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With the Sweat of Our Brows: A Qualitative Interview Study on the Meaning of Work for Illinois and Nebraska Family Farming Couples With Long Careers

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WITH THE SWEAT OF OUR BROWS: A QUALITATIVE INTERVIEW STUDY ON THE MEANING OF WORK FOR ILLINOIS AND NEBRASKA FAMILY FARMING COUPLES WITH LONG CAREERS

Sheri J. Hink

140 Pages December 2009

This qualitative interview study utilized a grounded theory approach to study the meaning of work for Illinois and Nebraska couples operating family farms together for at least two decades.

APPROVED:

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Date Barbara S. Heyl, Chair

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Date Joan M. Brehm

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Date Maria Schmeeckle

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Date Frank D. Beck

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This thesis explores the social identities and the work and business strategies of five farming couples who had long farming careers in the Midwest. Much of the literature presented within this thesis discusses the hardships that family farmers face in today's economy. However, the research also points to a strong attachment to farming and the farming lifestyle despite its many challenges. Using a qualitative interviewing method, I was interested in studying what meaning these farming couples attached to their work, including any gendered division of labor, and what survival techniques they had employed. I found that the five family farming couples from Illinois and Nebraska interviewed for this study used a variety of techniques best described as business savvy and technical knowledge to ensure their farms' survival. These techniques included making decisions about the types of products produced, farming techniques, and financial planning. All of these decisions were made amidst a changing cultural climate and strongly influenced by their connections to family, friends, neighbors, the land, and the farming lifestyle.

Throughout this study I used a grounded theory approach, utilizing the detailed information given to me by those interviewed to identify relevant concepts and the relationships among these concepts. Qualitative interviewing allowed these couples to identify and describe to the researcher what aspects of work and farming were most important to them and why. The data derived from the in-depth qualitative interviews, the follow-up interviews, and their subsequent inductive analysis can be used by the larger family farming community. These data shed light on how these family farming couples created meaning and life interpretations of their work. The data presented in this thesis will allow interested parties now and in the future to hear how farmers at the beginning of the twenty-first century did their work and ensured their survival.

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SHERI J. HINK

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S. J. H.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

I proposed a thesis project in which I would study farming couples and the meaning they attached to work related to their farming careers. I wanted to investigate if farming was considered to be an occupation or more of a way of life to the couples interviewed. Even more specifically, I was interested in studying couples who had been farming for two or more decades. I was most interested in how farming couples not located near cities have survived and how they handled work issues. Many of the research articles I had seen on rural issues had focused on families who were farming somewhat close to metropolitan areas. I felt that the experiences of individuals in more isolated areas may have been more challenging than the experiences of individuals who are closer to population centers; I was interested in couples farming in parts of Nebraska and central Illinois where there was greater geographic distance between towns throughout their region. I wanted to do this research with farmers who were located in various locations within Nebraska and Illinois.

The couples that I wanted to interview for this project were couples who had been in farming for many years, preferably their entire working career. To meet my selection criteria, the couples I sought could be farming with partners or with family members, including their children, but I wanted to select those

couples who still had direct and, at the time of interviewing, active participation in the farming operation in some manner. Using contacts known through work and/or school, I selected and invited into my research project five couples, three in Nebraska and two in Illinois, who met my criteria. All five couples agreed to participate and be interviewed. Two of these couples (one in Illinois and one in Nebraska) were over 70 years of age, the two remaining couples in Nebraska were in their mid-fifties, and the last couple from Illinois was in their mid-forties at the time of the interviews. In all of the couples interviewed, one or both of the individuals were still actively performing the farming duties. All the couples I interviewed had engaged in grain farming as well as livestock production, either previously or at the time of interviewing. All couples had a combination of farm ground that they owned and some that they rented from others.

I began my research by focusing on the following three topics identified from the literature that served as research questions. In addition to addressing these large topics, I also planned to seek out ways in which these experiences and their meanings varied for men and for women:

1. How was the social identity of these five farming couples in Nebraska and Illinois encompassed by their farm? How was their social identity influenced by their farming? How did their social identities, both as individuals and as couples, shape the way they viewed their place within the grander social scheme?

2. What was the couple's division of labor both on and off the farm? Did work carry the same meaning for the men and women in my sample?

3. How, if at all, had their farming careers or views of farming as a career changed as they aged?

What I found through the interview process, which was done with a qualitative grounded theory approach focused on empowering the respondents to give in-depth responses, was that the couples I interviewed were not much interested in discussing the ways in which farming shaped their identities. Instead, they wanted to focus on the daily process, the stories of decisions they made, and what means they utilized to get their work done. However, I found that data on identity and a gendered division of labor were embedded in the detailed descriptions of their work tasks as farmers and members of their local farming communities.

The focus of this study centered, both originally and ultimately, on what can now be stated as one broad research question:

> What is the meaning of work for couples who have been farming together for at least two decades and how do they explain their survival as family farmers into the twenty-first century?

This overarching question drove the research methods utilized during the study with the goal of allowing the couples to guide the interviews so that we could adequately explore their means of survival.

Brief Background and Context for the Study

I was aware, from my own background and more recently from readings on this topic, of a sociological trend: the family farm is a way of life that is fading, while cities are growing. Our country was settled, for the most part, by small family farmers who took advantage of the vast new country to forge a life for themselves and their families. As the country began to industrialize, the number of family farms began to decrease as people began to move to cities. A recent

report shows that, while the number of farms is decreasing, the land size of farms is increasing, and that while small family farms are seldom profitable, they still account for 91 percent of all farms in the United States (Hoppe 2001). Profitability, then, is correlated more with large agri-business operations, leaving the family farm in jeopardy.

History of Farming as an Occupation

In the 1980s newspapers and television were full of information about the farm crisis. Before we can discuss difficulties and advantages that farmers have today, we must first take a look back at what has happened within farming during the previous decades. During the 1970s farmers were encouraged to take on an "expansionary management style," which contrasted with the prior generation's style of avoiding debt and risks (Elder, Robertson, and Ardelt 1994:86). This culture of expansionary management lead to high levels of debt for many U.S. farmers during the 1980s and, as a result of the debt and other economic conditions, many left farming. When these families left farming, they suffered multiple losses. Subsequent chapters will document that farming is seen by many in the profession as more than just an occupation but instead as a way of life. It appears that these farmers' identities were very much encapsulated by their farm, and so, when the farm was lost, it was a traumatic event. Families who lost their farms during the 1980s remain in trouble (Elder, Robertson, and Ardelt 1994). In their study of farming families, displaced farming families and non-farming families, Elder, Robertson, and Ardelt (1994) found that displaced farming families continue to experience more financial strain than other types of families.

Context and Rationale for the Project

I am from a very rural area, southwest Nebraska, and therefore I had a great interest in both preserving a history of the experiences of the people who live and work the land in such places and also for advocating for the needs of people in these areas. As someone who had grown up in an agriculturally dominant community, I was often told that the "world" was unaware or uncaring of the hardships faced by family farmers. The inspiration for this project is deeply rooted in a desire to document and share the trials and successes of these five family farming couples with the hope that their stories will speak to other family farmers who have faced similar hardships and successes.

