using hope-focused counselling (Edey, Jevne, & Westra, 1998). Counsellors who work with hope-focused counselling found that their ability to work with these clients was enhanced when they consciously drew attention to hope (Edey & Jevne, 2003). These authors write that both counsellors and clients benefit from having hope; it is core to one’s well-being. Hope helps us live with a difficult past and present and an

uncertain future. The first sign of hope is a client asking for help. Edey and Jevne compare hope to a motor engine:

It can be the spark that brings the client for help, the fuel that keeps the counsellor going, and the thrust that helps the client try. Hope can be the outcome of a successful effort. It can also be the seed that blossoms into interesting and inspiring counselling interventions” (p.45).

Hope-focused counselling can benefit the farm population. Therapists who evaluate their level of hope are evaluating their ability to be effective helpers; both client and therapist must possess hope in order for the therapeutic process to be successful (Edey & Jevne, 2003; Edey et al., 1998; Snyder, 1995; Snyder et al., 1999). Farran, Herth, and Popovich (1995) believe that hope can be strengthened, and hopelessness mitigated. Hopelessness breeds pessimism about possibilities and the future. Farmers need sensitive, caring individuals who are culture-sensitive and are willing to enter into interpersonal relationships that foster hope and prevent hopelessness.

Hope has to do with the human spirit (Cousins, 1989; Siegel, 1988; Hay, 1987). Barret (1995) writes that as a counsellor, he practices from two sources: a vast spiritual experience that he shares with all humans, and also theoretical and technical beliefs that may help him understand the person with whom he is working. He describes his job as “shining the light on particular places” for the person to focus on more clearly (1995, p. 109). Berliner (1995) refers to being a companion-guide accompanying clients into the “yet to be discovered hurting and healing places in themselves” (p.124). Berliner believes that “any therapist who calls a client to change through deeper self-knowledge is in the gray area of connectedness between psychology and spirituality” (1995, p. 114). Farmers deep inside know what they need—connection with themselves and with others.

According to Dufault and Martocchio (1985), “Awareness of hope as multidimensional can guide listening, observing, and interacting to detect the presence or absence of each dimension and to determine ways in which each dimension is present” (p. 389). In my research study, farmers benefited from the opportunity to express how and why hope is significant, and to share the wide range of emotions associated both with their confidence and uncertainty related to hope. The implications for further counselling are evident. Counsellors who convey an empathic understanding of “worries, fears and doubts; alleviating these feelings when possible; assisting persons in avoiding being immobilized by the feelings; and building upon” positive assets or individual and “family strengths of courage, endurance and patience” (p. 390) Counsellors can focus on creating “an environment that would provide opportunities for communication about desired goals, readjustment of plans, reminiscing, reviewing values, and for reflection on the meaning of suffering, life, dying, and death” (p. 390). This could include loss of farm, community, and a life that farmers thought they would have.

Hope can be borrowed from others. Edey and Jevne (2003) suggest that our challenge as counsellors is to “coax the hope out of hiding” by asking hope-focused questions such as “What threatens your hope?” or “On a scale of one to ten, how hopeful are you now compared to in the past?” and asking “What puts him or her at zero or at ten?” “What would be the smallest change that might increase his hope?” They suggest ways of making hope visible, such as talking about a person who comes to mind when you think about hope, or a picture that reminds one of hope that could be placed in a strategic spot (2003, p. 46-47). Edey and Jevne believe that as counsellors when we let hope “run in the background” (p. 50), we can positively impact our clients. “We need to

position ourselves to be as hopeful as we can be” (p. 48). “Language, honed and carefully directed, is a powerful hope-giver” (p.49). “Attending to hope is a learning process that develops with practice and reflection” (p. 50); with practice and reflection, we can discern the difference between our hope and the hope of our clients. The key to this is in the words of Socrates, “Know thyself” as an individual and a counsellor.

### **Implications for Further Research**

My study was about a small sample of farmers experiencing farming today, with no intention to generalize. I recommend a further study that would research a larger number of farmers, asking specifically what feeds their hope and what drains their hope. We know that hope is universally accepted as very important in coping with adversity (Edey & Jevne, 2003; Snyder, 2001). Edey and Jevne write that “most of the scholarly work in the field of hope has focused on either developing a conceptual understanding of hope and/or translating such understandings into assessment measures of hope” (p. 50). What we do not understand is how persons maintain hope while confronting adversity.

