2022

"Someone Was Bound to Crack": Responses to the 1980s Farm Crisis

Dean Schmit
University of Minnesota - Morris, schm5164@umn.edu

“Someone Was Bound to Crack”: Responses to the 1980s Farm Crisis

Dean Schmit

HIST 4501: Senior Research Seminar

Professor Gross

May 4, 2022

Introduction

In the eighteenth century, farmers were viewed as the ideal Americans.[1] Thomas Jefferson was particularly influential in spreading the ideal of the yeoman farmer. He argued that farmers "who labor in the earth are the chosen people of God" and had a "substantial and genuine virtue."[2] Jefferson argued that farmers were the model American citizen, "the purest representative of the finest people on earth…the health of the republic depended" on them; this idea was popular because, as Richard Hofstadter argues, the population "consisted predominantly of literate and politically enfranchised farmers."[3] Their jobs were seen as truly necessary because they produced food, which separated them from other workers; this was an idea that became the center of cultural conflict in the 1980s. Those who believed in the yeoman ideal also argued that farmers "had simple tastes, abhorred artificiality, luxury, and ostentation, and were honest and straightforward."[4] By the rise of the Populist Party in the 1890s, farmers were still seen as defined by their independence and their heightened morality, although these traits were seen in a less flattering light and interpreted as evidence of their backwardness. The stereotypes about farmers remained relatively stable over time, but whether or not they were perceived as positive or negative depended on the circumstances of the time period.

These stereotypes would continue to define the identities of farmers in ways that would be harnessed to gain public support during the 1980s farm crisis. Men often had deep pride in their ties to the land and their professed individualism, which was part of the reason the crisis had such a profound psychological effect. Women were able to recognize the role of the family

---

[1] See David Danbom's *Born in the Country: History of Rural America* and Richard Hofstader's *The Age of Reform: From Bryan to FDR* for an examination of the symbolic role of farmers in America.
[2] Danbom, *Born in the Country,* 67.
[3] Dabom, *Born in the Country,* 66; Hofstader, *Age of Reform,* 29.
[4] Danbom, *Born in the Country,* 67.

and community in a farm's success; this was reflected in their activism. Farmers relied heavily on the idea that their work was different from other types of work; it was a lifestyle, not a job. These arguments were bolstered in films like *Country,* which contained themes of "endangered rural life marked by family, tradition, and agriculture that was quickly vanishing" and which Ronald Reagan described as "a blatant propaganda message against our agri programs."[5] The destabilization of the 1980s was the continuation of a trend decades in the making.

The 1920s saw the beginning of a turn towards mechanization in farming that would be re-emphasized after World War II. David Danbom describes this as a "productivity revolution" that caused the numbers of farmers to shrink as the need for labor continued to decrease over the following decades.[6] The populations of rural towns also shrunk, which was a consistent worry during the farm crisis, when article after article described the slow deaths of small towns. The farm crisis worsened many of the human costs of the productivity revolution, but it did not cause them. At the time, it was widely believed by farmers themselves, as well as academics, that the farm crisis was a contained event, only weakly impacted by historical trends.

The effects of the productivity revolution on farming can be seen in the agricultural census. There were 188,952 farms in Minnesota in 1945, 131,163 in 1964, and 98,537 a decade later.[7] Between 1982 and 1992, the number of farms in Minnesota dropped from 94,382 to 75,079.[8] As of 2017, there were 68,822.[9] Farming was significantly changed by the crisis; although there are still far more family farms than corporate ones, the numbers are heading in

---

[5] Rebecca Stoil, "Desperate Farm Wives: Gender, Activism, and Traditionalism in the Farm Crisis," *Middle West Review* 2, no. 1 (2015), 40, 38.
[6] Danbom, *Born in the Country,* 235.
[7] United States Department of Agriculture, "Minnesota," in *1969 Census of Agriculture* (Washington, D.C., 1972), 2, agcensus.library.cornell.edu/census_parts/1969-minnesota/.
[8] USDA, "Minnesota," 10.
[9] United States Department of Agriculture, "Minnesota: Historical Highlights," in *2017 Census Volume 1, Chapter 1: State Level Data* (Washington, D.C., 2019), 7.

opposite directions. Farms became larger under fewer farmers. Small towns also suffered as they could not retain younger generations.

The crisis itself has no official start and end date; secondary sources choose their own, but most agree that it began sometime in the late 1970s and ended sometime in the early-to-mid 1990s. In the 1970s, farmers were told by Earl Butz, Richard Nixon's secretary of agriculture, to "plant 'fencerow to fencerow' and…'get bigger, get better or get out."[10] Between 1974 and 1978, there was an increase of over a hundred farms, which reflected the good times of the decade; it seemed as if all the "decades of hard work and frugal living were at last going to be rewarded."[11] This resulted in many lenders pushing larger loans on farmers.[12] One activist reflected that

> loans officers often encouraged them to expand, encouraged them to make huge investments…Loan officers apparently were oblivious to the fact that the crops weren't bringing in enough income, or to the fact that the debt income was mounting, or that high interest rates would bring down the whole house of cards. Once everything collapsed the lenders wanted to crawl out of the picture and blame it all on the farmers.[13]

This perspective was expressed by many farmers, who were tired of being the only ones blamed, although most agreed that both lenders and farmers were responsible. Large loans and unbridled encouragement of expansion were the fuel for the crisis. The Carter administration's grain embargo of the Soviet Union is generally regarded as striking the match, as "farmers were suddenly carrying more debt than they were worth and had no way to make it up" which caused

---

[10] Dudley, *Debt and Dispossession*, 23.
[11] United States Department of Agriculture, "Minnesota State and County Data," in *1997 Census of Agriculture* (Washington, D.C., 1999), 10, agcensus.library.cornell.edu/census_parts/1997-minnesota/; Kathryn Marie Dudley, *Debt and Dispossession: Farm Loss in America's Heartland* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 21-22. At no other time was there an increase of farms from a preceding census.
[12] See Gerald Hagaman's interview by Margaret Robertson for the Minnesota Farm Advocate Oral History Project on November 22, 1989.
[13] Pat Franey, "Henningson Speaks Out On Farm Crisis," *Morris Weekly*, February 27, 1985, 5.

"massive waves" of foreclosures.[14] Although Carter was the primary president blamed by farmers for their situation, the crisis worsened under the Reagan administration. Reagan was "generally hostile," saying that he would "rather export the farmers and keep the crops" and viewed support programs as unnecessary spending.[15] This resulted in a veto of the 1985 Farm Bill and closing "the lender of last resort," the Farmers Home Administration.[16]

One effect of the productivity revolution was a shift in how people perceived farming. Traditionally, farmers saw it as their lifestyle — both an inheritance and something that they were called to do, much like a minister. By the 1980s, people had begun to see it as a job like any other. Farmers typically held a mix of both views, such as the farm advocate who said that he would "like to think of [farming] as a way of life, but you have to face reality that it's a real business," but it was still more common for it to be seen as a lifestyle.[17] This framework impacted views of foreclosure, since losing an ancestral home is different from losing a business. Although farming had always been competitive, cannibalization — the swallowing up of smaller farms — increased during the farm crisis and caused much bitterness within rural communities.[18]

As the cultural position of farming shifted during the crisis, the clash between job and lifestyle was highly visible. One local example occurred after an attempted foreclosure on the Langman farm near the University of Minnesota Morris campus, which will be discussed later.

---

[14] Michael Stewart Foley, "'Everyone Was Pounding On Us': Front Porch Politics and the American Farm Crisis of the 1970s and 1980s," *Journal of Historical Sociology* 28, no. 1 (2015): 110.

[15] Foley, "Everyone Was Pounding On Us," 115; Donald Drescher, interview by Margaret Robertson, *Minnesota Farm Advocate Oral History Project,* MNHS, April 18, 1989, 9. For an exploration of how Reagan's policies affected recent Hmong immigrants, see Cecilia Tsu's 2017 article "'If You Want to Plow Your Field, Don't Kill Your Buffalo to Eat': Hmong Farm Cooperatives and Refugee Resettlement in 1980s Minnesota."

[16] Daniel Levitas, *The Terrorist Next Door: The Militia Movement and the Radical Right* (New York: Thomas Dunne Books, 2002), 281.

[17] Drescher, interview, 11.

[18] Dudley, *Debt and Dispossession,* 16.