Many find it empowering to tell their stories (Heyl 1997), and it is my hope and belief that this happened for the members of my sample. Based on my selection criteria (age, length of time as an active farmer, geographic location, etc.), detailed in Chapter III, the farming couples interviewed in this study were survivors—farmers who have had long careers in family farming, able to over-come the highs and lows of the changing farming industry. Due to the fact that I grew up in a farming community and farming family, I realized that I needed to be aware of potential biases that could be present during data collection and analysis, as well as consequences related to my potential role as an insider/outsider within the state of Nebraska. Further discussion on potential biases and role challenges will be raised in Chapter III of this thesis. The contextual basis of this project centered on my sense of the importance of understanding and documenting just how some of those couples engaged in

family farming over decades have survived and been successful in their family business as farmers.

Farming Facts—Family Farming as a Dying Occupation

Family farming is a dying occupation. The 2001 U.S. Farm report (USDA) showed that the number of farms is decreasing and the land size of farms is growing (Hoppe 2001). More than 60 percent of U.S. farms ended 1998 with a profit, in fact large ($250,000 yearly sales) and very large ($500,000+ yearly sales) farms produced 53 percent of the value of agricultural production in 1998 (Hoppe 2001). However, 91 percent of all US farms are small family farms (sales of $1,000 to $249,000 per year), and they accounted for 33% of total agricultural production in 1998. Small family farms also own 69 percent of all farming assets (68 percent of the land) in the United States, which gives them an important role in national policies (Hoppe 2001). In other words, the small family farmer must compete with larger and larger farms, many of which may be industrialized corporate farms. All these facts and figures make family farming seem appealing; that is until one realizes that these farms are seldom profitable (Hoppe 2001). Therefore, their plight takes on special importance when discussing these issues.

Farming is still the lifeblood for many rural areas, and studies show that, if the current trend continues, there is a real possibility that rural communities may face decline should family farming truly die (Tickamyer and Duncan 1990). One of the main difficulties faced by small farmers is financial difficulties. When family farmers face economic difficulties, they must look for a way for both their business (their farm) and their family to survive. Transactions that mortgage

future income (use savings, loans, credit) can serve as the first line of defense in hard times and are commonplace in the agricultural world of farm families (Elder, Robertson, and Ardelt 1994). As was seen in the 1980s when large numbers of farmers went bankrupt or otherwise left the business, the financial burdens of farming are important to discuss because of their effects on the individual farming families and rural communities. For my purposes, I will not discuss debt-to-asset margins of farms but instead focus on how farming families coped with their financial difficulties and how their self identities, marital, and familial relationships are affected, which are popular topics within the current literature (Berkowitz and Perkins 1984; Dorfman and Heckert 1988; Elder, Robertson, and Ardelt 1994; Elder, Robertson, and Foster 1994; Lobao and Meyer 1995; McKinley Wright 1995; Rosenblatt 1990). These topics are closest to my research focus on how these couples had constructed meaning and identity in their work. It is important to document how some family farming couples who are still farming today in Illinois and Nebraska describe their work over time.

Introductory Literature Review

Farming—A Family Occupation

Positive and negative aspects of family farming. As discussed above, for many farmers today farming is a family occupation. As with any occupation, there are positive and negative aspects of family farming, and I introduce both here as relevant frames for my interview findings. I first focus on the research that illuminates some of the positive aspects of farming. In a study of rural home workers (not farmers), it was shown that the home workers lack standard work-

days, their work has many interruptions, and those studied did not try to achieve a typical 8-hour work day; in fact, the concept was foreign to them (Beach 1987). I bring this literature into my discussion of farming because I feel that rural at-home work and farming have many similarities. In the literature on farming, flexibility and independence are two important positive aspects of farming that repeatedly appear as positive examples of why farmers enjoy their work. Farming is also at-home work, the prime difference being that much of that work is outside of the house. Family farmers have the flexibility to do some of their farm work around other commitments. Beach finds similarities in the schedules kept by these home workers and the agricultural economy of the pre-industrialization past. Farm work integrates into family life; it blends farming and family roles, work and leisure roles, and self-direction with cooperation (Elder, Robertson, and Foster 1994).

As I mentioned earlier, farming is more than just an occupation. It is a way of life, and the belief of what farming entails goes beyond the farming community. For example, Fink (1992) locates these ideas in early American culture:

> Agrarianism, the belief in the moral and economic primacy of farming over other industry, rests firmly at the base of the collective U.S. ideological framework. Reaching from the pre-Revolutionary period to the present, agrarianism has been first a founding vision and then a sustaining ideal of the good life. (P. 11)

Sociologically, farming and agriculture include not only the processes involved in growing and harvesting a crop, but also the meanings, concepts, and identifiable practices that all contribute to how society at large sees farming and those who choose farming as a career (Liepins 2000). Images of self-reliance, resourceful-

ness, civic pride, family strength, concern for neighbors and community, honesty, and friendliness are seen by farm family members as their own (Garkovich, Bokemeier, and Foote 1995). Therefore, the meaning that farmers attach to their land and work becomes another positive aspect of family farming because they see the culturally accepted norms surrounding farming and agrarianism as their own, which becomes a source of pride in themselves and the work they do.

Research shows that independence is one of the primary areas of satisfaction felt by family farmers (Coughenour 1984; Elder, Robertson, and Foster 1994; Rosenblatt 1990; Sachs 1983). However, Rosenblatt (1990) states that the independence felt by and cherished by farmers has limitations, listing how farmers are dependent on weather and the economy which sets the prices of their goods, the price of their equipment, the interest rates and the taxes they must pay. Many of these areas of dependence lead to sources of stress for family farmers, the prime source of stress for family farmers being high levels of debt and financial strain. Elder, Robertson, and Foster (1994) found in their study that being in debt caused farmers to value hard work over anything else which caused them to place other things on hold. However, Rosenblatt (1990) found in his study that many of the farming couples he interviewed spoke of how facing the economic trials also made their family relationships stronger because they had faced the economic hardships together.

Farmers today work within constantly changing business conditions which may be one of the reasons they experience such high levels of stress. Garkovich, Bokemeier, and Foote (1995) have found through their studies of farm families

that “changes in farming, in the agricultural industry, and in rural communities have begun to erode the security of these nostalgic images” (Garkovich et al. 1995:9). Trying to cope with constantly changing economic conditions (debt and profit), which can have a significant effect, as well as other aspects and demands of farming makes depression common for farmers compared to non-farmers. People who farm constantly need to adapt. One of the things they need to adapt to is economic pressure. Families without sufficient income seek to reduce economic pressure in three ways: cutting back on consumption, raise income by changing jobs or adding workers to the workforce, or by living in a state of high debt—mortgaging future income through use of loans, credit and savings (Elder, Robertson, and Ardelt 1994).

One adaptation technique that seems to be very prevalent among farming families today is for one or both members of the couple to take off-farm employment (Elder, Robertson, and Foster 1994). Effectively managing a farming household includes making the most of what resources are there to meet family needs, matching income with standard of living, among other things (Elder, Robertson, and Ardelt 1994). In their study of Iowa farm families, Elder, Robertson and Ardelt (1994) found that most families have had to do these things at one time or another.

The research studies just reviewed fed into my interest in finding out why couples continued to farm, even though it appeared to cause so much stress. I was also interested in hearing how these families coped with their stress and what other strategies they formed as ways of combating the many uncertainties

they faced in their chosen occupations. I felt that these stories of adapting and overcoming sources of economic stress would also shed light on what meanings of work and the images of farmers these farming couples claimed as their own.