We know that it is difficult to get farmers to go for counselling. What would farmers consider a safe environment in which to pursue counselling? How does this differ from other individuals? A study answering this question would be pertinent.

There is limited research with Saskatchewan farmers. The research study might focus on more interviews with each of a small number of participants to explore more deeply how hoping, coping, optimism, and resiliency play a part in the experiences of adversity. What inter-relationships are apparent? How does farm business differ from other small agricultural or non-agricultural businesses?



Snyder (2001) writes that in dealing with stress “one of the views in literature is that men supposedly are prone to use problem-focused strategies, whereas women use emotion-focused ones” (p. 6). I found this interesting in light of my study. Folk pedagogy in agriculture suggests that women are more objective marketers of the product for sale, and that men are too emotionally involved and tend to react from an emotional standpoint rather than rational. Further research might examine the gender differences in farmers using problem-focused or emotion-focused strategies.

One of the farmers in my study seemed to be less hopeful and optimistic about the future of farming in Saskatchewan. Do some farmers cope better because they are optimistic? If so, what are their coping strategies that help them adapt better than pessimists? In terms of optimism and pessimism, the picture is not complete. Some forms of acceptance seem to promote well-being and health, whereas resignation appears more detrimental. What is the nature of the difference between these forms of acceptance? More research linking optimism and pessimism to psychological well-being is needed (Scheier et al., 2001).

Further research is needed to determine coping strategies that are most effective and adaptive in promoting positive outcomes to stress (Zeidner & Saklofske, 1996). Snyder (1999a) also encourages theoreticians, researcher and practitioners to consider coping processes in their work. He suggests that there needs to be more research inventing theoretical frameworks for the area of coping:

Some people are better copers, she or he is probably optimistic, has a sense of mastery, is hopeful, can ward off negative events via the explanations made about those events, finds a silver lining in adversity, understands and effectively uses emotions...(p. 332)

Within the farming culture an intergenerational pressure for males to farm exists, as indicated by each of the farmers. Within each interview, the farmer discussed the possibility of the children farming. In all cases, the farmers had both male and female children. The discussion was about the possibility of the son(s) farming. I suggest from my experience in this interview as well as experiential experience that this is an obvious area to research. Each of the farmers spoke about the male partner feeling like he had failed if this was the choice. What impact to their mental health is there for individuals who choose not to farm, or choose to leave the farm for one reason or another?

Frances spoke about farmers not having a collective voice. Another area to research might be to inquire about the reasons behind this. Farmers need to be able to ask the right question, analyse, vision, and have practical options to have more participation in and control over various aspects of their business life outside their farms.

To learn how to take risks, to understand how power works differently as both a productive and dominating force, to be able to 'read' the world from a variety of perspectives, and to be willing to think beyond the common-sense assumptions that govern everyday existence (Giroux, 1997, p. 168)

With a collective voice, farmers could be more political, and may gain more control of the agricultural situation.

Valuable research about the impact of farm stress on the well-being of children and adolescents is suggested. Some farm families are better able to adapt positively to stressful situations. What conditions, what resources, and what coping behaviours influence and impact this? In talking about the study of resilience and its protective feature for prevention measure of high-risk activities in our children, Kumpfer (1999) writes:

The future success of our country depends on increasing our technology and

interest in building better children...increased research into this field of resilience and child development is critical to the prevention field and our nation's prosperity and well-being (p. 215).

Children are the seeds and the roots of our future in agriculture.

### Hope

*From the wings of a darkened night, small lights of hope are born.*

*They shine of faith and belief,*

*and in their hands are the hidden seeds of new beginnings.*

*Through the changes in our lives we discover the gift of understanding,*

*and we grow to become more than we ever knew we could be.*

*Look to the sky and always know that I believe in you.      Flavia Weedn*

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## Appendix A

### UNIVERSITY OF SASKATCHEWAN ADVISORY COMMITTEE ON ETHICS IN BEHAVIORAL SCIENCE RESEARCH Application for Approval of Research Protocol

#### 1. Name of Supervisor, Researcher, and Related Department

Dr. Mark Flynn, Supervisor,  
Department of Educational Psychology and Special Education,  
University of Saskatchewan.