UMM student Lori Halverson first recounted the events of the protest in the campus newspaper with little personal perspective, focusing on Jesse Jackson's speech.[19] However, the editor-in-chief, Kathy Kuntz, fired back in the next issue, arguing that although Groundswell and Jesse Jackson felt the farm crisis "was a good vs. evil issue," farmers were at least partially to blame for their own misfortune.[20] Speaking generally about farmers, not the Langmans specifically, Kuntz argued that "like so many other Americans these farmers prefer free government money to the old fashioned kind you have to sweat for," and accused them of being poor businessmen. She was firmly in the camp that farming was another type of job.

Farmers had historically been seen as the most independent group of workers, but were now being scorned as overly dependent on government support. Many farmers tried to distance themselves by deriding those farmers as failures who should quit while they still had their dignity. They had also been seen as beacons of civic virtue, but though they tried to harness that belief in their style of protest, the broader culture did not always respond. This shows the flexibility of stereotypes around farmers, since both farmers and non-farmers could use historical and inverted versions to attack groups they did not like. Halverson had assumed the lifestyle framework was the default perspective, since that had historically been true. Although she did not respond to Kuntz, it seems unlikely that she expected the response her article received. These women were not alone in their beliefs about the role of farming; their writing lacks the polish of professional writers and therefore clearly reveals the bones of the argument beneath. This division would continue to grow in rural communities during the 1980s and beyond.

Undergirding most of these arguments were beliefs about welfare, which took center stage in national politics during the Reagan administration. Rarely would the "welfare queen" be

---

[19] Lori Halverson, "Save Rural America," *Morris Weekly,* April 10, 1985, 1.
[20] Kathy Kuntz, "The Farm Crisis — A Complex Issue," *Morris Weekly,* April 17, 1985, 2.

directly mentioned, but the idea that people receiving assistance from welfare programs were different from people who were not was an underlying assumption, as Kuntz's argument reveals.[21] One farmer said that he thought activists who participated in tractorcades were the same as "the guy that goes up to the welfare office to collect food stamps in his new Cadillac."[22] The interviewer later noted that "even farmers who enroll in commodity programs feel compelled to express disdain for those who cannot farm without more government 'handouts.'"[23] Welfare was seen as shameful, which meant that many people who needed assistance, such as food stamps, would not apply for the programs. Parents were an exception; one farmer reflected that "if you want to feed your kids you take food stamps."[24] Farmer Juanita Buschkoetter said the same thing: she applied for food stamps against her husband's wishes because she was deeply concerned about her ability to feed her children.[25] Welfare was rarely explicitly mentioned, but beliefs about it formed the base on which conversations about the farm crisis were built.

Sociologist Kathryn Marie Dudley argues that "the lessons of hard times are not restricted to those who live through them."[26] Families and whole communities, not just individuals, were scarred by the farm crisis. Those who were then children are now adults with children of their own; like those who lived through the Great Depression, they are passing on the lessons they learned. Many people did feel they had lost their way of life, which affected their political outlooks. All farming organizations supported Reagan in the 1980 election because of

---

[21] For a discussion of these building blocks of the welfare queen, see Carly Hayden Foster's 2008 article "The Welfare Queen: Race, Gender, Class, and Public Opinion."
[22] Dudley, *Debt and Dispossession,* 96.
[23] Dudley, *Debt and Dispossession,* 100.
[24] Paul Levy, "Dreams Broken, Crushed in Lincoln County," *Minneapolis Star and Tribune,* May 4, 1986, 5.
[25] *The Farmer's Wife,* PBS, aired 1998, YouTube video, 1:38:41, www.youtube.com/watch?v=0HaYTtE1B_o.
[26] Dudley, *Debt and Dispossession,* 10.

Carter's grain embargo; though Reagan ended up worsening the crisis, resentment towards Carter remained much stronger. Extremism worsened during the crisis and laid the groundwork for the militia movement. Lessons learned at the time still guide rural people's thinking today.

This paper will discuss three broad categories of responses to the farm crisis. Each comes from farmers' impulses to maintain control over their livelihoods, though they were not equally common. First is suicide; this was a common response, particularly from men. It was often caused by a feeling of crushing responsibility for their farm and to their family. Second is religion, which informed farmers' relationship to their land and community. Christianity was tightly woven into daily life and affected several types of responses, including withdrawal from churches and an increase in activism. Activism was the third response, uncommon but highly publicized. There were multiple strains, with differing attitudes on the usefulness of working within or fighting against the system. Most focused on practical solutions, although extremist groups were less grounded in reality, negatively affecting their success.

Gendered Suicide

One of the primary ways farmers and their families responded to the farm crisis was through suicidal ideation. The highest rate of farm losses in a single state was in Minnesota in 1984 and 1985, after the "worst drought in 50 years" in 1983.[27] Rates of interpersonal violence went up during the crisis, but the rise in suicides gained the most attention, particularly two that followed murder sprees.[28] Suicide was both gendered and stigmatized. It did not affect men, women, and children equally, but all groups were touched by the stress of the crisis and the fear of losing their family members.

---

[27] Patricia Riney-Kehrberg, "Children of the Crisis: Farm Youth in Troubled Times," *Middle West Review* 2, no. 1 (2015), 6; Paul Klauda, "Three Farm Families / Agriculture Presented Challenge in '83," *Minneapolis Star and Tribune*, January 23, 1984, 3B.
[28] Michael Stewart Foley, *Front Porch Politics* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2013), 215.

The 1983 Ruthton murders committed by James and Steven Jenkins, and the 1985 murders committed by Iowan Dale Burr deeply impacted Minnesotan farmers. James and his 18-year-old son killed bank president Rudolph Blythe and loan officer Deems Thulin; James later shot himself and Steven was arrested. Dale Burr killed bank president John Hughes, neighbor Richard Goody, his wife Emily, and himself. Both men targeted bankers because they were at risk of foreclosure. It is debatable if the murders were caused by the farm crisis, but both activists and newspapers believed they were.[29] James Jenkins was turned into "a hero," which one attorney said was because "a lot of people thought Jenkins was as much a victim as the bankers."[30] One farmer being foreclosed on by the same bank said "So many farmers are going down the tubes, someone was bound to crack," placing himself and Jenkins in the same position.[31] He felt that something may have been different about Jenkins, which is why he killed, but that his stress stemmed from the crisis; death by suicide was common among farmers.

These were the only two murder-suicides connected to the farm crisis; both occured in places where violent death was rare. The Ruthton murders were the first in the county in over a century.[32] Violence did not feel rare at the time; one couple remembered that the Farmers Home Administration (FmHA) official they worked with "was afraid that somebody was going to shoot him…[and a] farmer tried to run him over with a tractor."[33] In a review of Louis Malle's 1985 documentary *God's Country,* Nick Coleman explained that the "fear of violence is in the air

---

[29] Joseph Amato convincingly argues in his 1988 book *When Father and Son Conspire: A Minnesota Farm Murder* that the crisis was not the reason for the Ruthton murders; rather, a sense of being a failed man was. James Jenkins was considered a poor farmer by his community. Similar complexities emerge with the Burr murders, though less academic attention has been paid to them.
[30] Levy, "Dreams Broken," *Minneapolis Star and Tribune*, 14.
[31] Andrew Malcolm, "In Farm Crisis, the Land Itself Becomes a Liability," *New York Times,* October 9, 1983, E5.
[32] Levy, "Dreams Broken," *Minneapolis Star and Tribune*, 14.
[33] Dudley, *Debt and Dispossession*, 121.

because violence is being done to a way of life."[34] Regardless of their actual causes, the murders felt like the natural progression of tension and were thus interpreted through the lens of the farm crisis. In doing so, the complexity of the situations and people involved were flattened to the point of stereotyping.[35] Although the murders that drew attention, newspapers focused equally as much on suicide; other murders were only hypothetical, suicide was actually happening.

The possibility of losing one's farm was one cause of suicide. Foreclosures were traumatic; it felt like the bedrock of life was crumbling away because "land was not just dirt in which to grow crops, but a measure of social status, family pride, and often an inheritance passed down through generations."[36] Agricultural educator William Nelson said that even families who found that leaving farming was a better course of action than staying were "dragged kicking and screaming off [their] farm" and "it was just awful" to watch the ones who were forced off try to figure out what to do.[37] When they lost their farm, families lost their place in their community.[38] Another farmer said it could be compared to "someone telling you you have a terminal illness. At first you're angry then 'No, why me,' and finally you come to the realization it's not anything I personally did…and once you've quit you'll never get back to the farm again."[39] This grief over the possibility of losing his farm and the idea that his children would not inherit it was shared by the vast majority of farmers, though many did blame themselves.