Gender roles on the farm. Since another core principle of farming is work, the issue of how that work gets done so that the farm can be successful is another question I brought to this thesis project. Both historically and currently, farming is most often thought of as a male-dominated occupation. In their study of farm women in Iowa, Elder, Robertson, and Foster (1994) found that, while women play important roles in the farming operation, their role was seldom the leader's role. According to the 2001 U.S. Farm Report, only 5 percent of all U.S. farms were operated by women in 1978 and that percentage has grown only to 9 percent in 1997. This number seems surprising considering the many changes that our society has seen in recent years concerning women and their role in business. Of the farms operated by women most commonly, they are small farms and they specialize in livestock production (Hoppe 2001).

Women regularly do bookkeeping on farms, but they are less likely to do field work and to participate in management tasks (Lobao and Meyer 1995). In their study of retired rural couples, Dorfman and Herckert (1988) found that even though respondents reported an overall decrease of household role segregation after retirement, results showed that the wife spent more time weekly doing household tasks than did the husband. They also found that husbands made more financial decisions and wives made more household decisions—before and after retirement. Therefore, the gender division of labor also became an

important area to study in my thesis on family farming. I was also interested to see if the couples in my sample experienced a similar change in their division of labor after retirement.

The different types of work done by farming women may also lead to additional stress. Women on farms perform a variety of tasks, both reproductive and productive (Sachs 1996). Reproductive tasks include a wide range of activities connected with family life. “Approximately three-fourths of the male and female respondents [from nonmetropolitan marriages] report that the wife always or usually performs the grocery shopping, prepares breakfast, and makes doctor and dental appointments” (Hardesty and Bokemeier 1989:259). Berkowitz and Perkins (1984) examined husband support of farmwomen. They found that the level of husbands’ involvement in farm duties was unrelated to wives’ perception of support, but that husbands’ involvement in the household was related to wives’ perception of support (Berkowitz and Perkins 1984). Regardless of the number of hours they spend on productive work (activities that contribute to the economic base of the family), farm women remain also responsible for the majority of reproductive work, and some tasks play dual roles (Sachs 1996). McKinley Wright (1995) states that the labor options for rural women range from generating income to reducing expenditures. Most women did a combination of both forms. Many farm women have stated that housework was nonessential and is squeezed in between primary responsibilities to the farm (Garkovich et al. 1995). Women’s responsibilities on the farm (or in the home) were often seen by themselves and their husbands as duties that could be put off and therefore they often

served as helpers in farming tasks when needed. They ended up having their own primary responsibilities, but also acted as helpers in other people's tasks, and this led to women doing more work overall (McKinley Wright 1995).

Berkowitz and Perkins (1984) found that the variable of "husband support" is the best determinant of the level of stress [for women]—stronger than the effects of actual role conflicts between home and farm or the actual workloads. Therefore, "…the degree of involvement in different roles and the potential conflicts between them may not be as important as the 'psychological climate' in which role duties are performed" (Berkowitz and Perkins 1984:164). I felt it was important to study why women's work on farms was often referred to as helping rather than simply working. It was important in my study to pay special attention to not only how the labor was divided, but how each member of the couple responded to that division and what meaning the individuals attached to the division of labor.

In addition to working in the home and on the farm, farm women also work off the farm to gain extra income. In a study of 35 older farm women, McKinley Wright (1995) found that farm women generated income by taking a job or kept money on the farm by working in the fields so they didn't have to hire farm help. However, only women in the most affluent families could afford to do expenditure-reducing work alone. In their study, Elder, Robertson, and Foster (1994) found that, while marriages usually survived wives' off-farm employment, the added stress of maneuvering between home, farm, and off-farm employment led to less than satisfying marriages for farm women. I believe this suggests that

women also enjoy the work on the farm.

From the information presented above, it appears that farm women's stress or discontent is more likely to come from over-work or lack of spousal support than it is with the actual work tasks to be done. "A good many women with farming roots longed for the time when they were on the farm and worked with their husbands [after they lost their farms during the 1980s farm crisis]" (Elder, Robertson, and Foster 1994:125). Therefore, there must be some sort of attachment to the farm for women as well. For my study, I was interested in learning how both men and women in the couples in this sample described their work and their attachment to farming after all these years in the business.

Farm Identity, Family Connections, and Community

Farmers also feel a sense of community with neighbors and family—identifying with a way of life. Rosenblatt (1990) found that one major part of the farming lifestyle that was valued by those in his study and was something they wanted to hold onto was freedom from control by others. He also found that farmers resisted leaving farming because it would mean a loss in a way of life (1990). "The work of a farmer entails elements of independence and connectedness, both with people and with the spiritual essence and biology of nature" (Elder, Robertson, and Foster 1994:119). Farmers who lose their farms or leave farming, for varying reasons, tend to move on to jobs connected to farming in some way (Rosenblatt 1990).

If their ways of generating or saving money are unsuccessful at reducing financial stress and the couple must stop farming, they must deal with other

issues. Such problems of making a living through farming conflict with goals of farming as a family tradition (Elder, Robertson, and Foster 1994).

> The loss is not merely a personal failure, but a failure magnified across the generations—from the son who will no longer have the chance to farm to the father and grandfather who saved the farm in the 20s and 30s. (Elder, Robertson, and Ardelt 1994:88)

Families and farms are greatly intertwined and on several levels. Research shows that many farms may have been passed down from generation to generation, but also that family farms require the labor of all family members to be successful.

Since family farms usually require that many of the family members work together to get the work done, especially during busy times like planting and harvest, they use all the resources available to them in an attempt to stay profitable. In fact, the desire to choose farming as a career is found to be influenced by things such as: prior experience of working on a farm, parental emphasis on the son's work role, the personal value of hard work, and parents' approval of the son's farming (Elder, Robertson, and Ardelt 1994). This list of influential factors shows how imbedded family farmers are in their social network. I was interested to see how my sample of family farmers today would articulate their connection to an identity as farmers, to family ties, to farming, and to the surrounding farm community.

Theoretical Literature

I have divided the brief descriptions of the theoretical literature below into three sections: symbolic interaction, grounded theory, and the life course perspective. Each approach is outlined in more detail in Chapter III. Each

approach has played a specific role within my research project, enhancing my research in different ways. I begin with a brief discussion of how and why I have chosen to employ a grounded symbolic interactionist perspective as the primary theoretical base for my research.

Symbolic Interactionism

My basic desire in this research project was to hear how the selected farm couples describe their experiences as farmers and what these experiences mean to them. I wanted to discover which aspects of farming and work were most salient to these farming couples and in what ways these impacted their lives. For these reasons, I based my research within a symbolic interactionist perspective using a grounded theory methodological approach. The symbolic interaction theoretical perspective has three basic concepts: that an individual's perceptions of his or her social reality is a social production, humans are capable of self reflection, and by taking a standpoint and molding it to others, individuals then interact with other people on that basis (Denzin 1989). "…[S]ymbolic Interactionism sees meanings as social products, as creations that are formed in and through the defining activities of people as they interact" (Blumer 1969:2). Through the use of this theoretical perspective I was able to glean the meanings the couples in my sample attached to their daily activities and their farming careers. Asking the farming couples to describe the stories of their experience gave me insight into their lives as they experienced them; I saw the values, the friendships and what the events meant to them. By telling me their stories, they allowed me into their social context.