1a. Barbara Joy MacDonald Sanderson, Master of Education Candidate,  
Department of Educational Psychology and Special Education,  
University of Saskatchewan.

1b. Anticipated Start Date of Research Study: August, 2003  
Expected Completion Date of Research Study: December, 2003

#### 2. Title of Study

Farming with Resiliency and Hope

#### 3. Abstract

The purpose of this study is to explore the experience of farmers who are farming today, and to help us understand how they deal with the transition and stress. Some farmers appear to be more resilient and hopeful than others. The researcher's goal is to interview farmers and compare the interview findings to determine what personal characteristics or factors contribute to their positive outlooks. The researcher will conduct a narrative inquiry as a means to give voice to farmers' stories, to expand our understanding of their experience, and to discover the basis for their stability through the peaks and challenges in farming. The study will be an analysis and interpretation of the techniques and coping strategies the interviewed individuals have incorporated into their farm business and family. The researcher will conduct four interviews of farmers or farm teams (family members) who are between forty-five and fifty-five years old. This age range has been chosen because forty-nine is the average age of Saskatchewan farmers. Farmers of this age have usually farmed for many years, have experienced both highs and lows in farming, and may be at a place in their lives where they tend to look philosophically at their past, present and future. The findings of this study will help to provide information, develop understanding, and raise questions that will contribute to knowledge and meaning about how a sample of farmers find resiliency and hope amidst the transition in agriculture.

#### **4. Funding**

There is no external funding; the funding for this study will be the responsibility of the research student, Barbara J. M. Sanderson.

#### **5. Participants**

The participants will be four active farmers/farm teams who are willing and able to articulate their experience farming. Purposeful sampling, a technique that seeks information-rich cases will be used in order to obtain a greater range of experiences and stories (Patton, 1990, p. 169). The following criteria will be used to select four participants:

- a) Farmers aged 45-55 years (approximately the average age of farmers in Saskatchewan).
- b) Individual farmers or farm teams willing to share their stories
- c) Participants whose stories are likely to be "information rich" with respect to the purposes of qualitative research study.

Recruitment of participants will be initially attempted through canvassing fellow farmers to see if they are aware of someone meeting the above criteria who may be interested in telling their story. There is no benefit or coercion involved in recruitment of participants, except for the benefits of telling their story and contributing to research. When a participant has been found, snowball interviewing may help to locate other potential participants. Once identified, the researcher will verify participant suitability, and confirm their interest and willingness to participate. A full discussion of the informed consent process and sign off permission will take place before the interview (See Appendices A and B). The researcher will arrange to conduct the interview either on their farm or a mutually agreed upon location. After the interview has been transcribed, participants will have the opportunity to read, review, and edit transcriptions to ensure authenticity of their words. To verify their approval of the transcript the participant will sign the Transcript Release Form (See Appendix B). (Cited in Merriam, S.B. and Associates (2002). *Qualitative Research in Practice*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.)

#### **6. Consent**

An Information and Consent Form will be signed by each participant, which addresses issues of confidentiality, the rights of participants to authenticate their data, storage of data, the right to withdraw without penalty at any time, and contact information (See Appendices). Signing Appendix A will signify the participants' understanding of their consent, obligations, and rights. Signing Appendix B will indicate that the participants consent to what is included in the final document.

## **7. Methods/Procedures**

The study will be a basic interpretive qualitative research inquiry informed by narrative. A central characteristic of qualitative research is that individuals construct reality in interaction with their social worlds. The researcher wants to understand how farmers make sense of their daily lives and experiences. The design of this research will be an individual interview with four farmers participating in unstructured one-hour interviews. In these unstructured interviews, the researcher will encourage each participant to openly tell his or her story, being careful to follow, not lead, by using an active listening approach. This methodology has been chosen to understand the participant's experience, and the meanings they derive from such an experience. Comments such as, "I hear you saying..." or "It seems to me you are saying..." provide opportunity for the participant to confirm, clarify, or give a further explanation. The researcher and participant will meet at a location of choice for the participant. The interview will be audio-taped. Each participant will be asked to describe what it's like to farm in these times. A list of possible guiding questions is available (Appendix E) to use, however, the participant's narration will lead the interview. The data will be collected through taped interviews and observations. The stories will be transcribed and given back to each participant for authenticity. If there are things the narrator would like to add, edit, or delete, revisions will be made collaboratively between participant and researcher until the participant feels that their intended meaning is communicated. When a final draft of the study is complete, each participant will receive a copy and have the opportunity to offer feedback. Any changes requested by the participant will be honoured. The analysis of the data involves identifying recurring patterns (presented as categories, factors, variables, and themes) that emerge from the data. The research will serve to develop a richer and thicker understanding of the lived experiences of farmers in Saskatchewan. This study will require informed consent and protection of individual privacy and confidentiality. (Merriam, S.B. and Associates (2002). *Qualitative Research in Practice*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

