

Cover slide: Hello, everyone. I'm Dean, a History major, and today I'll be presenting part of my senior seminar. I am looking at how Minnesota farmers and their families responded to the 1980s farm crisis. The three responses that I am focusing on are religion, activism, and suicide; all of these responses informed each other and came from a similar impetus. The time we have today is much too short to fit everything in, so I'm primarily focusing on activism. Since World War II, farming was transitioning away from the family farm model and towards a bigger and more technological one and the generations coming of age began to head to urban areas. The 1980s farm crisis had extreme proportions, but was part of this larger trend; Nixon encouraged farmers to plant 'fencerow to fencerow' and banks pushed loans for better farm equipment in the 1970s, when America wanted to feed the world. Land values soared. However, a combination of factors — including a grain embargo on the Soviet Union and austerity policies implemented by the International Monetary Fund — meant that the trend rapidly reversed in the early 1980s; lenders called in loans prematurely which farmers could not pay with sinking land values, and many families lost their farms. The worst years were 1984 and 1985; when Minnesota had the most foreclosures of any state in the nation.

AAM tractor: What did activism look like during the crisis? Joining activist groups was a fairly uncommon reaction to the crisis, which only about two percent of farmers did. However, it was one of the more eye-catching aspects, and garnered a good deal of media coverage. There was farm activism prior to the crisis. This picture shows tractors in Washington D.C. One of them has a sign that says "The tractors are here! AAM is for *real*!!!" AAM, the American Agricultural Movement, was one of the key activist organizations in the 1970s, when farm activism focused on parity. They would continue to be important in the 1980s, as the goal switched to keeping farms and stopping foreclosures. However, there was a dark side to farm activism, which AAM also demonstrated. The 1979 tractorcade was disappointing because they did not achieve their goals and did not have public support. Afterwards, several of the founding members were drawn to the Christian Identity ideas that Posse Comitatus and other survivalist groups, which ended up splitting the organization into extremist and non-extremist wings. The Posse was a non-farm right-wing organization that was particularly focused on taxes and viewed "all of history as a Manichaeian struggle between white, divine, Anglo-Saxon Christians, and Satanic Jews." In the 1990s, they would become the militia movement. There was some violence during the farm crisis as well. Most notable were two sets of murders in Ruthton Minnesota and Lone Tree Iowa in 1983 and 1985, respectively. The Ruthton murders were committed by James Jenkins and his son Steven. They killed the president of their bank, Rudolph Blythe, and loan officer Deems Thulin. The Lone Tree murders were committed by Dale Burr, who killed bank president John Hughes, his neighbor Richard Goody, and his wife Emily. Both James Jenkins and Dale Burr took their own lives, although Steven Jenkins was arrested. Although both men were farmers facing foreclosure, these murders were not necessarily caused by the farm crisis, as Joseph Amato passionately argued in his book on the Ruthton murders. James Jenkins, for example, was already prone to domestic violence. However, James Jenkins was turned into a symbol of the cost of the crisis, both by activists and by national and local newspapers.

Jim Nichols quote: This quote from commissioner of agriculture Jim Nichols opened one article on the effects of the farm crisis. Nichols reflected that “There was an old saying when I was growing up in Verdi: ‘It may not be God’s country, but you can see it from there.’ All that has changed. When you crush the farm economy, you don’t only crush the farmers, you crush the towns. Nowhere is the depression more evident than in Lincoln County, Minnesota. The dreams are gone.” One French filmmaker, Louis Malle, took the name of his documentary *God’s Country* on Glencoe Minnesota from this same saying. The bulk of the documentary was filmed in 1979 and does not talk about the crisis, which makes its presence in the 1985 epilogue loom even larger. The interviewed farmers expressed the same sentiment as Nichols. One farmer, who had said in 1979 that he hoped one of his three children would end up taking over the farm, said that he now could see no future in it. Farmers interviewed for projects on the farm crisis repeated this again and again. People became activists because the threat was at their own doors — they were engaging in ‘front porch politics,’ as historian Michael Stewart Foley argues was common for activist movements across America in the 1980s. Another farmer in the same documentary expressed agreement with the ideas of the Posse Comitatus, especially the belief that Jewish people controlled the banks and had engineered the farm crisis. One ADL poll found that farmers were particularly likely to hold anti-Semitic beliefs, but Minnesota also ranked ninth in hate crimes against Jewish people in 1983, most of which were committed in the Twin Cities. Because Minnesota had a small Jewish population, it was easier for people to latch onto conspiracy theories involving them. Other farm organizations did push back against these ideas, particularly the Iowa-based PrairieFire, and were instrumental in decreasing the damaging influence of extremist groups in the Midwest.