Grounded Theory

More specifically for my research, I wanted to utilize a grounded theory approach so I could allow the individuals that I interviewed to speak out on what matters most to them in the context of their farming careers, thus empowering them to shape the study in the direction they felt was most important to their experience. In addition, each interview built on the ones before it, so that together we could probe deeper into a topic already identified as important in their lives. The initial interview with each couple began with my basic set of questions and, when appropriate, I asked supplemental questions from ideas brought to light by other farming couples. The questions for the second interview with each of the couples were informed by both their initial interview and the interviews of other couples completed by that point.

Individuals who choose to farm in today's society have many connotations placed on them by the culture, and not all of them are accurate or true, similar to the many other minority groups within society today. Based on this premise, which will be further explored in Chapter II, I felt that the group of people I was studying had often been "othered" by literature and the media. That was one of my prime reasons for wanting to utilize grounded theory approach in my study—to be able to base my conclusions on their words and interpretations. With this approach, my findings emphasized the points that were considered most important by those I studied and detailed the meanings they placed on specific events. The unique contribution of grounded theory is that what concepts emerge from open and detailed coding of the interviews have been grounded in the

words and descriptions given by the respondents. These concepts and themes are shown on the concept map of my thesis project as shown in Chapter IV.

The life course perspective was another supportive theoretical approach for my project. The life course is defined by short-term events in addition to larger-scale events that take place in an individual's life (Crosnoe and Elder 2002). Three main themes are important to the study of the life-course and aging—timing, process and context (Elder 1985). Elder states that timing refers to the sequence of roles an individual takes throughout his or her lifetime. The process refers to a focusing on how the individual transitions through different roles but not on a specific role. Lastly, Elder (1985) argues that context must also be taken into account because an individual's personal situation may be affected by the other aspects of their experiences. The study of these couples' farming careers as a segment of their life course requires understanding a wide range of complex occurrences that take place over time as well as looking at their pasts and their hoped-for futures (Settersten 2002). The life course perspective informed this thesis project through analysis of how the respondents entered into their farming careers, looking at the relationship of their entry into farming to the influences of their parents' involvement in farming and later their children's entries into farming. I was also interested in their responses to societal changes that have taken place during their careers. The focus in the interviews, allowing the couples to tell their stories, was designed to facilitate analysis of their life course trajectories.

Methods

This is an ethnographic qualitative study in which I conducted in-depth interviews with my research participants to hear what it had been like for them to be part of a farming family. I chose a sample of five farming couples from central and southeastern Nebraska and central Illinois. My sample is a theoretically purposeful one. I sought couples who had farmed together for at least two decades in order to be able to trace the changes and adaptations they made during their careers as farmers. It is a snowball sample; I relied on my friendship networks in both states to locate potential interviewees. I did not know any of the couples personally before the interviews.

The overall focus of this study was to determine what the meaning of work was for these five couples in Illinois and Nebraska and to look at how they explain their survival and adaptations as family farmers into the twenty-first century. The findings presented in Chapter IV show how the participants described their survival as family farmers as based on a combination of business savvy, vast technical knowledge, connection to family, friends and community and perhaps, most importantly, the willingness to perform hard work and put in long hours. The in-depth qualitative interviews and the grounded theory approach to analysis of data allowed these themes to emerge.

Contributions

The findings from my study of these five family farming couples were in many ways very similar to the findings I saw when reviewing the literature. The key item I learned from these five couples was that there was no clear-cut line

between their work lives and their home or family lives. As they told me their stories, I found that many times they could not describe how something affected their work lives without describing how it affected their family lives or visa versa. This finding illustrates how interconnected their labor and families are with one another. I will describe in Chapter IV how their work, knowledge (often learned from family) and social connections were fundamental aspects of their farming successes. The level of detail contained in the interview data is reflected in the multi-layered concept map. Indeed, the specific stories from these couples, covering decades of family farming, document for future family farmers how it was done at the turn of the millennium.

Preview of Chapters

Chapter I—Introduction

The first chapter of this thesis project has provided an overview of the entire project. It provided a brief background and contextual framework of the study as well as an introductory literature review and a brief introduction to the theoretical literature that guided the study. It also provided a brief summary of the methodology used while gathering and analyzing the project data. It concludes with a brief section on the contributions of this thesis project.

Chapter II—Review of Literature

The second chapter presents a review literature that is pertinent to this thesis project. It begins by giving a history of farming as an occupation and then continues to provide insights on positive and negative aspects of family farming as they have been presented in preceding research. Finally, Chapter II looks at

identity, family and attachment to the farm. This section of the literature review is the most pertinent to this thesis project, which focuses on the meaning of work for the five family farming couples interviewed.

Chapter III—Methodology

The third chapter offers a detailed account of the research methods utilized throughout this thesis project. It first examines the theoretical approaches which informed the methods used in the study and then details the research design of the project.

Chapter IV—Research Findings

The fourth chapter describes the farm work done by the couples interviewed as well as its meanings and the division of labor on the farms. The couples interviewed told how their experiences were encompassed by all kinds of work which required business savvy and vast technical knowledge. It concludes by telling how the family farming experiences of these five couples were enhanced by strong connections to other people, the land, and to the farming lifestyle.

Chapter V—Discussion

The final chapter provides a summary and interpretation of the results of this thesis project. It also provides a discussion of the limitations of this research project and the contributions made through the completion of the project.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

As described in Chapter I, the steady decline in the number of family farmers in the United States over the past several decades threatens the continuation of the family farming occupation. The review of literature in this chapter covers a broad spectrum of issues that affect family farmers in the modern era of farming. The review will provide a brief history of farming, the positive and negative aspects of family farming, and identity, family and attachment to the farm.

History of Farming as an Occupation

In the early 1900s, over 140 million U.S. workers were employed in agriculture; since that time, the number of workers in agriculture has dropped to less than 10 million which accounts for less than 2 percent of total U.S. workers (Hoppe, Korb, O'Donoghue, and Banker 2007). This study, which focuses on the long-time survival of family farming couples in Illinois and Nebraska, provides insights on the means the five couples interviewed used to remain in the farming occupation despite barriers to success, which will be discussed later in this chapter. As of 2005, only 2.1 million farms remained in the United States (Hoppe et al. 2007). This study demonstrates the tactics used by these five couples to remain successful family farmers.

It will be shown later in this chapter that the occupation of farming is affected by many outside forces such as family and community and, in turn, affects family and community. Therefore, this review of the literature will focus not only on the individual farmer but on the farming community as well. As mentioned in Chapter I, the farm crisis seen in the 1980s had an effect on rural communities, even when they were not that dependent on agriculture. One effect is the multiplier effect—farm income is spent in local communities, which, in turn, creates income for local public and private businesses (Heffernan and Heffernan 1986). Heffernan and Heffernan go on to state that the economic base in rural communities is fragile in nature; when any major income source is lost, it leads to community financial crisis.

Loss of farming also has psychological and social impacts on the community, which can compound economic problems. As Heffernan and Heffernan (1986:280) note, “Collective depression (extreme community pessimism) makes the attraction of new economic ventures in a community very difficult.” In a study of individuals who had left farming, Heffernan and Heffernan (1986) found that many of the farm families that had been forced out of farming felt that their communities had abandoned them. Prior to being forced out of farming, the families were actively involved in the community. After they were forced out, they withdrew from the community. When these farmers left farming, they took their leadership and in many ways their personal investments in their communities away with them (Heffernan and Heffernan 1986). The literature on the history of farming is what originally interested me in studying family farmers who had been

able to survive for many years. I wanted to discover what they had done to ensure their survival.