## **8. Storage of Data**

Following completion of the written study, all transcripts of interviews, written observations and audio-tapes will be safeguarded and securely stored for the required five years in a locked file in Dr. Mark Flynn's office in the Education Building according to University of Saskatchewan regulations, and then destroyed.



## **9. Dissemination of Results**

The data collected in this study will be presented in my Master's thesis and shared with the faculty of the Department of Educational Psychology and Special Education at the University of Saskatchewan. The results of this study may also be published as an article(s) or in other scholarly works, presented at a conference, or used by agricultural media and farming organizations. Safeguards of anonymity and confidentiality will be employed in all uses of the information (See Confidentiality below). Participants will have access to results (See Debriefing and Feedback below).

## **10. Risk or Deception**

Any risk associated with this study is minimal. Participation in the proposed study is strictly voluntary and the participants have the right to withdraw at any time. If the recounting of experiences brings difficulties or interpersonal conflict for participants, access to a counsellor will be discussed and, if necessary, provided. Pseudonyms, fictitious names of towns, and altering identifying details will help to secure and protect participant anonymity. In keeping with the style of narrative inquiry and representation, and due to the fact that information from four farmers/farm teams does not adequately generalize to the larger farming population, conglomerate results will not be reported. Interpretation of four personal stories will be told, and it is through the emerging common threads and themes that a major part of understanding and meaning of the study can be discovered.

## **11. Confidentiality**

Several precautions will be taken to ensure confidentiality and anonymity. As stated above, names and other identifying information will be changed in the transcribed material and the final report to protect the identities of the participants. Transcripts and written stories will be made available to the participants to check for accuracy and acceptability, prior to becoming part of the thesis. Furthermore, excerpts of interviews that will appear in the final written thesis will be used with the consent of the participant. All audio-tapes, interview transcripts, and written observations will be kept confidential and locked securely in the office of Dr. Mark Flynn for a minimum of five years, in accordance with University of Saskatchewan regulations, and then destroyed.

## **12. Data / Transcript Release**

Participants will be asked to review, alter, add to, or delete information in an effort to present the true meaning of the interview as they intended. Following

this, participants will be asked to sign a transcript release form (Appendix B), which states that they agree with the accuracy of the stories and perceptions extrapolated by the researcher. Only the parts of the transcriptions relevant to the study from each participant's interviews will be included in a permanent record of the study.

### **13. Debriefing and feedback**

Opportunity for debriefing and feedback will take place when the data/transcript release form is signed by the participants. Upon completion of the study, participants will be given a brief synopsis of the thesis findings, receive a copy of their own story, and be informed of the location of the thesis in the library.

### **14. Required Signatures**

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Barbara Joy MacDonald Sanderson – Master's Candidate, Department of Educational Psychology and Special Education

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Dr. Mark Flynn – Supervisor, Department of Educational Psychology and Special Education

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Dr. Vicki Schwean – Department Head, Department of Educational Psychology and Special Education

### **15. Contact Name and Information:**

Barbara Sanderson  
Box 2079, Rosetown, Saskatchewan S0L 2V0  
(306) 882-3317      [sandd@sasktel.net](mailto:sandd@sasktel.net)

Dr. Mark Flynn  
Department of Educational Psychology and Special Education  
University of Saskatchewan  
(306) 966-7710      [mpflynn@shaw.ca](mailto:mpflynn@shaw.ca)

Department of Educational Psychology and Special Education  
University of Saskatchewan,      (306) 966-5253

**UNIVERSITY OF SASKATCHEWAN  
BEHAVIOURAL RESEARCH ETHICS BOARD**

<http://www.usask.ca/research/ethics.shtml>

**NAME:** Mark Flynn (Barbara Sanderson)  
**BSC#:** 03-1124  
Educational Psychology and Special Education

**DATE:** August 18, 2003

The University of Saskatchewan Behavioural Research Ethics Board has reviewed the Application for Ethics Approval for your study "Farming with Resiliency and Hope" (03-1124).