Jesse Jackson: The bulk of activists were not violent or extremist, just farmers who were already deeply impacted by the crisis and wanted to prevent others from feeling the same loss. Forced foreclosures were deeply painful and often humiliating. To quote one historian, “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.” What did their tactics look like? Because they were community events, foreclosures were good targets for protests. Many of the younger leaders had grown up watching the civil rights and anti-war movements on their televisions. This photo shows the reverend Jesse Jackson speaking at a foreclosure protest on April 1, 1985 in Glenwood, Minnesota. Jackson worked with Martin Luther King during the civil rights movement and was a presidential candidate in 1984 and 1988. In his speech, he emphasized the shared hardships that oppressed people faced, and urged farmers to work together and build coalitions with “women, minorities, the poor, the unemployed, and members of the Third World nations,” according to one Morris student who attended. The protest Jackson is speaking at was for the farm of Jim and Gloria Langman. Jim Langman was the former president of the Minnesota AAM chapter. This was the third unsuccessful attempt by their mortgage holder to foreclose. Their protest drew national attention, especially because Jackson was there. About 2,000 people attended; most were not from Glenwood. Another protest strategy that was

especially popular in Minnesota were penny auctions. These were a tactic from the Great Depression, where bidding would start at a penny and no one would be allowed to bid higher. They were not particularly successful in 1980s. Activists like the Langmans were not looked at kindly by many members of their communities, since they were seen as sore losers who were stirring up unnecessary trouble. This was particularly true of protest, although other forms of activism were seen as less disruptive.

CSPAN: What was the role of women in activist groups? They played particularly important roles in both gender-specific and mixed groups. This photo is from the hearings on the 1985 Farm Bill and shows the actresses Jessica Lange, Sissy Spacek, and Jane Fonda, who had portrayed farm wives in recent films. The women in the red jackets behind them are members of WIFE, Women Involved in Farm Economics. According to Rebecca Stoil, 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.” Although all types of farm activists relied on a moral argument to some extent, this was particularly strong with WIFE. There seems to be a division between female activists in gender-specific groups and female farm advocates. Women like Lou Anne Kling and Anne Kanten — very important people within Minnesota activism — did not base their activism on their gender, but on their role as farmers. WIFE was a more conservative group, and this influenced their ideas about gender, so their activism “existed alongside, and certainly not as a threat to, their prescribed roles within the family.” Extremist groups were highly patriarchal as well; several women found that their husbands wanted to renounce their marriage certificates after they joined Christian Identity groups because they were legal government documents, but the wives’ reactions were not taken into account by their husbands, who acted on behalf of their family. Although women were vital to activist movements, there was no single form of women’s activism. Newspaper coverage did not accurately reflect the gender dynamics of activists, focusing overwhelmingly on men. With the exception of letters written by female activists, articles that interviewed female activists focused on their gender in a way they did not do for men.

White crosses: How did connections between religion, activism, and suicide manifest? No symbol of the farm crisis shows the relationship quite like the white crosses, such as those seen here. [pause] Farmers 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. When they lost their farms, they were no longer to take care of the land. These ‘deaths’ were represented by the white crosses, which were carried at the Langman protest. Each was a stand-in for a Minnesota county, and had the number of farms predicted to fail in the upcoming years written on it. A second part of the protest was a memorial service led by Jackson for victims of suicide; a reminder that lives were being lost alongside farms. Precise statistics on suicide are difficult to find and problematic, as due to a cultural taboo and payout restrictions of life insurance, many probable suicides were recorded as accidents. They also do not record unsuccessful suicide attempts, which were more

common among women. However, deaths by suicide did increase during the farm crisis. Suicide was an escape from the cultural shame of failure, which fell more heavily on adult men than any other group, since they were expected to bear the most responsibility for keeping the farm functioning. The suicide note of one farmer was simply the word “responsible” written over and over on the last page of his diary. It was difficult for men to envision a future for themselves that did not involve farming. Men not only felt unable to cry, but unable to communicate their troubles in any way, sometimes even to their wives. Though most interviewees agreed that the fear of losing one’s farm was harder on men than on women, both men and women perceived foreclosure as a personal failure. 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.” However, women felt able to ask for help in a way that men did not, because 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.

There were many other connections between the three reactions, including the operation of hotlines and withdrawal from churches. The ways that suicide, activism, and religion were used to shape a narrative about the farm crisis are complex and interwoven, and guided by beliefs about who deserves what kind of assistance, as well as if farming is a lifestyle or a job. I’ve tried to present the broad strokes of their connections and relevance here, but the type of nuance needed to talk about them does not mesh well with today’s time constraints.

Sources: These are a few of the primary and secondary sources that I used. Many of my primary sources are articles from the Star Tribune and New York Times, as well as the Minnesota Historical Society oral history interviews with activists. However, Kathryn Marie Dudley’s study of the town she calls ‘Star Prairie’ was also indispensable, as she includes long stretches of interviews with members of the community.

Are there any questions?