Positive and Negative Aspects of Family Farming

Positives

As discussed in Chapter I, for many farmers in the modern era, farming is a family occupation. Flexibility and independence are two important aspects of farming that repeatedly appear in the literature as examples of why farmers enjoy their work. The feeling of freedom from control by others is an aspect of farm life that many people cherish and want to maintain (Rosenblatt 1990). However, research also shows how that level of independence for farmers is changing.

> A major contradiction between the ideal and reality of the family farms is that the family farm is not independent. Farmers must produce for the market, which is often the world market. The prices they receive for their commodities are set by urban financiers. (Sachs 1983:71)

Family farmers no doubt value independence, but given the global context for agricultural products, the amount of independence they are able to achieve may be decreasing. However, farmers have not had the ability to set the prices for their products since the 1870s with the transportation revolution (Hoppe 2001), and they have never controlled the weather—two things that have significant effects on the success of the farm.

Flexible work hours are another positive aspect of family farming. Beach (1987) researched work satisfaction of rural home workers. Rural home workers share similar working situations with family farmers and, therefore, I believe that their experiences of work satisfaction are worth of mention in this discussion of

the positive aspects of family farming. “For these home workers, the interspersing of work with non-work chores and the opportunity to restructure the work schedule, was preferable to the conflict engendered by work-time demands in the conventional work world” (Beach 1987:415). Farm work integrates into family life; it blends the roles of family and farm, work and play, self-direction and cooperation (Elder, Robertson, and Foster 1994). Therefore, the work, energy, and time of farming family members must continually be renegotiated between the farm and the home. However, I feel that this flexibility with work hours and time is a part of what farmers enjoy about their work. They have the freedom to decide what chore they will do when and in what order, just as the home workers do.

Family solidarity also came across in the literature as a positive aspect of family farming. Rosenblatt (1990) found in his study that many farming couples found that facing economic hardships made their relationships stronger because they faced the difficulties together. Garkovich, Bokemeier, and Foote (1995) found that not all farmers see the stresses of farming in the same way. They found that some farmers see their farms and lives as full of risks and long for more control but that other farmers see these uncertainties as challenges and enjoy the gamble (Garkovich et al. 1995). Sonya Salamon went so far as to say that the stresses and gambling nature of farming in the modern era of farming makes farmers sound like modern pioneers (1992).

> Many people who were interviewed [in a Minnesota study] resisted leaving farming because the loss of the farm would mean the loss of a sense of self and a way of life that could never be duplicated were they to take up a different occupation. (Rosenblatt 1990:73)

These ideas are key to my research. It is important to continue the research on why farm families choose to continue within an occupation that has so many risks and potential for failure. It becomes important to study why they decide to stay in the profession and why it is so central to their identity and the meanings they attach to their lives. Rosenblatt stated that farmers who lose their farms or who leave farming typically choose new professions that are in some way connected to farming (Rosenblatt 1990). The attachment to farming is not felt by men alone. Elder, Robertson and Foster (1994) found that many women who had left farming during the 1980s yearned for the time when they worked on the farm with their husbands. Researchers have found that individuals who have left farming continue to speak fondly of the occupation and the "way of life." "…[D]espite the frustrations and discouragements they had experienced and the unpleasant realities they knew all too well, they continued to speak about attachment to the home place, to an identity, and to a way of life" (Rosenblatt 1990:76). This work will incorporate the ways in which identity with farming leads to attachment with the career despite negative aspects that must be overcome.

Negatives

In relation to the negative aspects of farming, Rosenblatt states that the independence in farming has limitations, "…since people who farm are at the mercy of the weather, the people and forces that set the prices for products and the cost of production and credit, legislators and county boards that establish taxes, and much else" (1990:74). These areas of dependence lead to stressors for family farmers, the primary source of stress being debt and financial strain.

“Indebtedness causes people to place many things on hold and to question the wisdom of anything other than hard work” (Elder, Robertson, and Foster 1994:106).

Trying to cope with constantly changing economic conditions (debt and profit), as well as other demands of farming, makes depression common for farmers compared to non-farmers; it also causes farming to be ranked as one of the occupations with the highest stress levels (Lobao and Meyer 1995). Perhaps one of the reasons that farmers experience so much stress in this era of farming is the constantly changing conditions in which they do business. People who farm for a living find themselves with the constant need to adapt. The defining characteristic of the lives of family farmers is “adapting to constant change in an endless search for the right combination of strategies that will bring them success” (Garkovich et al. 1995:17). However, farm families often feel that strategies, including planning, logic, and efficient decision making, may not be enough to guarantee their survival. They work amongst many conditions outside their realm of control including unpredictable weather and many other external conditions which they cannot control (Garkovich et al. 1995). It was common knowledge in the community where I grew up that farming had many downfalls. The review of literature on the positive and negative aspects of family farming helped me to separate perceptions from my personal life from those that had been academically researched. This literature helped me to ask more pertinent questions relating to the negative aspects of farming during my interviews with the couples.

Strategies: Adaptation, Specialization. and Growth

One of the things to which farming families need to adapt is economic pressure. One adaptation technique prevalent among farming families in the modern era of farming is for one or more of the family members to take off farm employment. When farm men and women decide to take employment off the farm, they do so because they likely believe that the income derived from that employment will allow the family to continue to live and work on the farm (Elder, Robertson, and Foster 1994).

As discussed in Chapter I, many small family farms do not make enough profit to support their families, and therefore many farming families have used off-farm employment as a strategy of subsidizing their income. Fellows and Lasley (1995) found that younger families with more education were more likely to opt for off-farm work as a means of reducing economic stress; these families were more likely to choose this option, in part, because having more education made it a more viable option. One of the issues that many times arose within farming families was the question of who was going to work off the farm and then, how the work that still had to be done on the farm would get done. When the amount of debt is high and there are fewer sources of other income, farm wives who work off the farm appear to be doing so out of necessity, regardless of whether either spouse wishes her to do so (Godwin, Draughn, Little, and Marlow 1991).

Due to financial difficulties in family farming, women, and more recently, men too, have had to go out into the workforce. “It is likely that even though many families took off-farm jobs as a temporary solution, these jobs may become

a permanent feature for many families" (Fellows and Lasley 1995:125). Elder, Robertson, and Ardelt (1994) stated that in the past 30 years the numbers of rural women in paid employment has risen to match the level of urban women (also Godwin et al. 1991). "Like their urban and suburban counterparts, farm women experience less stress associated with role conflicts between home responsibilities and work outside of home" (Berkowitz and Perkins 1984:164). Farm men, in opposition to farmwomen, take the second job as a result of economic pressures on the farm and their extra earnings are often put back into the farm itself (Elder, Robertson, and Ardelt 1994; Elder, Robertson, and Foster 1994). Differentially, farmwomen are more likely to apply their off farm earnings to family, not farm, needs (Elder, Robertson, and Ardelt 1994).

Another survival strategy, which is dependent on economic resources, is specialization of the products produced on the farm. Many farmers who wish to expand their farming operation have to choose between learning and incorporating specialized management and technical skills themselves or bringing on others who possess these skills (Coughenour 1984). In his analysis, Coughenour states that acceptance of new techniques is related to rapid change in farm size. It has also been found that specializing farm production is linked with an increased use of capital (White and Irwin 1972, Coughenour 1984). There are many incentives to increasing the size of a farm. In fact, few farmers are happy with the starting size of their farm and its associated farm income, and most farmers develop a strategy to increase their farm income (Coughenour 1984). Often when a farmer decides to retire, he/she will continue to farm on a smaller

scale and rent out a portion of the land, perhaps to a child who is starting his/her own farm. Coughenour states that as farmers age, full ownership of their farm increases, while their own tenancy decreases.