---

[34] Nick Coleman, "Ch. 5 Films a Moving Farm Story," *Minneapolis Star and Tribune,* April 21, 1986, 2.
[35] See Catherine McNichol Stock's 2017 book *Rural Radicals: Righteous Rage in the American Grain*.
[36] Riney-Kehrberg, "Children of the Crisis," 6.
[37] William Nelson, interview by Margaret Robertson, *Minnesota Farm Advocate Oral History Project,* MNHS, June 2, 1989, 33, 40.
[38] For an in-depth exploration of shame during the crisis, see Kathryn Marie Dudley's anthropological study of 'Star Prairie,' Minnesota, in *Debt and Dispossession: Farm Loss in America's Heartland*.
[39] *God's Country,* directed by Louis Malle, aired 1985, 1:20:27.

Teenagers and children were at the lowest risk of suicide. However, children experienced a lack of control that contributed to their stress that the state of Minnesota recognized by designing youth-targeted mental health programs.[40] In addition to these programs, the vast majority of surveyed teens worked to support their families through off-farm jobs, just as their mothers often began to do.[41] Although off-farm work shifted internal family dynamics in a way that may have increased stress, being able to monetarily contribute may have decreased dual senses of being helpless and being a burden. A sentiment commonly expressed among interviewed farmers was that there was no future in farming, and many teenagers agreed with that sentiment. Youth flight from rural areas was consistently remarked upon, and gaining skills off of the farm may have given teenagers the belief that they could build a different future.

Like adults, children feared losing their homes, but they additionally feared losing their parents. A recurring motif in the dreams of teenagers at the time was "huge, noisy trucks coming to haul away not only the family's goods but also the parents."[42] Teens feared their parents would commit suicide, which was worsened by a parental refusal to discuss struggles with their children. "It's scary to see your folks scared," one teenager reflected.[43] Teens wanted information to dispel the sense that their family was "the only one in the 'whole world' that was experiencing this hardship."[44] Fear of parental suicide manifested in many ways, such as a

---

[40] There has been no analysis of gender divisions of suicide among children during the farm crisis. Boys and girls were raised with different expectations of their future relationships to the land, but it is unclear how or if this impacted their risk of suicide; Riney-Kehrberg, "Children of the Crisis," 6.
[41] Riney-Kehrberg, "Children of the Crisis," 13.
[42] Andrew Malcolm, "Families Fail Along With Their Farms," *New York Times,* January 4, 1987, E5.
[43] Wendy Wall, "Growing Up Afraid: Farm Crisis is Taking Subtle Toll on Children in Distressed Families," *Wall Street Journal,* Nov 7, 1985.
[44] Eric Ramírez-Ferrero, *Troubled Fields: Men, Emotions, and the Crisis in American Farming* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 45.

teenage boy refusing to answer the phone because he was afraid "that the caller will want his father and that he will find the man a suicide out in the barn."[45] He could not prevent his father from taking his own life, but he could control his own response to it through this seemingly-irrational action. Adult men were presumed to be stoic and yet their suicide rates were high, contributing to a sense that the world was unstable.

Statistics on suicide are problematic. Despite "suicides and suicide attempts appear[ing] to be on the rise," the precise number of intentional deaths is unclear.[46] Due to a cultural taboo and payout restrictions on life insurance, many probable suicides were recorded as accidents. The few statistics reported in newspapers focus on adults; only in rare cases were children included. However, children do seem to have attempted suicide much less frequently than adults and suicides of men were much more frequent than women. Among sixty-six verified cases of farm suicides in Oklahoma that included three minors, over three-fourths of the total were men.[47]

Suicide was an escape from the cultural shame of failure, which fell more heavily on adult men than any other group. They were culturally expected to bear the most responsibility for keeping the farm functioning, and this pressure is seen throughout accounts of men's suicidal ideation. One suicide note was simply the word "responsible" written over and over on the last page of his diary.[48] Another farmer directly connected the grief of foreclosure to suicide, saying that since men were not culturally allowed to cry, "some of them couldn't cry. They ended up down in the barn and hung themselves."[49] It was difficult for men to envision a future that did not involve farming. Men not only felt unable to cry, but unable to communicate their troubles in

[45] Malcolm, "Families," E5.
[46] Eileen Ogintz, "Emotional Crisis Grips Rural America," *Chicago Tribune,* April 12, 1985, 3.
[47] Schneider, "Rash of Suicides," A13.
[48] Schneider, "Rash of Suicides," A13.
[49] Dudley, *Debt and Dispossession,* 126.

any way, sometimes even to their wives. To talk about the problem was to admit failure; this was particularly true for men whose farms had been passed down through generations of their family.

Farmers nationwide tended to believe that hard work would be rewarded with success, so those who failed had not worked hard enough. This cultural belief was weakened by the crisis, for those facing foreclosure and not, in the same communities.[50] This widened the circumstances under which it was acceptable to seek help. Culturally-enforced silence was consistently pointed to as a key factor in suicide. Farm advocates attempted to address this by giving struggling farmers a way to talk about their problems in hotlines and peer-counseling groups.[51] They were not limited to emotional support, often providing legal advice as well.

Although men were seen as primarily responsible for the farm, women also faced responsibilities that could become overwhelming. An element left out of most narratives around farm suicides is that women attempt suicide "three or four times" more than men do.[52] Accounting for this would still leave a gap between male and female suicides, but it reveals the pressure on women. Though most interviewees agreed that the fear of losing one's farm was harder on men than on women, both perceived foreclosure as "moral failings of the deepest kinds: hers as a wife and homemaker, his as a husband and father."[53] Women felt able to ask for help in a way that men did not, since it did not undermine their gender role. They did not feel the shame of failure with the same intensity, which likely explains the lower rate of suicidal ideation.

---

[50] Joan Blundall and Emilia Martinez-Brawley, "Whom Shall We Help? Farm Families' Beliefs and Attitudes About Need and Services," *Social Work* 36 no. 4 (1991), 317.
[51] Bev Strom, "Report From Heartland: Farm Crisis Getting Worse," *Los Angeles Times,* January 18, 1986, 2.
[52] Andrew Malcolm, "Deepening Financial Troubles Taking Emotional Toll on Midwest's Farmers," *New York Times,* June 15, 1983, A14.
[53] Ramírez-Ferrero, *Troubled Fields*, 44.

Suicide was a common response to the farm crisis, particularly among men. It was located in a feeling of shame and failure that originated in the pride farmers took in their land and work. All members of farm families were at risk because of cultural pressure to keep financial problems within the family; withdrawal from other family members was also common. Teenagers were able to find new ways to help their families and stabilize their identities in a way their parents struggled with. Suicide was linked to violence, as stress and grief over the future loss of a farm and all that meant increased. However, despite the disproportionate amount of attention paid to it by media, murder was exceedingly rare. James and Steven Jenkins and Dale Burr reveal the common feeling that violence was just around the corner, but the rarity of their actions also reveals that violence was typically kept within the family or internally directed.

Christianity

Farmers' relationship with their land was influenced by the Christian belief of human dominance, as well as a sense that they were enacting a family legacy through their work. Religion also guided the relationship between farmers and their community. Farmers' relationship with the church as a social institution could be fraught during the crisis. It could influence people towards activism and give them a sense of support, but a more common response was withdrawal from the church altogether. Ministers tried to decrease this through a turn towards activism that included running support hotlines. Not all denominations reacted in the same way but primary sources rarely specify to which they are referring, so this paper refers to Christianity as a whole.

