

The Roots of Grass-Based Farming

One aggressive family farm in the plains grew rapidly by investing in irrigation in the 1960s and 1970s. It grew so fast that it soon had over eight thousand irrigated acres, a cattle-feeding operation, and a farm-supply business. To acquire more working capital, the family farmer incorporated and merged his operation with an alfalfa processor whose stock was sold over one of the national stock exchanges. In a few years, the family farmer had lost so much money in the cattle feeding and futures market transactions that he had to accept a minority position in the company. Subsequently, the company was acquired by a conglomerate that held it a short time and then sold it to Texas oil interests. At the beginning of this high-speed transformation, no one would have quarreled with the claim that the farm was a family farm. At the conclusion, no one would have suggested it was anything but an industrial agribusiness. At many points along the path, however, you could have ignited a spirited debate by suggesting it was either.

Excerpted from Marty Strange, *Family Farming*

The commercial family farm is disappearing from the United States. Our farming system is being split into two camps: megafarms, which are corporate in nature if not in deed, and small-scale farms, often thought of as hobby farms. The middle is being squeezed out.

These changes had their beginnings around the time of World War II. The changes brought on by the war are well illustrated by the story of my husband Ken's grandfather, Clarence Woodard. During the Great Depression, Clarence ran a small farm on the outskirts of LaJunta, Colorado. He managed to support his family and a hired man with the milk from a small herd of dairy cows.

During Clarence's era, farmers had a more direct link with the consumer. In fact, 40 percent of the consumer's food dollar went directly to the farmer (Figure 1.1). In Clarence's case, the percentage was even higher; twice each day he hand-milked his fifteen to twenty cows, cooled and bottled the milk, and delivered it door to door in LaJunta. Clarence's customers were neighbors, friends, and relatives, and if things were going well, he'd take a few minutes to visit along his route.

From the beginning of the century until 1940, farm numbers hovered right around 6.4 million; these numbers began a quick descent, however, with the coming of the war. This phenomenon was driven by many factors, but in Clarence's case, it was the abundance of good-paying construction jobs on military installations around Pueblo and Colorado Springs that led him to quit farming.

As more and more farmers left for jobs in town or were sent to war, those who remained had to produce more. The land in production stayed fairly constant, around a billion acres, but fewer farmers were working that land. Farming more land left less time for direct-marketing of crops, so the remaining farmers began counting on bulk sales of raw commodities.

After the war, industry, which had geared up for large-scale production of weapons, military transport, and other war-related goods, suddenly turned to agriculture as an open market. Chemical inputs to feed plants and fight the farmer's enemies {m} weeds and insects {m} became readily available. Initially, they produced miracles. Tractor and implement production cranked into full swing. The message to American producers was clear: Grow all you can grow, America will feed a hungry world, and you, her farmers, will reap the benefit. Some, of course, did benefit. But many were left by the wayside. Farm numbers continued to decline, as they still do today. And the farmers who are left, despite getting bigger, are continuing to struggle for their existence.

As farm sizes increased, farmers began specializing. The idea of egg money or a few pigs to pay the mortgage disappeared. Monocropping and farming fenceline to fenceline were substituted for diversity. Animal agriculture, like crop farming, moved into an industrial model, with living creatures being treated as little more than production units.

These changes have resulted not only in reduced farm numbers but also in the loss of soil productivity, reductions in wildlife, and increases in water and air pollution. They have also caused a fundamental breakdown in many rural communities: Schools consolidate, hospitals close, and small businesses disappear. That's the bad news.

The good news is that a new class of small-scale farmers are showing that things don't have to continue in this vein. They are reintroducing diversity to their operations. They are raising their animals in a more natural system that allows each critter to express its unique personality and character while eliminating or minimizing the use of synthetic hormones, antibiotics, and other technological quick fixes. They're learning that different methods of operating can reduce their costs while improving the environment. And they are learning to recapture some of the lost share of the consumer's dollar.

Though some of these small-scale farmers come from the traditional family-farm sector, many are new to agriculture. They bring with them a willingness to try new things and a commitment to farm in harmony with nature.

Small scale is hard to define. The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) and the Census Bureau of the Department of Commerce define it as an operation with more than \$1,000 of gross receipts per year from farming and farm-related industries; they define *large scale* as any farm with more than \$100,000 of gross receipts. Then there are those who would define small scale based on some number of acres {m} 100, 500, or 5,000 (41, 203, 2,025 ha, respectively). I don't know where the magic cutoff should be placed. Ten thousand acres of prime corn ground in Iowa probably is large, but 10,000 acres (4,050 ha) of rangeland in the West isn't necessarily big.

Of the farmers and ranchers I highlight throughout this book, several would meet the USDA's \$100,000 definition. Several control land in excess of 5,000 acres (2,024 ha). At the other end of the spectrum are the folks who use less than 30 acres (12.2 ha), or those whose farming operations gross far less than \$10,000 per year. (And sometimes you wouldn't be able to guess which was which.)

I take a slightly different view: *Small scale* may be any operation, whether 1 acre (0.4 ha) on the edge of town that only supplies the family with a regular portion of its own food, or thousands of acres in a rural area that is owned and operated as a commercial operation that

provides a family's main livelihood. In my mind, the key criteria that separate the small-scale farm from the large one are based on the labor used in the operation, and on attitude. Small-scale farms and ranches are those where the family is involved equally in management and operation. Although they may have some hired help (or interns), they don't sit in an air-conditioned office in clean chinos and a sports shirt directing the efforts of dispensable employees. If they do have employees, those employees are part of their team, included in planning and decision making, and the family's labor is applied to day-to-day operations.