This literature on strategies of survival helped me to focus on the goal of understanding how the farming couples in my study managed to develop strategies that worked and allowed them to continue to farm for decades as a family. Indeed, this question of strategies turned out to be one of the topics the couples most wanted to explain.

Identity, Family, Attachment, and the Farm

The farm concept contains strategies and values for how to farm and care for their land and animals that have been passed down through the generations and passed down meanings and values attached to the land of the farm (Garkovich et al. 1995). Farm family members see images of self-reliance, resourcefulness, civic pride, family strength, concern for neighbors and community, honesty, and friendliness as their own (Garkovich et al. 1995). When these images change, it also changes the identity and meanings that family farmers associate with their occupation.

As our society has moved from an agriculturally-based country to industrialization and the post-industrial eras, the larger cultural views of farming are changing.

> The mechanisms by which the wider American culture is reinforced are to a large extent cut off from agrarian values. Politicians, teachers, and preachers tend to be drawn from non-farm groups or tend to adopt industrial values through their training. (Bartlett 1993:237)

I argue that the idea of farming and the farmer has been constructed to simultaneously include the positive traits of agrarianism and the negative traits associated with manual labor and careers associated with working the land. In a society that values education, particularly formal education, and sees prestige in white-collar labor, the image of the farmer begins to erode. Through this process the knowledge and skill set of the modern farmer has been "othered." I believe that individuals who choose to farm the land in the modern era of farming face many connotations placed on them by the culture, and not all of them are accurate or true, similar to the many connotations of other minority groups within society. Manual labor has earned a negative connotation in American culture. Farmers are aware of the evolving negative viewpoint of manual laborers, especially those who work in the dirt performing hard manual labor as farmers do, and "they experience a status ambiguity from their simultaneous roles as business owners and laborers" (Bartlett 1993:237). Farming requires many different types of work, including manual labor, business and time-management skills, and negotiations with vendors and buyers. Many farmers learn needed skills from early childhood through watching their elders negotiate the different aspects of the farm. Many farmers also seek formal education, but I argue that the most valuable skills in business, land, and animal management are learned through informal education that is passed from generation to generation. Bartlett (1993) asserts that the farmers' knowledge earned from a lifetime of experience of working with crops, animals and the weather has been devalued by society, disregarded, and replaced by computer programs designed to make sound decisions by some experts.

Work Identity

The way that farmers come to think of themselves is affected by their involvement with the larger society around them. A person's chosen occupation is one of the primary ways that social class is determined and is one of the most important ways in which people are identified socially (Carper and Becker 1957). Carper and Becker have identified three primary group expectations that influence the development of an occupational identity. First are generalized cultural expectations within the society in which an individual lives. Second are expectations of the family, and third are expectations of the occupational group (Carper and Becker 1957). Occupations differ on the timing required for commitment; some occupations can be entered later in life and others require early commitment (Carper and Becker 1957). Due to the many informal skills that are required by a career in farming, I feel that it is best described as an occupation that requires early commitment. Much of the research on farming shows that it is a career choice passed down from parents to children, often father to son. The research done by Carper and Becker (1957) on college students states that when a son chooses to pursue his father's occupation, he does so early and knows what that career path entails. Therefore, the occupational choice and identity become engrained early in life.

In a discussion of developing a farm work identity, it has been said that the essential part of forming that identity is creating a work role separate from other institutional roles held (Nosow 1962; Salz 1962; Coughenour 1984). Coughenour (1984) states that this creation of a separate role is even more important than the

farmer's activities. DeVault (1990) states in that language describing work is embedded in the male experience which can make it difficult for women to adequately describe their work; they often find the need to translate what they do into the common language which is embedded in the male experience. If the language of work is inadequate for women farmers, it could create difficulty in role identification for women farmers. The ways that the husbands and wives in this study identify with the farming identity was one of the research topics I wanted to discover.

In his discussion Coughenour (1984) provides rationale for the importance of role differentiation. He states that farm business is becoming less of a family enterprise because the scale, technical advancements, smaller family size, and off-farm employment encourage the development of an independent status-role (Coughenour 1984). The status and role of farmers in the modern era of farming has changed from past times due to the commercial nature of agriculture in this era. American farming is very similar to other industrialized occupations because it is engrained with dominant values, structures, and differentiation from family concerns (Coughenour 1984). However, as will be shown later in this review of the literature, the family farmer cannot completely separate the family and the farm because these two systems are intimately related to one another under his chosen identity as a family farmer. Coughenour identifies the new relationships with buyers of farm products and sellers of farm inputs as the most obvious changes (1984). He states that because of these changes, marketing skills and sophisticated management became necessary skills for farmers to have. Coughenour identifies four ideal characteristics of a farmer in the modern era of farming:

1. Rational planning in the enterprise system;
2. Role performance evaluated based on outcomes rather than expectations;
3. Ability to balance costs/benefits where net farm income is considered success and social worth; and
4. Identify themselves as farmers and recognize they are working within the norms of the farm enterprise system. (Coughenour 1984:6)

He continues his analysis by stating that the male head of household identifies farming as his occupation, whereas more women consider themselves as cooperators of the farm business. Coughenour's work documents the new technical expertise farmers need in the modern era of farming. I was interested to see if the farmers in my sample, who had been farming for decades, had too found the need to utilize this technical knowledge.

Due to their ties to communities and larger social systems, farm work entails both independence and connection to people and also to nature (Elder, Robertson, and Foster 1994). In the past, farmers were more dependent on neighbors, but new time and labor saving machines have limited their dependence on neighbors for sharing work (Garkovich et al. 1995). Garkovich, Bokemeier, and Foote (1995) state that less sharing of work leads to weaker ties and less time to visit with neighbors. However, there remains a strong sense of community between farmers, whether they are neighbors or two states away.

> Farmers, regardless of their location, have a common sense of struggle for survival. It is because of that universal bond that farm families understand the sense of helplessness and despair felt by those experiencing a drought, for example, and offer to help, although they may have never met each other. (Garkovich et al. 1995)

The norms and values of farming extend beyond the farm and their neighbors. Family farms are tied to a particular place, and their local communities

become the focus of their daily lives due to the nature of their work (Garkovich et al. 1995). The people with whom they do business are simultaneously business contacts and friends. Through this work I expected to see that the couples I interviewed have similar relationships with their family, friends and other farmers. For example, would they describe close family ties, the need for technical knowledge and less time with neighbors? I was interested in seeing how these complex relationships affected their personal and occupational identities and the work they did on their farms.

Farm and Family

The occupation of farming goes beyond simply being a career or a job. It is a group of tasks that does not end at a certain time of day, and these duties require a year-round commitment from all who work on the farm. Every member of a fam family works on the farm to some extent, whether daily or just when needed. The farm and the farm family are dependent on one another: decisions about the business affect the life course of family members and the household (Salamon 1992). In the course of their work family farmers often must make decisions that have potential to put the family and the farm business in opposition to each other. Where a decision that benefits the farm could potentially benefit the family, at the same time a decision that helps the farm could weaken the resources of the family. The members of the farming family hold several different roles, as described by Salamon (1992). In farming families, men are simultaneously husbands, fathers, farm laborers, and farm managers. Women are wives, mothers, farm partners, and household managers. Farm children are children,

siblings, heirs, apprentices, and play- or work-mates (Salamon 1992). While all of these roles are lived simultaneously, they are sometimes in opposition to each other. Decisions made by the father, mother, or child have potential to cause strain for the farm manager, business partner, or future heir.