1. Your study has been APPROVED subject to the following minor modifications:

- The signature of the Department head is missing. The statement that conglomerate results will not be used is unclear. Please clarify how the results will be reported.
- The consent form should also indicate that the tape recorder will be turned off at any point, that the information being discussed may be emotional and that counselling services will be available if required and change the phone number for ORS to 2084.

2. Please send one copy of your revisions to the Office of Research Services for our records. Please highlight or underline any changes made when resubmitting.

3. The term of this approval is for 5 years.

4. This letter serves as your certificate of approval, effective as of the time that the requested modifications are received by the Office of Research Services. If you require a letter of unconditional approval, please so indicate on your reply, and one will be issued to you.

5. Any significant changes to your proposed study should be reported to the Chair for Committee consideration in advance of its implementation.

6. This approval is valid for five years on the condition that a status report form is submitted annually to the Chair of the Committee. This certificate will automatically be invalidated if a status report form is not received within one month of the anniversary date. Please refer to the website for further instructions: <http://www.usask.ca/research/behavrsc.shtml>

I wish you a successful and informative study.

---

Dr. David Hay, Acting Chair  
University of Saskatchewan  
Behavioural Research Ethics Board

DH/bjk

**UNIVERSITY OF SASKATCHEWAN  
BEHAVIOURAL RESEARCH ETHICS BOARD**

<http://www.usask.ca/research/ethics.shtml>

**NAME:** Mark Flynn (Barbara Sanderson)  
**BSC#:** 03-1124  
Educational Psychology and Special Education

**DATE:** September 5, 2003

The University of Saskatchewan Behavioural Research Ethics Board has reviewed the Application for Ethics Approval for your study "Farming With Resiliency and Hope" (03-1124).

1. Your study has been APPROVED.
2. Any significant changes to your proposed method, or your consent and recruitment procedures should be reported to the Chair for Committee consideration in advance of its implementation.
3. The term of this approval is for 5 years.
4. This approval is valid for five years on the condition that a status report form is submitted annually to the Chair of the Committee. This certificate will automatically be invalidated if a status report form is not received within one month of the anniversary date. Please refer to the website for further instructions:  
<http://www.usask.ca/research/behavrsc.shtml>

I wish you a successful and informative study.

---

Dr. David Hay, Acting Chair  
University of Saskatchewan  
Behavioural Research Ethics Board

DH/ck

## Appendix B

### INFORMATION AND CONSENT FORM

Dear \_\_\_\_\_,

My name is Barbara Sanderson. I am presently doing a Masters Degree at the University of Saskatchewan, in the Department of Educational Psychology and Special Education. I am interested in learning about the experiences of farmers who are about the age of the average farmer, have farmed through the peaks and lows of farming, and are still hopeful about farming in these times. In exploring these stories, I hope to develop an understanding of four farmers or farm teams who are about the average age of farmers. While there are many statistics in agriculture, little research has been done to understand the stories and experiences forty-five to fifty-five year old farmers who are hopeful about farming in the future. This research will give a voice to your experience so that others will have a better understanding about what it is like to farm today. This research may also help to raise new questions for future studies in understanding transition in agriculture. Approval for this research has been obtained from the University of Saskatchewan Behavioural Research Ethics Board on August 18<sup>th</sup>, 2003 and September 5<sup>th</sup>, 2003. Participation in this study will involve one informal interview of about one to one and a half hours.

Please read the following paragraphs. After your questions are answered, and if you are willing to participate, sign on the lines below.

You understand that the researcher (Barbara Sanderson) will meet with you at a time and location that is convenient for you. Once your story has been written by the researcher, she will meet with you to allow you to review the transcripts and to ask you for any changes or additions to your story, so that you can be sure that it represents what you truly wanted to say. You are free to have all or parts of your story removed.