There was a strong belief among farmers that farming was a calling. Although farmers stressed their independence, particularly when compared to other types of jobs, they viewed themselves as a link in a long chain rooted in the land. One end of that chain was held by God,

and the other by a distant unborn descendant. This was reflected in a saying from the time, "It may not be God's country, but you can see it from there."[54] Farmers' work allowed them a proximity to the beauty of the divine, even on Earth; it was a good life. When they inherited the land, they made a promise to continue the work of their fathers and grandfathers. This was made explicit in advertisements targeted towards farmers, which sometimes showed "a ghost image of a father or grandfather mirroring the actions of the present-day farmer."[55] While this generational relationship provided an anchor to the land, it could quickly become an added weight during the crisis. As one farm wife put it, "you feel like all the ancestors are there watching everything you do, from generations back. And if you fail, you're failing *all* the family."[56]

Generational connections made the land more than a place. This was repeatedly stressed across a variety of sources, including those interviewed for the Minnesota Historical Society's Farm Advocate Oral History project. Not only was the land no longer just "someplace to leave," it was "in our blood."[57] The land structured the family, since "it gives birth to [kinship] and it symbolizes it, and figuratively and often literally, it entombs it."[58] Although not all farmers expressed their belief in explicitly religious terms, many viewed the land as a gift from God. It was their responsibility to make the raw landscape productive through their own skill as part of the "Biblical injunction for man to exercise dominion over the earth," though no interviewees framed their relationship with the land in terms of dominance.[59] This foundational belief in

---

[54] Levy, "Dreams Broken," *Minneapolis Star and Tribune*, 1. This is where Louis Malle's documentary, *God's Country*, takes its name. It is clear that Christianity has a strong presence in Glencoe.
[55] J. L. Anderson, "'You're a Bigger Man': Technology and Agrarian Masculinity in Postwar America," *Agricultural History* 94, no. 1 (2020), 15.
[56] Dudley, *Debt and Dispossession*, 130.
[57] Anne Kanten, interview by Dianna Hunter, *Minnesota Farm Advocate Oral History Project*, MNHS, June 6, 1989, 3; Dudley, *Debt and Dispossession*, 147.
[58] Ramírez-Ferrero, *Troubled Fields*, 82-83.
[59] Dudley, *Debt and Dispossession*, 8; Anderson, "You're a Bigger Man," 19-20.

intergenerational relationships that developed the land was typically not outright stated. Like Christianity, this belief was assumed to be so natural a part of life that it needed no explanation.

A belief in stewarding the land could also lead people towards activism, which is underexplored in secondary literature on the crisis.[60] As will be discussed later, activism was a relatively rare response. However, people who became activists were responding to the same pressures that other farmers in their communities felt, including religious ones. Both American Agricultural Movement (AAM) member Anne Kanten and attorney Lynn Hayes were inspired towards activism due to their childhood churches. Hayes' mother worked with migrant workers through their church, ingraining a belief that "the underdog doesn't have to [stay] the underdog."[61] As Kanten grew up, "our whole society and our community was focused around that little rural church" which shaped her thinking for the rest of her life, particularly regarding working in tandem with the natural processes set in motion by God.[62] Like Dudley's interviewees, Kanten expressed a strong feeling of responsibility for the land; feeding the world was her job because she had made a contract with God to take care of it. This is one of the reasons that the National Catholic Rural Life Conference valued family farms above corporate farms, since they "tended to take better care of their land and avoided wasteful land use practices that were inefficient in the long run."[63] Although Kanten's rhetoric of 'feeding the world' aligned with the view of the Nixon administration, "farm[ing] fence to fence" was not her motivation.[64]

---

[60] The majority of literature centered on religion during the farm crisis is sociological studies. For an exception, see David Bovée's 2016 article "The Middle Way: The National Catholic Rural Life Conference and Rural Issues in the 20th and 21st Centuries."
[61] Lynn Hayes, interview by Dianna Hunter, *Minnesota Farm Advocate Oral History Project*, MNHS, May 18, 1989, 22.
[62] Kanten, interview, 3.
[63] Bovée, "The Middle Way," 782.
[64] Drescher, interview, 7.

Churches were not only religious institutions, but social ones. These were spaces where the community could provide support for distressed members. As the farm crisis worsened, many people attempted to find comfort in religion. Women not affiliated with a church were "significantly more depressed" than women who were.[65] This may be due in part to the fact that churches had historically been the "only public institution in which it was usually acceptable for them to play an active role."[66] Women benefited more from religion than men overall, although Fundamentalist men benefited more than non-Fundamentalist men.[67]

Churches formed part of a support network that decreased stress and depression in meaningful ways for farmers during the crisis. One key aspect of church support was that it was unasked for; individuals did not need to seek it out. When forced to do so, their mental health suffered.[68] This is likely because talking about a problem was the same as admitting failure, whereas unasked for support showed acceptance by the community. This was true across denominations. Farmers felt deep shame about asking for help because it could not be kept private. One strategy churches used to prevent this shame was asking community members to submit applications for heating assistance and food stamps, regardless of need, so those who did need them would not be singled out.[69] This protected them from shame, although the material end result was limited by requirements that tended to exclude many people who did need help.[70]

---

[65] Katherine Meyer and Linda Lobao, "Economic Hardship, Religion and Mental Health During the Midwestern Farm Crisis," *Journal of Rural Studies* 19, no. 2 (2003), 147.
[66] Danbom, *Born in the Country,* 92.
[67] Meyer and Lobao, "Economic Hardship," 149.
[68] Meyer and Lobao, "Economic Hardship," 151.
[69] Foley, *Front Porch Politics*, 215.
[70] "Farmers, in Protest, Apply for Food Stamps," *New York Times,* December 21, 1984, A10.

Unfortunately, only 19 percent of families in one survey thought their church "actively expressed support."[71] Before and during the crisis, Mennonite communities in Iowa were transitioning from an inwards community-focused perspective towards an outward, global-focused one. Like Anne Kanten, they felt called to feed the world.[72] Farm problems came to be seen as issues that should not be dealt with on a community level, which cut off an important avenue of emotional support, since farmers did not want to discuss what they saw as their individual failure.[73] Lack of privacy exacerbated these issues, as people sought refuge by "hiding out" and no longer participating in social spaces.[74] Though the social aspect of churches could be beneficial for farmers, it was more frequently seen as a representation of "social censure, not an escape from it."[75] Many families withdrew from church as foreclosure loomed.

Newspaper coverage of the crisis commonly discussed the problem of people withdrawing from church. Many farmers felt "alone in their grief" as they struggled through the 1980s.[76] Some described it as "worse than during the 1930s" because everyone was struggling during the Great Depression; people mourned a sense of lost community.[77] No one knew what to say. It was considered polite to allow struggling neighbors to save face by "pretend[ing] that nothing is wrong."[78] This politeness had a gendered component, as it also allowed "an avoidance of the discomfort caused by witnessing emotions deemed inappropriate for a man."[79] Community

---

[71] John Eicher, "'Every Family on Their Own'?: Iowa's Mennonite Farm Communities and the 1980s Farm Crisis," *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 35 (2017), 87.
[72] Eicher, "Every Family on Their Own?" 76.
[73] Eicher, "Every Family on Their Own?" 89.
[74] Jim Massey, interview by Dianna Hunter, *Minnesota Farm Advocate Oral History Project,* MNHS, September 13, 1989, 45. Massey gives the examples of churches and coffee shops.
[75] Ramírez-Ferrero, *Troubled Fields*, 42.
[76] Dudley, *Debt and Dispossession,* 141.
[77] Eileen Ogintz, "Emotional Crisis Grips Rural America," *Chicago Tribune,* April 12, 1985, 2.
[78] Dudley, *Debt and Dispossession,* 115.
[79] Ramírez-Ferrero, *Troubled Fields*, 43.

responses were more suited to acute crises than long-term ones. Anne Kanten found that her church "didn't quite know what to do" with her realization that "the church also needs to be concerned about the people who live and struggle on that land."[80] Forty-four percent of respondents to a survey were likewise disappointed, finding their church "not at all supportive."[81] This caused further withdrawal. However, isolating oneself from potential support and denying that problems existed increased stress and depression for farmers.[82]

People's struggles did not go unnoticed when they withdrew from church. It, and particularly clergy, functioned as part of a community surveillance system. No one knew for sure who was struggling, but withdrawal from normal social life implied something was wrong. Ministers often kept an eye on "one or two families" who seemed on the verge of drastic action.[83] Though pastors "did not wish to alienate congregants by being too activist oriented," newspapers were always able to find someone willing to talk.[84] Newspapers typically chose to speak to men, unless they were specifically writing about women. Activist clergy are likely overrepresented, but there was a genuine increase in political action. As one reverend explained, "In all faiths, they're conscious that they're losing parishioners, and you know what that does to a church in a small town…they know they have to let the politicians know their people are in great pain."[85] Most mental health outreach came from churches, and organizations like the National Catholic Rural Life Conference were active in "counseling farmers, participating in

[80] Kanten, interview, 4.
[81] Eicher, "Every Family on Their Own?" 87.
[82] Meyer and Lobao, "Economic Hardship," 149.
[83] Schneider, "Rash of Suicides," *New York Times,* August 17, 1987.
[84] Eicher, "Every Family on Their Own?" 87.
[85] Eileen Ogintz, "Hardships Pulling Farm Belt Together," *Chicago Tribune,* March 11, 1985, 3.

protests, and calling for a moratorium on foreclosures until emergency credit measures could take effect."[86]

Religion held many meanings for farmers and shaped multiple responses to the crisis. Farmers were deeply connected to the land by a relationship that extended over many generations. Combined with their feelings of responsibility for it, this made foreclosures devastating. In losing the land, they failed to continue what their ancestors started and broke a contract with God. Community dynamics of churches were not openly discussed but emerged as a consistent source of pain in later interviews. Standards of politeness were alienating as congregants did not acknowledge the toll the crisis was taking on those in their midst. Farmers withdrew from their churches, worsening their stress. Despite this, churches often played a large role in community support and activism. They operated hotlines for mental health and kept an eye on those who could not bring themselves to ask for it.