This interplay between the family and the farm business has been termed the “agrifamily system” by Bennett and Kohl (1982), who stated that by thinking of the interplay as a system, it allows researchers to look into how the family negotiates between family and farm demands. The demands of the farm include needs of labor, capitol, and management while at the same time the family has kinship obligations, goals, and community integration needs. The interplay between the two sets of obligations comes into play when families must make trade-offs in regard to money, time and energy of family members. When the family has sons, it has been shown that farm families are less likely to hire labor to help with some farm responsibilities, which shows that farm families try to avoid hiring laborers from outside the family when possible (Wilson, Simpson, and Landerman 1994).

> Because the family is a dynamic system whose members age in concert, the family and the farm accommodation is a dynamic process. Household expansion through the birth of an heir can motivate enterprise expansion, just as lack of an heir can be the reason for decreasing farm size. (Salamon 1992:45)

Within the agrifamily system, the family unit and the farm business become two subsystems within the agrifamily system. The agrifamily system is located within a community milieu just as the community is embedded within a national structure, which consists of further systems (Salamon 1992).

Because of the interplay between the family and the farm, the family and family members are essential components of the farm. The majority of the people who work on the family farm are related and the farm (the land and the home) is a part of the family heritage (Garkovich et al. 1995). People born on farms all identify with the land, even if they do not identify with the farm buildings as a homeplace (Salamon 1992). The farm family goes beyond the traditional nuclear family to include extended families that live within close proximity. The extended family assists during busy times, and extended families loan, borrow, or pool resources such as farm equipment, machinery, labor, or advice (wanted or unwanted) (Salamon 1992). When the husband must work off the farm and the wife does not, he is most likely to get assistance with farm duties (such as plowing, fertilizing, and animal care) from other family members, but usually not the wife, as she usually only helps in production in the case of harvest (Wilson et al. 1994). The generations of farm families are intertwined and dependent upon each other and need to be treated as a system (Weigel, Weigel, and Blundall 1987). “[T]he very nature of the two-generation farm is itself developmental. It is a transition from the time when a father first starts farming alone to the time when a son or daughter has taken over complete control of the operation” (Weigel et al. 1987:47).

Although there is not one definition of a farm family, there are certain traditional trends that are prevalent within farm families. In a study that compared urban, rural non-farm groups and farm groups, it was found that the family structures of urban and rural non-farm groups were very much alike but that rural farm groups were different (Albrecht and Albrecht 1996). This study found that

farm groups have a higher proportion of married-couple families and are less likely to have female-headed households (Albrecht and Albrecht 1996). However, farm families who farm part-time are more similar to non-farm families. “Just as there is no homogeneous rural America anymore, neither is there a homogeneous farm America” (Albrecht and Albrecht 1996:460). The diversity within the farming population means that some parts of this population are more similar to the urban and non-farm rural population (Albrecht and Albrecht 1996).

Also due to the close proximity of the family and the farm business, farming couples share an understanding of work that is not often possible for couples that do not work together, and this understanding may play an important part in the commitment to the farming way of life (Garkovich et al. 1995). The home of farm families is different from many homes because it is a home and a business at the same time (Salamon 1992). Because they combine work and home, farm couples have a unique perspective where they are able to see the contradictions between the two types of work they perform as well as the positive and negative aspects of both (Garkovich et al. 1995). The interplay between the business and family allows family farmers to respond quickly to changes (Salamon 1992). There is a parallel relationship between the work done by farm husbands and wives; they may work on different things in different places, but their work supports the other (Garkovich et al. 1995).

Gender Division of Labor

Farm business and home responsibilities are most times divided by sex. Rickson and Daniels (1999) found that approximately 50 percent of the women in

their study reported that half of the decisions about household equipment were their sole responsibility and half reported that these decisions were shared with their husbands. In the same way, Salamon (1992) has found that couples in her study call themselves farmers and couples consider themselves a business management team, but that the team is led by the husbands. All members of the family were vital to the farming operation, but the women labeled their farm work as "helping" rather than simply as work (Salamon 1992). Women are less likely to have equal decision-making responsibility in choosing crop varieties, soil conservation strategies, and farm equipment (Rickson and Daniels 1999). Another study found that women are more likely to contribute to support activities, such as running errands; however, this also decreases when the wife takes off-farm employment (Wilson et al. 1994). Rickson and Daniels (1999) found that women were sharing farming responsibilities more in their study than in similar previous studies. They concluded that this may indicate that this sharing of responsibilities is crucial in order for the farm business to be successful. They also felt that these changes might be due to changes in the larger social system, such as changes brought on by the women's movement. Women also tend to be more involved in decision making if the husband does not farm with his father (Salamon 1992).

When farming is mentioned, it is most often a picture of a man that comes to mind. "['True' farmers]…is a composite gender identity drawing on constructions of farmers as men who are rugged, physically active in outdoor work, and knowledgeable and decisive in their farm management" (Liepins 2000:612). Even though the farmer is usually thought of as a man, women's labor is also central to

most farm production (Campbell and Bell 2000). The farmer is seen as a man who possesses the strength and skill to perform a variety of outdoor activities, where it is assumed that women will work either in the home or closer to the home than the man, even when this is not the case (Liepins 1998; Liepins 2000). The way that farmers are seen becomes important in research concerning farming families because of the power that is given to the assumed roles. Research has shown that farmers are seen as strong men. However, it becomes even more important when studying farming families in this era because just as women have been identified by researchers, such as Carolyn Sachs (1983), as "invisible farmers," Campbell and Bell (2000) make the case that men who farm have also been invisible because they were seen as the "norm." "Visible farmers were always men, but they were never visible *as* men" (Campbell and Bell 2000: 543—their emphasis). Campbell and Bell go on to say that if social scientists want to completely understand this phenomenon, we must understand how men are empowered as much as we understand how women are disempowered because "these are two sides of the same coin" (Campbell and Bell 2000:544).

Men who farm are highly skilled in many areas, including welding, machinist skills, electrical skills, plumbing, accounting and market speculation (Salamon 1992). As the technology surrounding farm business became more technical, farm men were forced to learn new skills in marketing and computer-ized bookkeeping, unless the tasks were taken over by farmwomen (Salamon 1992). "The relative isolation of the farmstead has made farmers adaptive, and they master as many skills as possible" (Salamon 1992:55). A man's contribution

to the farm changes from physically demanding tasks to mentally demanding tasks as he ages (Salamon 1992). Farm husbands are less likely to independently do work such as childcare, housework, or collaborative work such as harvesting and animal care (Wilson et al. 1994). Women are more likely to be involved equally in farm production activities than men are to be active in domestic tasks and childrearing; however, they are capable of these tasks if needed (Salamon 1992). Most times, farm men and their sons share production work, but support work is shared with or left to the wife (Wilson et al. 1994).