You understand that your story will be a part of the researcher's graduate thesis, and could be published as part of an article in the future. You understand that all information obtained will be kept confidential, that in the story your name will be changed to a name of your choice, and that any identifying information will be altered to protect you from being identified through your story. When your story is complete and you have approved, it, you will be able to keep a copy of your story for yourself. When the study is complete, you understand that Barbara Sanderson will meet with you or send you information briefly explaining the findings of this study.

You understand that our interviews will be audio-taped so that the researcher will be able to write out the interview. At any point that the information being discussed is emotional, the tape recorder will be turned off. In the event that there is any discomfort or distress as a result of the study, professional counselling services will be available to you if required.

All transcripts, notes, and audio tapes will be kept confidential and locked. Following completion of the study, these transcripts, notes and audio tapes will be locked in the office of Dr. Mark Flynn at the University of Saskatchewan for five years, at which time they will be destroyed.

You agree to participate in a study titled Farming with Resiliency and Hope. You understand that your participation is voluntary, and that you may withdraw from the study at any time. You understand that you will be reminded of your right to withdraw at each meeting.

If you have any questions, you can contact:

Barbara Sanderson at (306) 882-3317,  
Her supervisor Dr. Mark Flynn at (306) 665-1630,  
The Department of Educational Psychology and Special Education, University of  
Saskatchewan, at (306) 966-5253, or  
The Office of Research Services, University of Saskatchewan, at (306) 966-2084

You have read and understood this consent form (or have had it read to you) and have received a copy for your own use.

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Signature \_\_\_\_\_

Witness \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Signature \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix C

### PARTICIPANT DATA/TRANSCRIPT RELEASE FORM

**RESEARCH STUDY:**      **Farming with Resiliency and Hope**

**RESEARCHER:**      **Barbara Sanderson**

I, \_\_\_\_\_, have read the transcript/my story (or have had the transcript/my story read to me by Barbara Sanderson). Barbara Sanderson gave me the chance to change or add words so that the transcript/my story indicates what I really wanted to say. I know that Barbara Sanderson wants to use parts of my story to help other people understand the experience of farming today. I know that my identity will be protected by using a pseudonym and changing any details that will identify me. I have agreed to let Barbara Sanderson use my story, and am signing this paper to show that I have agreed.

\_\_\_\_\_

Participant's Signature

\_\_\_\_\_

Date

\_\_\_\_\_

Barbara Sanderson (Researcher) Signature

\_\_\_\_\_

Date

If you have any questions, you can contact:

Barbara Sanderson at (306) 882-3317,  
Her supervisor Dr. Mark Flynn at (306) 665-1630,  
The Department of Educational Psychology and Special Education,  
University of Saskatchewan, at (306) 966-5253, or  
The Office of Research Services, University of Saskatchewan, at (306) 966-8576.

## Appendix D

### PARTICIPANT SIGN OFF RELEASE FORM

**RESEARCH STUDY:**      **Farming in Saskatchewan Today**

**RESEARCHER:**      **Barbara Sanderson**

I, \_\_\_\_\_, have reviewed the story and final interpretations drawn by Barbara Sanderson, and I agree that they accurately reflect what I shared in the interviews. I hereby give my permission to include the above material for inclusion in Barbara Sanderson's (researcher) final written thesis, and/or to be used in the manner as described in the information and consent form. I am satisfied with the efforts that have been taken to ensure that any identifying information on these materials has been altered or eliminated. I have a copy of the Sign-off Release Form for my own records.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Participant's Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Barbara Sanderson (Researcher) Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

If you have any questions, you can contact:

Barbara Sanderson at (306) 882-3317,  
Her supervisor Dr. Mark Flynn at (306) 665-1630,  
The Department of Educational Psychology and Special Education,  
University of Saskatchewan, at (306) 966-5253, or  
The Office of Research Services, University of Saskatchewan, at (306) 966-8576.



## **Appendix E**

### **GUIDING QUESTIONS**

*(These questions are intended as open-ended questions that may possibly be used to guide the interview since the researcher intends to use an active listening approach, listening to and following the participants' stories, to understand how farmers make sense of their daily lives and experiences.)*

1. Describe your experiences farming in Saskatchewan today?
2. Tell me how your experiences have changed over time.
3. Describe inner resources you have or relationships with people that you can talk with about your farming experiences.
4. What else would you like to share that you think may be important to this study?