Activism

Activism was a relatively rare response to the farm crisis, yet received the most attention. Farm activism had been on the rise in years prior to the crisis, emphasizing parity.[87] During the crisis, struggling farmers were drawn to many groups, including those who offered practical and extremist solutions. Many farms were still lost and activists were often looked down on by their neighbors for disturbing the social order, but activism provided a framework allowing farmers to turn away from a destructive individualistic mindset.

---

[86] Bovée, "The Middle Way," 783-784.

[87] Michael Stewart Foley tracks the changes in Midwestern farm activism in the 1970s and 1980s in his 2013 book *Front Porch Politics.* He argues the crisis was a turning point, where the goal of groups like AAM shifted from parity towards a more primal goal of keeping their homes.

Jim and Gloria Langman of Starbuck, Minnesota did not respond typically when their 480-acre dairy farm faced foreclosure.[88] Though they represented farmers most likely to be affected by the crisis — "young farmers with limited capital who took advantage of optimal credit conditions in the 1970s" — Jim was the former president of the AAM's Minnesota chapter.[89] Rather than privately negotiate with the lender, they reached out to Minnesota farm organizations Groundwell and COACT to plan a rally. By April 1, 1985 their foreclosure would be delayed for the third time due to threats of violence, but the protest continued. Roughly 2,000 people showed up, including presidential hopeful Jesse Jackson, who gave a thirty-minute speech encouraging coalition-building between farmers and other groups.[90] The protest was about more than the Langman farm; it was a protest against all foreclosures. Increasing numbers of farmers were drawn to activism "looking for a collective solution to their problems" in 1985 as the farm crisis continued to worsen.[91] At the Langman foreclosure, protestors carried white crosses for the counties in Minnesota, with the numbers of farms predicted to fail in the coming years written on them; a reminder "of the nobility of taking up a battle known to be lost before it is ever begun."[92] A later part of the protest was a memorial service led by Jackson for victims of suicide; a message that lives were being lost alongside farms. Both Jim and Jackson urged attendees against using violence, which had been a topic of national conversation for several years.[93]

---

[88] Paul Klauda, "Jackson Tells Crowd to Keep Fighting Foreclosures," *Star Tribune,* April 1, 1985, 5A.
[89] Dudley, *Debt and Dispossession,* 94; Klauda, "Jackson Tells Crowd to Keep Fighting Foreclosures," *Star Tribune,* 5A.
[90] Klauda, "Jackson Tells Crowd to Keep Fighting Foreclosures," *Star Tribune,* 1A.
[91] Dudley, *Debt and Dispossession,* 89; Stoil, "Desperate Farm Wives," 33.
[92] Halverson, "Save Rural America," *Morris Weekly,* 1; Dudley, *Debt and Dispossession,* 102.
[93] Klauda, "Jackson Tells Crowd to Keep Fighting Foreclosures," *Star Tribune,* 5A. Gloria Langman was uncomfortable with the spotlight and chose not to speak at the rally.

Many younger leaders in farm activism drew on lessons learned by watching the civil rights and anti-war movements.[94] Rural populists came from "generations of sturdy producers who *did* feel some jobs were beneath them and were ready to fight to prevent falling to the lowest class," but a sense of global community guided many individuals involved in farm activism.[95] AAM activist Alan Gains said that during his first tractorcade, "We thought agriculture was the only thing oppressed, but we didn't get very far down the road until we knew that wasn't entirely the case. We wasn't in the boat alone…everybody" in the working and middle classes was there alongside farmers.[96] Jackson made the same point, arguing that marginalized groups should work together since oppression did not stop at national borders; "black South Africans, white Iowa farmers, and Palestinian villagers all belonged with no pecking order of geography or suffering."[97] Farm activists typically focused on their own states, but some kept an international perspective. Anne Kanten said her mission trips revealed the kind of problems facing farmers in the Midwest were faced by farmers worldwide.[98] This was a relatively uncommon point of view. Many communities were suspicious of activists as outside agitators; coalition building largely did not occur, particularly across rural-urban divides.[99]

There was a dark side to farm activism: "the roots of violence, racism, and hatred…have been nourished in the same soil and from the same experiences that generated rural movements for democracy and equality."[100] AAM had been a leading farm activist organization in the 1970s,

---

[94] Levitas, *The Terrorist Next Door*, 210; Massey, interview, 15.
[95] Michael Kazin, *The Populist Persuasion* (New York: BasicBooks, 1995), 279.
[96] Ramírez-Ferrero, *Troubled Fields*, 123.
[97] Halverson, "Save Rural America," *Morris Weekly,* 1; Kazin, *The Populist Persuasion,* 279.
[98] Kanten, interview, 28-29.
[99] For an exploration of the psychology behind rural antagonism towards urban areas and residents, see Katherine Cramer's 2016 book *The Politics of Resentment: Rural Consciousness in Wisconsin and the Rise of Scott Walker*.
[100] Stock, *Rural Radicals,* 148.

but in the wake of the disappointing 1979 tractorcade, several of the founding members were drawn to Christian Identity rhetoric that the Posse Comitatus and other survivalist groups preached. The Posse was a non-farm right-wing organization that viewed "all of history as a Manichaean struggle between white, divine, Anglo-Saxon Christians, and Satanic Jews" and was particularly focused on taxes.[101] In the 1990s, it would develop into the militia movement. Violence was also present in the 1980s, when the Posse taught farmers how to build bombs during armed survival training groups, but it mainly bubbled under the surface.[102] The primary draw was the solutions the groups seemed to offer; the worse the crisis became, the more people attended recruitment meetings. This alliance split AAM and farm activism.

This extremist turn would be damaging for both individuals who relied on their strategies and farm activism as a whole. By 1983, extremist groups had broadened their appeal by avoiding explicitly violent rhetoric. As Daniel Levitas explained, "farmers with legitimate grievances lost credibility and found themselves divided, when they should have been uniting around more constructive efforts to pursue economic justice."[103] Other farm organizations pushed back against their bigotry, particularly Iowa-based PrairieFire; by 1986 extremist groups faced significant resistance, but their ideas persisted. In 1992, anthropologist Eric Ramírez-Ferrero attended an AAM meeting where two of the national founders spoke. They urged against paying taxes and explained farmers "have been placed in the role of servitude" by the government; the audience took them seriously, making Ramírez-Ferrero feel like "I was at some sort of Klan meeting."[104] Despite the pushback, their ideas about farming identity were still attractive.

---

[101] Levitas, *The Terrorist Next Door,* 81.
[102] Levitas, *The Terrorist Next Door,* 186.
[103] Levitas, *The Terrorist Next Door,* 208.
[104] Ramírez-Ferrero, *Troubled Fields,* 153.

Anti-Semitism was central to extremists, who argued Jewish people controlled the banks and had deliberately engineered the crisis. Farmers who joined these groups willing overlooked or actively engaged in anti-Semitism. Jewish people were absent from the thoughts of Glencoe residents in *God's Country* until the 1985 ending. One interviewee said he was afraid of potential violence by the Posse, but agreed that "the Jewish people control much of our markets."[105] This disavowal of methods and agreement with ideas was a consistent cultural response to activism. Farmers were told that "These Jews [responsible for the crisis] are not your Jew who lives next door."[106] Most farmers did not know Jewish people personally and this allowed for further abstraction and dehumanization. Although the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) found in 1986 that farmers were "very likely to hold anti-Semitic beliefs," it was not because they were rural.[107] Despite a small Jewish population, Minnesota was in the top twenty percent of states with anti-Semitic hate crimes in 1983, which happened primarily in the Twin Cities.[108]

Though less overt than anti-Semitism, racism also shaped how farmers saw the crisis, as Jesse Jackson's visit to the Langman farm revealed. Newspapers did not report on it, but Dudley said that "it was not uncommon to hear Jesse Jackson dismissed as 'that nig-ger' whom no one 'wanted to see anyway.'"[109] There were few Black people in rural Minnesota and no Black farmers.[110] One farmer said that Black people "just don't like it" in Glencoe, though when

---

[105] *God's Country,* directed by Louis Malle, aired 1985, 1:22:08.
[106] Levitas, *The Terrorist Next Door*, 182.
[107] Levitas, *The Terrorist Next Door,* 254. The ADL was interested in downplaying the danger bigotry posed and did not publish these findings.
[108] "...And Continue to Curb Anti-Semitism," *Minneapolis Star and Tribune,* February 3, 1984, 10A; "Despite Drop, State Ranks 9th in Vandalism Against Jews," *Minneapolis Star and Tribune,* January 18, 1984, 5B. Attacks dropped from 25 to 18 and incidents of harassment dropped from 42 to 22 between 1982 and 1983.
[109] Dudley, *Debt and Dispossession,* 90.
[110] Lou Anne Kling, interview by Dianna Hunter and Ken Meter, *Minnesota Farm Advocate Oral History Project,* MNHS, June 15, 1988, 43.

pressed he admitted that "People are very prejudiced against blacks out here."[111] Anti-Semitism and racism were prevelant in Minnesota; when combined with a homogenous population, extremist groups flourished as a version of their ideas was already culturally accepted.