Success is also hard to define. The simplistic view of success currently permeating American thought is based almost exclusively on money, or perhaps more specifically on consumptive power. In my eyes, to be deemed successful, an agricultural endeavor must be not only financially profitable but also ecologically and socially profitable. Making money while destroying the land (which is the basis of all wealth) isn't successful, and making money while destroying the local community isn't successful either.

The farmers I have highlighted here have certain things in common. Their philosophies of profit are a little different from those of the people who think profit is simply a number reported on the bottom line of an accounting form. Although they are all profit motivated, they aim for a profit that is both financial and spiritual. The profit equation for these folks balances money with quality of life, with humane treatment of their animals, with support for their communities, and with fostering a healthy environment.

There are lots of reasons for small-scale farmers to include livestock in their operations:

- ❖ You can become an active participant in the food chain, converting solar energy to grass, and grass to high-quality protein.
- ❖ The meat that comes from your own animals is usually far superior to anything you can buy at the grocery store, and at less cost. And you know how your animals were raised (no growth hormones or routine antibiotics, for instance).
- ❖ Livestock provides an opportunity for your family to learn about life, both its joys and its heartaches. Raising animals teaches children to be responsible for other creatures.
- ❖ Livestock can help you make profits from your land. When used for livestock, marginal land can provide a profit that it's less likely to provide with crops.
- ❖ Livestock can provide valuable nutrients for your soil. Manure is a fine fertilizer, and livestock not only provides it but can also incorporate it.

When properly managed (and this is the key), livestock is beneficial to the environment. Converting croplands, particularly highly erodible croplands, to permanent pastures improves water infiltration into the soil and water uptake by plants, thereby reducing runoff and erosion. Wetlands that are grazed via managed grazing show improvements in bank structure, increased variety of plants and animals, and more consistent water flows.

Having livestock around is fun! Watching a hen scratch for bugs, seeing a group of calves running across a field with their tails held high, or being nuzzled by a new lamb provides great entertainment and good feelings that you just don't get watching a plant grow. Let's face it, the refrain from "Old McDonald's Farm" doesn't run, "With a corn, corn here and a corn, corn there."

Still, despite all the good things to be said about livestock for the small-scale farmer, there are some drawbacks. Livestock ties you down; your animals' lives depend on you, so you can't just take off for two weeks and forget about them. There is some heartbreak when raising livestock; critters get sick and sometimes they die. But most of the time, the benefits far outweigh the drawbacks.

The main qualification for being a successful small-scale livestock farmer is having a deep love and appreciation of animals. If you don't really like animals, look at other aspects of small-scale farming, like market gardening. Do not go into livestock raising just because you think it will make your operation profitable: If you don't honestly care for your animals, almost to the point of obsessiveness, they won't make your operation profitable. But if you think you have the heart for it, read on!

Farmer Profile Todd Lein and Annie Klawiter

Neither Todd nor Annie grew up on farms. Todd was raised up in a small town in rural Minnesota, but he did have some experience with livestock: His dad raised occasional feeder pigs or calves in the backyard. The experience was a good one, and left Todd with a desire to work with livestock. Annie grew up in Sioux Falls, a small midwestern city.

In 1994, Todd and Annie began farming on 37 acres of land they purchased, and 30 more they rented, near Northfield, Minnesota. Over the ensuing years, their operation has solidified into a profitable small-scale farm.

"Starting out was scary, but we started small and grew the operation as our experience grew," Todd explained. "We avoid debt, and though we have some outside income, we expect the farm to pay its own way!"

Todd and Annie's operation is centered on a pastured poultry, but they also background replacement dairy heifers for a local dairy farmer, sell hay, and work in a cooperative agreement with three market gardeners, who operate a Consumer Supported Agriculture (CSA) subscription garden on their farm. In each case, they have looked for unique approaches that minimize their expenses and the need for high dollar capital, while returning some profit.

"Backgrounding" of livestock refers to the practice of taking care of someone else's animals for a specific period of time. The practice is most often associated with the dairy industry, as many dairy farmers are happy to pay someone to take care of their young heifers for them. For Todd and Annie, the backgrounding operation works well, because they don't have to purchase the heifers. The dairy farmer they work with brings the heifers over in spring and picks them up in late summer or fall, depending on how long the grass lasts. He pays Todd and Annie rent, based on how many head they feed per month. Todd and Annie feed the heifers on rotated pastures and keep water and trace minerals available.

Excess hay is sold to another area farmer, who pays for the hay in the field. "The neighbor purchases the hay, but he has to cut it, bale it, and get it out of the field. We could possibly make a little more off the crop if we sold bales, but when you figure the expenses of owning and operating the equipment, and the labor involved in putting up hay, it wouldn't be worth it for us." By selling the hay as grass in the field, they don't have to worry about the weather; if the hay gets rained on, it's the neighbor's problem.

The concept of a CSA garden was interesting to Todd and Annie because they saw it as a way to bring local customers to their farm, but they were more interested in animal agriculture than gardening. By teaming up with three avid gardeners who didn't have enough land of their own to do market gardening, Todd and Annie were able to meet their own goals while helping the other three growers meet theirs. "The CSA is kind of a joint venture. The gardeners pay us rent, and it ultimately provides us with a customer base for our poultry."

Fifty area families purchase membership in the CSA at the beginning of each year. Their membership entitles them to shares of all the produce from the gardens, and they come out regularly to pick up their shares. The CSA also hosts some social events at the farm each year. "The best thing about 'hosting' the CSA is that it has created a marketing program that brings people out to our farm. When it's time to sell our chickens, we have a built-in customer base."

Todd works as an organizer for a nonprofit organization and Annie teaches at a charter school, but the farm provides succor and sustenance to both their bodies and their spirits. "The benefits of running our farm come from the things we can't go to town and buy. It fulfills our need to not only live in the country but also work the land, and grow in our understanding of what it means to be connected to a piece of land."