Making Changes in the Heartland

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Farmers are ‘in’ right now. With today’s trend towards local food and sustainable agriculture, farmers are making the news, appearing on lists of most influential people and changemakers. The farmers we hear most about seem to be in or near cities, often new to the field, raising vegetables, selling at farmers markets. We’ve read the articles about rooftop farmers in Brooklyn and vegetable farmers growing heirloom varieties for Berkeley restaurants. They all deserve the recognition, because farming is hard work any way you do it.

But there are a lot of farmers we do not often hear about. Most farmers are not growing vegetables for direct markets, and most of the food Americans eat doesn’t come from farmers markets. And (surprise!) many of these rural farmers are also more urgent in the world."

"The US has a strong history of agrarian-led advocacy. There have been movements for what we now call sustainable agriculture for centuries; most led not by people in urban centers, but by rural farmers.

In the 1890s, farmers across the country realized that the struggles they faced were more a result of economic and social policies than personal failings, and built a broad coalition and a strong movement, Populism and the People’s Party, to change the system.

Nearly a century later, skyrocketing debt payments and a drop in exports led to the 1980s farm crisis. Hundreds of thousands of farms went into foreclosure; with fewer farmers, rural businesses failed, downtowns vacated and rural communities withered. Throughout the crisis, farmers fought back, protesting at state houses and in Washington, fighting through the courts and in the court of popular opinion, using tractorcades and white crosses marking the loss of farms to call the nation’s attention to the countryside. A Supreme Court decision eventually stopped the foreclosures, but the crisis in farm country did not end, it changed to a slow burn.

In the last thirty years, farms have gotten increasingly larger, equipment and inputs more expensive, and dramatic consolidation has shrunk farmers’ market options. The prices farmers receive for their goods dropped precipitously following the removal of all price stabilizations in the 1996 farm bill, and a patchwork of subsidies and insurance has not made up the difference. Throughout the 1990s, the fight became about confined animal operations, or factory farms. Citizen action in states like Minnesota and Missouri kept these states from being completely overrun by factory farms then and continues to be critical in demanding state enforcement of factory farm rules. Grassroots organizations such as Iowa Citizens for Community Improvement, Missouri Rural Crisis Center, (Minnesota) Land Stewardship Project, and the Western Organization of Resource Councils have rallied their farmer and rural members (along with urbanites) for decades on these and other fights, and continue to do so today. Through it all, there have also been the quiet farmers—those who may not have actively protested, but instead resisted by changing their own farming or land stewardship practices and influencing their neighbors to do the same.

I’ve written an online series of profiles telling the stories of how three modern rural Midwestern farmers have carried on this legacy and are working to make change in their communities. (You can read all three by going to http://grassroots.whyhunger.org/ and entering ‘farmer’ in the search box.)

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