Extremist groups did not deliver on their promised solutions, while non-extremist groups offered both "an alternative worldview and a concrete strategy to address farmers' woes."[112] Foreclosure protests were not always successful, but they generated sympathy from the larger culture. One notable strategy was penny auctions, a tactic from the Great Depression. Bidding started at a penny and no one was allowed to bid higher. David Danbom argues that these were often last-ditch efforts, "just desperate acts by desperate people," because they required tacit assent from police and potential bidders.[113] During the 1980s, penny auctions seemed more popular in Minnesota than elsewhere. At least one worked successfully, although a minimum bid was typically set.[114] In 1984, 11 year-old Tito Bates hoped to use this tactic with "a shiny penny from his piggy bank" in order to buy back his parents' farm equipment.[115] He was denied, but the use of the tactic spoke to hope in community.

This hope was particularly evident in the actions of women. They were the "backbone" of activist movements, which reflected their cultural responsibility for the farm's finances.[116] Ramírez-Ferrero argues that the social rules for women allowed them to be less individualistic

---

[111] *God's Country,* directed by Louis Malle, aired 1985, 37:29.
[112] Levitas, *The Terrorist Next Door*, 209.
[113] Danbom, *Born in the Country*, 205. This typically required intimidating other bidders, but it is difficult to tell from newspaper coverage if violence was typically used in the 1980s.
[114] See Michael Stewart Foley's discussion of Gerald and Alicia Kohnen's 1982 protest in "'Everyone Was Pounding On Us': Front Porch Politics and the American Farm Crisis of the 1970s and 1980s."
[115] Associated Press, "Protests, Son With Piggy Bank Can't Stop Forced Farm Sale," *Minneapolis Star and Tribune,* January 30, 1984, 6A.
[116] Hayes, interview, 25; Ramírez-Ferrero, *Troubled Fields*, 12; Kanten, interview, 36. Women seemed to have largely handled the finances at home, while men were expected to do so publicly.

than men and be "the first ones who reached beyond the immediate family context for help."[117] Women overall may have been less attached to the land, as he asserts, but they were willing to break social rules to stay when men felt paralyzed, even if it meant public shame.[118] This may have contributed to women's importance in activist groups. Over half of Farm Advocate oral histories were of women, with both male and female interviewees frequently referring to the importance of women within the movement, particularly Lou Anne Kling and Anne Kanten.[119]

There were also female-specific activist groups. The most renowned was Women Involved in Farm Economics (WIFE), whose members testified during the 1985 Farm Bill hearings alongside three actresses who had portrayed farm wives. Activists in WIFE relied on "a powerful, deliberately crafted trope that enabled activists to dispel negative stereotypes of rural life while still appealing to deeply conservative elements that viewed women's activism as potentially threatening."[120] Although all farm activists used morality as the basis for their argument, it was particularly strong in WIFE. There seems to be a division between female activists in and outside of gender-specific groups. Women like Kling and Kanten did not base their authority as activists on their gender, but on their role as farmers; women in WIFE did precisely the opposite. WIFE was a more conservative group, which influenced their ideas about gender, so their activism "existed alongside, and certainly not as a threat to, their prescribed roles within the family."[121] Extremist groups were highly patriarchal. Several husbands wanted to renounce their marriage certificates after they joined Chrisitan Identity groups because they were

---

[117] Ramírez-Ferrero, *Troubled Fields,* 39.
[118] Kanten echoes Foley's concept of "front porch politics" when she argues that women's increased involvement during the 1980s occurred because it was different "when it hits *your* family" on page 36 of her interview.
[119] The interviews were clearly conducted with an eye towards gender, but it is also brought up unprompted. Jim Massey's interview is a particularly good example.
[120] Stoil, "Desperate Farm Wives," 34.
[121] Stoil, "Desperate Farm Wives," 44.

legal government documents; they decided to do this without taking their wives' opinions into account because they were the head of the family.[122] Women were vital to activist movements, but there was no single form of women's activism.

Newspaper coverage did not accurately reflect the gender dynamics of activists, focusing overwhelmingly on men. People interviewed as experts were often male or female counselors, male clergy, and male farmers who had first-hand experience with losing their farms. When they featured women, it was often in a tokenizing way, as women rather than activists. However, they did occasionally print letters by female activists.[123] Lawyer Jim Massey thought that "maybe women have always been there…and we just haven't seen them because the media, historically, was looking for men."[124] Newspapers also overemphasized the extent to which farmers as a whole participated in any activism. Despite what the newspapers wrote, activists were not seen as genuine members of the community by those around them. Activism was a more exciting topic than the daily lives of farmers, the same way that the Ruthton and Burr murders overshadowed the wave of suicides to which they were tied. Protests were specific moments with start and end dates that could be easily collapsed into a narrative.

Most people kept their heads down; Dudley reports that "less than 2 percent of midwestern farmers took part in public protest during the 1980s, and that fewer than one in a hundred joined political action groups."[125] Communities reinforced a belief that one should not rock the boat. Many interviewees in the Farm Advocate Oral History Project described the cultural tensions they faced. AAM member Anne Kanten recalled that she "got the message as a kid growing up, that politics was kind of a nasty business. And nice folks didn't dabble too much

---

[122] Levitas, *The Terrorist Next Door,* 258.
[123] For an example, see Bev Strom's 1986 "Report from the Heartland" in the *Los Angeles Times*.
[124] Massey, interview, 76. Massey speaks at length about sexism in journalistic coverage.
[125] Dudley, *Debt and Dispossession,* 5.

in that kind of stuff."[126] Sandy Hunz, Vice President of the Minnesota Women for Agricultural and "token woman" on the Agricultural Advisory Committee in 1983, recalled that she stayed away from Kling "because I thought she was real radical" since she did not work within the system, saying that it was an issue that "they came into town and they were going to raise hell…a lot of people cannot accept that."[127] The methods used were a sticking point for people who otherwise agreed. Although activism could be radicalizing, that was not always the case. Activism was a broad term that covered many behaviors, including community-wide social welfare program sign-ups, foreclosure protests, and involvement in state politics. Communities as a whole did not always distinguish between these behaviors, although protest was frequently singled out as the worst, since it was seen as stirring up unnecessary trouble and making a fuss.

Tied to this value of maintaining the status quo was an element of blame. There was a cultural belief that hard work led to success and a corresponding belief that those who did not succeed had not worked hard.[128] This was only worsened by complete silence on the existence of the crisis within Minnesota until 1984.[129] When asked about Jim Langman, a neighboring farming couple said "He was just a very poor manager…A lot of good farmers knew what to do and tightened up their belt and made it. He just never could do that."[130] As this quote shows, success and failure were evaluated after they occurred. Langman's failure is what excluded him from the category of 'good farmer;' his behavior was retroactively reassessed to fit that judgment. When failure did occur, men were expected to take responsibility for that loss. This sentiment was consistently heard when non-activists were asked about those who had failed.

---

[126] Kanten, interview, 18.
[127] Sandy Hunz, interview by Dianna Hunter and Ken Meter, *Minnesota Farm Advocate Oral History Project*, MNHS, May 10, 1988, 4-6.
[128] Blundall and Martinez-Brawley, "Whom Shall We Help?" 316.
[129] Kling, interview, 15.
[130] Dudley, *Debt and Dispossession,* 92.

Those who feel they have the potential to be victimized in the same way as a person they are judging tend to recognize the effects of environment as well as individual actions, but this was not always the case for farmers. This is possibly because of the cultural belief about hard work in addition to the idea that activism was an external contagion rather than something naturally occurring.[131] When talking about the Langman protest discussed earlier in this section, local banker Frank Tostrud argued that

> It was a media show. They were largely people that had failed before this thing came along. Not totally, but they were the ringleaders, the ones who got people worked up. So it wasn't something that the—what we call *real people*—paid much atten-tion to. It wasn't an appropriate way of addressing the problem. March in the street and talk about—I don't know what they talked about. I didn't go to that thing.[132]

This is a revealing statement. Tostrud draws a firm line between those within and without the community, arguing that activists are on the outside. Failure meant one should sit down and be quiet; by becoming vocal, the Langmans violated community norms. He is correct that most of those at the protest were not from Glenwood, although he admits a number of community members attended. He then asserts that attendance in itself is also abnormal. Those locals who attended can be absolved because their behavior is assumed to be influenced by charismatic outside agitators, but it is still something that 'real people' did not do. Finally, he echoes Hunz's concerns about the method of protest. Since he did not attend the protest and hear Jesse Jackson speak about building a coalition, it is the disruption to which he objects.

One Minnesota accountant argued that activists were motivated by "a case of sour grapes."[133] He felt farmers wanted to make themselves feel better about their individual failure by lashing out at systems that were, in the end, not at fault. While too simplistic to be correct,

---

[131] Blundall and Martinez-Brawley, "Whom Shall We Help?" 317.
[132] Dudley, *Debt and Dispossession*, 89. As with all other names in the book, 'Frank Tostrud' is a pseudonym assigned by Dudley.
[133] Dudley, *Debt and Dispossession,* 90.

this argument does reveal a real psychological benefit that activists received. Activists pushed themselves past the barrier of staying quiet about their problems while attempting to better their lives. They had a similar reckoning with self-blame. One long-term benefit of membership in activist groups was that farmers learned that they alone were not responsible for foreclosure; the lenders and the government also bore responsibility.[134] Activist groups stressed that "There's something structurally wrong with the agricultural economy. And it's not their fault."[135] This shift in beliefs was necessary for survival; the president of AAM's Oklahoma chapter described one man who accepted the dominant narrative of blame and died by suicide as a result.[136] Avoidance further worsened farmers' problems. Only by addressing them could they be resolved, but many farmers felt unable to do so because of the cultural shame around failure. Activists like Kling therefore found it vital to stress that "It's not your fault. It's the economic times. But be proud of it and stand up and say, 'I was in financial trouble and I took it on myself and I did something about it.'"[137] This gave farmers an alternate lens to view cultural ideas through. The deeply ingrained shame they felt could be turned into a source of pride by focusing on individualism and survival.[138] Although many farmers in the following decades still asserted that activists, unlike themselves, simply had not "[grown] up with a work ethic…[and] really aren't very good managers," others began to accept the idea that they were not solely responsible for the crisis.[139] They may not have seen activists as part of their community, but the spread of these ideas showed that they were psychologically useful.

---

[134] The Carter administration faced particular animosity from farmers due to the grain embargo, but the Nixon and Reagan administrations also played crucial roles.
[135] Hayes, interview, 16.
[136] Ramírez-Ferrero, *Troubled Fields*, 141.
[137] Kling, interview, 35-36.
[138] Pride was very important to farmers; for an analysis of how it impacted the farm crisis, see Ramírez-Ferrero.
[139] Dudley, *Debt and Dispossession*, 97.

Activist groups and churches served similar functions. Farmers expressed a sense that people no longer felt like part of a community. Farmers learned coping and healing strategies from their time as activists, which they were then able to share.[140] The communal aspect was repeatedly stressed by activists. Being a farm advocate involved "being a neighbor again. Being a community again. And helping each other instead of hoping your neighbor goes broke so you can get his land."[141] Advocates found meaning in their volunteer status. They were "farmers helping farmers" with no incentive other than rebuilding a sense of community that seemed lost.[142] Unlike churches, activist groups were less likely to feel isolating because they directly addressed the crisis, which was the most beneficial coping technique.[143]

Farm crisis hotlines exemplify church-directed activism. Although Kanten was not alone in her assessment that "the church is not in the middle of the fight here" like it was in Brazil, it would be vital in getting people to utilize hotlines, even if they did not run them.[144] Many AAM members also worked with hotlines, since they "viewed their participation as a natural extension of their work with the AAM—helping to keep families on the farm and using their own experiences to help those in distress to reframe their experience and find some hope."[145] Farm crisis hotlines were vital activist efforts, as they provided usable assistance to farmers while piercing the bubble of isolation when churches were unable to do so.

There were several different broad categories of activism that responded to the farm crisis in Minnesota, with a divide between extremist and non-extremist organizations, although some in the latter category were more conservative than others. This particularly affected the strategies

---

[140] Ramírez-Ferrero, *Troubled Fields,* 166.
[141] Kling, interview, 21.
[142] Hayes, interview, 15.
[143] Meyer and Lobao, "Economic Hardship," 149.
[144] Kanten, interview, 30.
[145] Ramírez-Ferrero, *Troubled Fields,* 143.

women used, and meant that they were easier to find in non-extremist organizations. All activism primarily focused on preventing foreclosures, either through protest or through advice. Although extremist groups were volatile, violence was rarely a reality. Anti-Semitism and racism played key roles in farmers attitudes towards activism, though not always overtly. Newspaper coverage prioritized activism over other responses to the crisis, since it was easy to construct a narrative from and involved people who had already proved their willingness to speak out. This was not a valued trait in most farm communities, and activists felt pressure to back down; they were typically judged as sore losers. Activism was attractive to farmers not only because it extended the possibility of keeping their farm, but because it offered a different mindset for thinking about the causes of the crisis, which absolved them of sole blame.

Conclusion

People had many reactions to the 1980s farm crisis — including suicide, withdrawal from religious spaces, and activism — that were informed by centuries of stereotypes about farmers. Minnesotan farmers strongly believed individual hard work would be repaid by success; that belief was challenged during the crisis, but still informed intra-community responses to struggling farmers. Although the groundwork for the crisis had been laid over decades by the productivity revolution, people were still blindsided by the arrival of the crisis after the prosperous 1970s. Individuals were not affected alone; the central arguments of the farm crisis relied on the cultural status of the family farm, and families were affected together.

Men, women, and children were all impacted by suicide, although men were much more likely to take their own lives. For many people, suicidal ideation was rooted in their feelings of responsibility; they consistently expressed the belief that they had failed because their farm had failed. If the land was in their blood, what did it mean that they had lost it? Men were primarily

responsible for the farm, which was often passed down by previous generations. This increased the emotional weight of failure. Cultural expectations that men should be stoic further increased the risk of suicide, since men felt unable to talk about their emotions and it was not acceptable to seek help for mental health issues. Women also struggled under these expectations, although they were often able to abandon pride for the survival of their family in a way that men were not; they were also able to take off-farm jobs that bolstered the family's income. Children and teenagers felt suffocated by the silence around financial problems; even more than adults, children assumed their family was the only one struggling.

Christianity greatly influenced farmers' lives. A farm was a family legacy, but it was also a contract made with God to steward and care for the land. Religion structured social life as well, since churches were one of the main centers of community. Unfortunately, many struggling farmers found them more isolating than not. Farmers tended to withdraw from community spaces as their financial problems worsened because they felt too ashamed. This contributed to worsening mental health issues as farmers were increasingly isolated.

Activism was a relatively rare response to the crisis; protest in particular was viewed negatively by farming communities. As in many other areas of life, religion played a key role in inspiring activism. Many activists applied Christian principles about helping their neighbors, since they felt their churches were not doing enough. Foreclosure protests like the Langmans' were a popular tactic since they were community events and drew media attention. Older tactics like penny auctions were also re-adopted, although they were not often successful.

Responses frequently overlapped. Hotlines were activist efforts connected to suicide and religion; they offered emotional support and practical advice, and were often operated by churches. Suicide and activism also intersected at violence. There were two murder sprees that

ended in suicides and an extremist edge to activism that would occasionally bubble over into violence. Women were key to all three responses. They were typically more able to reach out for support than men were; they were also able to utilize a cultural construction of farm wives that positioned them as moral consciences to lend weight to their activism.

Community was at the center of each response. Although it may have felt true, farmers were not solely responsible for their own success and failure. Churches were a vital area of community, but during the crisis they did not provide the range and intensity of support needed. Some people found a community in activist groups instead, where they did not feel like the crisis was an isolated experience and were given the tools to understand the structures that governed it. The historic ideal of individualism did not work well during the crisis, since it caused farmers to view structural problems as individual ones to the detriment of their own health. This applied to government support, particularly regarding food stamps and heat assistance, as well as the role of the lenders and government policy in causing the crisis.

Bibliography

Primary Sources

"...And Continue to Curb Anti-Semitism." *Minneapolis Star and Tribune,* Feb. 3, 1984.

Coleman, Nick. "Ch. 5 Films a Moving Farm Story." *Minneapolis Star and Tribune,* Apr. 21, 1986.

"Despite Drop, State Ranks 9th in Vandalism Against Jews." *Minneapolis Star and Tribune*, Jan. 18, 1984.

Drescher, Donald. Interview by Margaret Robertson. *Minnesota Farm Advocate Oral History Project,* MNHS, Apr. 18, 1989.

The Farmer's Wife. PBS. Aired 1998. YouTube video. www.youtube.com/watch?v=0HaYTtE1B_o.

God's Country. Directed by Louis Malle. Aired 1985. YouTube video. www.youtube.com/watch?v=bt66N-ypAfU.

"Farmers, in Protest, Apply for Food Stamps." *New York Times,* Dec. 21, 1984.

Franey, Pat. "Henningson Speaks Out On Farm Crisis." *Morris Weekly,* Feb. 27, 1985.

Hagaman, Gerald. Interview by Margaret Robertson. *Minnesota Farm Advocate Oral History Project,* MNHS, Nov. 22, 1989.

Halverson, Lori. "Save Rural America." *Morris Weekly,* Apr. 10, 1985.

Hayes, Lynn. Interview by Dianna Hunter. *Minnesota Farm Advocate Oral History Project,* MNHS, May 18, 1989.

Kanten, Anne. Interview by Dianna Hunter. *Minnesota Farm Advocate Oral History Project,* MNHS, June 6, 1989.

Klauda, Paul. "Jackson Tells Crowd to Keep Fighting Foreclosures." *Star Tribune,* Apr. 1, 1985.

Kuntz, Kathy. "The Farm Crisis — A Complex Issue." *Morris Weekly,* Apr. 17, 1985.

Levy, Paul. "Dreams Broken, Crushed in Lincoln County." *Minneapolis Star and Tribune,* May 4, 1986.

Malcolm, Andrew. "Deepening Financial Troubles Taking Emotional Toll on Midwest's Farmers." *New York Times,* June 15, 1983.

Malcolm, Andrew. "Families Fail Along With Their Farms." *New York Times,* Jan. 4, 1987.

Malcolm, Andrew. "In Farm Crisis, the Land Itself Becomes a Liability." *New York Times,* Oct. 9, 1983.

Massey, Jim. Interview by Dianna Hunter. *Minnesota Farm Advocate Oral History Project,* MNHS, Sept. 13, 1989.

Nelson, William. Interview by Margaret Robertson. *Minnesota Farm Advocate Oral History Project,* MNHS, June 2, 1989.

Ogintz, Eileen. "Emotional Crisis Grips Rural America." *Chicago Tribune,* Apr. 12, 1985.

Ogintz, Eileen. "Hardships Pulling Farm Belt Together." *Chicago Tribune,* Mar. 11, 1985.

Schneider, Keith. "Rash of Suicides in Oklahoma Shows That the Crisis on the Farm Goes On." *New York Times,* Aug. 17, 1987.

Strom, Bev. "Report From Heartland: Farm Crisis Getting Worse." *Los Angeles Times,* Jan. 18, 1986.

United States Department of Agriculture. "Minnesota." In *1969 Census of Agriculture*, 2. Washington, D.C., 1972. agcensus.library.cornell.edu/census_parts/1969-minnesota/.

United States Department of Agriculture. "Minnesota: Historical Highlights." In *2017 Census Volume 1, Chapter 1: State Level Data*, 7-8. Washington, D.C., 2019. www.nass.usda.gov/Publications/AgCensus/2017/Full_Report/Volume_1,_Chapter_1_State_Level/Minnesota/.

United States Department of Agriculture. "Minnesota State and County Data." In *1997 Census of Agriculture,* 10-11. Washington, D.C., 1999. agcensus.library.cornell.edu/census_parts/1997-minnesota/.

Wall, Wendy. "Growing Up Afraid: Farm Crisis is Taking Subtle Toll on Children in Distressed Families." *Wall Street Journal*, Nov. 7, 1985.

Secondary Sources

Amato, Joseph. *When Father and Son Conspire: A Minnesota Farm Murder.* Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1988.

Anderson, J. L. "'You're a Bigger Man': Technology and Agrarian Masculinity in Postwar America." *Agricultural History* 94, no.1 (2020): 1-23. www.jstor.org/stable/10.3098/ah.2020.094.1.004.

Associated Press. "Protests, Son With Piggy Bank Can't Stop Forced Farm Sale." *Minneapolis Star and Tribune,* Jan. 30, 1984.

Blundall, Joan and Emilia Martinez-Brawley. "Whom Shall We Help? Farm Families' Beliefs and Attitudes About Need and Services." *Social Work* 36 no. 4 (1991): 315-321.

Bovée, David. "The Middle Way: The National Catholic Rural Life Conference and Rural Issues in the 20th and 21st Centuries." *American Journal of Economics and Sociology* 75 no. 3 (2016): 762-808.

Cramer, Katherine. *The Politics of Resentment: Rural Consciousness in Wisconsin and the Rise of Scott Walker.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016.

Danbom, David. *Born in the Country: A History of Rural America.* 2nd ed. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006.

Dudley, Kathryn Marie. *Debt and Dispossession: Farm Loss in America's Heartland.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000.

Eicher, John. "'Every Family on Their Own'?: Iowa's Mennonite Farm Communities and the 1980s Farm Crisis." *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 35 (2017): 75–96.

Foley, Michael Stewart. "'Everyone Was Pounding On Us': Front Porch Politics and the American Farm Crisis of the 1970s and 1980s." *Journal of Historical Sociology* 28, no. 1 (2015): 104-124. DOI: 10.1111/johs.12064.

Foley, Michael Stewart. *Front Porch Politics.* New York: Hill and Wang, 2013.

Foster, Carly Hayden. "The Welfare Queen: Race, Gender, and Public Opinion." *Race, Gender & Class* 15 no. 3 (2008): 162-179. www.jstor.org/stable/41674659.

Hunz, Sandy. Interview by Dianna Hunter and Ken Meter. *Minnesota Farm Advocate Oral History Project*, MNHS, May 10, 1988.

Kazin, Michael. *The Populist Persuasion.* New York: BasicBooks, 1995.

Kling, Lou Anne. Interview by Dianna Hunter and Ken Meter. *Minnesota Farm Advocate Oral History Project*, MNHS, June 15, 1988.

Levitas, Daniel. *The Terrorist Next Door: The Militia Movement and the Radical Right.* New York: Thomas Dunne Books, 2002.

Meyer, Katherine and Linda Lobao. "Economic Hardship, Religion and Mental Health During the Midwestern Farm Crisis." *Journal of Rural Studies* 19, no. 2 (2003): 139–155. DOI: 10.1016/S0743-0167(02)00069-4.

Hofstadter, Richard. *The Age of Reform.* New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1955.

Ogintz, Eileen. "Right-Wingers Circle Over Farm Crisis." *Chicago Tribune*, May 26, 1985.

Ramírez-Ferrero, Eric. *Troubled Fields: Men, Emotions, and the Crisis in American Farming.* New York: Columbia University Press, 2005.

Riney-Kehrberg, Pamela. “Children of the Crisis: Farm Youth in Troubled Times.” *Middle West Review* 2, no. 1 (2015): 11–25. DOI: 10.1353/mwr.2015.0049.

Stock, Catherine McNichol. *Rural Radicals: Righteous Rage in the American Grain.* Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2017.

Stoil, Rebecca. “Desperate Farm Wives: Gender, Activism, and Traditionalism in the Farm Crisis.” *Middle West Review* 2, no. 1 (2015): 33–49.DOI: 10.1353/mwr.2015.0028.

Tsu, Cecilia. “‘If You Want to Plow Your Field, Don’t Kill Your Buffalo to Eat’: Hmong Farm Cooperatives and Refugee Resettlement in 1980s Minnesota.” *Journal of American Ethnic History* 36, no. 3 (2017): 38–72. DOI: 10.5406/jamerethnhist.36.3.0038.