According to the 2001 U.S. Farm Report, only 5 percent of all U.S. farms were operated by women in 1978, and that percentage had grown to only 9 percent in 1997. This number seems surprising considering the many changes that our society has seen in recent years concerning women and their role in business. Of the farms operated by women, most commonly, they are small farms and they specialize in livestock production (Hoppe 2001). Farmwomen play important roles on the farm, but their role is seldom that of the leader (Elder, Robertson, and Foster (1994). Even though women often perform work on farms, they do so under men's direction or to increase the income for men (Sachs 1996). Women's work on the farm does not include control of income, decision-making, or increased status (Sachs 1996). Farm women do not benefit equally in the occupational inheritance of agriculture; they are often excluded from necessary agricultural resources and information (Leckie 1996).

This exclusion comes about through the ongoing social processes of agrarian patriarchal culture, operating both inside and outside of the agrifamliy

unit (Leckie 1996). Women do not have the same skills that men do when they enter agriculture because they have not been socialized to have the same knowledge and skill as a man, which makes it difficult for them to gain the same level of credibility in farming (Leckie 1996). In a study of farm magazine success stories, it was found that the narratives mostly overlooked women's contributions to success and these narratives have separated the farm business from the farm family (Walter and Wilson 1996). As has been presented here, much of the other research states that farm and family are integrally connected, forming a unit of production that includes both household work and farm work. Walter and Wilson (1996) found that when women's contributions were mentioned, it was more likely for their commercial contributions rather than their household contributions to the farm. In other research it has been argued that women's household work is integral to the success of the farm. They state that the treatment of women in these success stories reinforces the idea that the farm business and the household are separate, and that they are only meshed by women's occasional entrance into farm labor (Walter and Wilson 1996).

Women on farms perform a variety of tasks, both reproductive (caring for the home and family) and productive (creating income) (Sachs 1983). A study by Hardesty and Bokemeier (1989) found that approximately three-fourths of people in the study reported that the wife is most likely to do the grocery shopping, cooking, and making appointments for the family. Regardless of the number of hours they spend on productive work, farmwomen are responsible for the majority of reproductive work, and some tasks play dual roles (Sachs 1983). Many farm-

women have stated that housework was nonessential and is squeezed in between primary responsibilities to the farm (Garkovich et al. 1995). McKinley Wright (1995) found that work designated as “women’s work” is often seen as work that can be put off in favor of other farming tasks by men and women, therefore women often served as helpers in farm tasks and many times ended up performing more work overall. Women habitually do the farm books, but they are less likely to work in the fields or complete management tasks (Lobao and Meyer 1995). Garkovich et al. (1995) offer insights into why the farm’s bookkeeping is typically done by women. They state that women generally do the bookkeeping because they are the ones to purchase supplies, have more formal education (especially within older couples), and because bookkeeping is done at home when time allows.

I used this literature on the gender roles of men and women farmers to guide my thoughts as I planned the original structure of the interviews, which was to have the initial interview with the couple and follow-up interviews with each husband and wife separately. Chapter III contains a discussion of the reasons that we were unable to complete the individual follow-up interviews, conducting follow-up interviews with the couples instead. Therefore, ultimately I used this body of literature on the gender division of work to guide my thoughts and probes during the interview process.

Attachment to a “Dying” Occupation

If income generation or saving money is unsuccessful at reducing financial stress and the couple must stop farming, they again must deal with other issues.

The problems associated with making a living by farming conflict with the incentives of farming as a family tradition (Elder, Robertson, and Foster 1994). Families and farms are greatly intertwined and on several levels. Farming families have low levels of family conflict and have strong interdependence between family members (Swisher, Elder, Lorenz, and Conger 1998). This literature on identity, family, attachment and the farm helped me to gain a better understanding of potential motivating factors for long-time family farmers to stay in the business. In fact, during the interviews we spent a great deal of time discussing the issues this body of literature brought to surface.

Conclusion

Through this work I hoped to see what held these five couples within farming despite the overwhelming challenges they faced and the chance for limited success. A vast amount of research has been done on the topic of farming, and I chose to focus on the areas presented here because I anticipated that these issues surrounding the family and farm will be most relevant to my research of older farming couples in Nebraska and Illinois. I chose topics that I felt would help me to better understand the issues and concepts I wanted to study. By conducting a qualitative interview study with five couples in Nebraska and Illinois, I sought to discover the meaning of work for these couples and how they explained their own survival as farmers.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

The methodology of this thesis project was developed using elements of three theoretical approaches, with the ultimate desire to empower the individuals interviewed. I wanted the couples I interviewed to guide and help define the direction of this research, because they are the experts of their experiences. In the following pages I will describe the parameters I used for selecting the research respondents and how they ultimately changed the course of this study.

Theoretical Approaches

This ethnographic study was completed with the ultimate goal of listening to those interviewed and telling their stories of the meanings and interpretations of work for them as family farming couples. I communicated to each of the couples I interviewed that they were the experts and that I was an avid listener who was there to learn what they were willing to share with me about their farming experiences. It has been shown that it is empowering to have someone else listen to your life story attentively (Heyl 1997).

As mentioned in Chapter I, the theoretical approach to this thesis project was influenced by symbolic interactionism as the primary theoretical perspective, supported by the grounded theory approach and the life history perspective. Below I will describe how each of these four prospective influenced this thesis project.

Symbolic Interactionism

A major premise of Symbolic Interactionism states that meaning evolves within a social context; meaning is typically constructed in the process of inter-action (Blumer 1969). The process of interaction as a term and concept reminds us that social events, and the construction of meaning, don't happen all at once but instead they happen in steps; first one then another with each event creating a new social context for the next (McCall and Becker 1990). Denzin (1989:5) connects meaning and action in Symbolic Interactionism: "Integral to this perspective is the view that the social world of human beings is not made up of objects that have intrinsic meaning. The meaning of objects lies in the actions that human beings take toward them." Since individuals follow a line of action based on their interpretations, in order for me to understand the actions of these family farmers, I needed to hear their interpretations of the "objects" and changing circumstances of their lives as family farmers. As Blumer (1969) notes:

> The contention that people act on the basis of the meaning of their objects has profound methodological implications. It signifies immediately that if the scholar wishes to understand the action of people it is necessary for him to see their objects as they see them. (P. 50-51)

I wanted to learn from the couples I interviewed which aspects of farming and work were most important to them and what those aspects meant to them and how they affected their lives. This is why I based my research within a symbolic interactionist perspective and used a grounded theory methodological approach. In an attempt to derive the meaning interviewees attach to their farming careers, I utilized some of the advantages of ethnographic interviewing.

This methodological approach allowed interviewees to shape both the research themes and the direction of the study through my contacts with interviewees over time and the subsequent rapport developed through the interview process (Heyl 2001).

Grounded Theory

I utilized a grounded theory approach to the interviews conducted for this study because I wanted the interviewees to be able to speak on matters that were meaningful to them in relation to their farming careers. In turn, I strove to empower them to influence the direction of the study to concepts that were most important to their family farming experiences. “Grounded theories, because they are drawn from data, are likely to offer insight, enhance understanding, and provide a meaningful guide to action” (Strauss and Corbin 1998:12).

I feel that individuals who choose to farm in today’s society have many connotations placed on them by the general culture; not all of them are accurate or true, similar to other minority groups within society today. Based on this premise, which was explored in Chapter II, I felt that the group of people I was studying had often been “othered” by literature and the media. I utilized a grounded theory approach because I wanted to hear and tell the stories of their experiences from their own words as much as possible. Therefore, I went into each interview with a basic set of questions (see Appendix B), but asked them in a way that the interviewees could guide the direction of the conversation based on the aspects of their farming careers that were most important to them.

Careful analysis of transcribed interviews facilitated identifying a conceptual framework grounded in the interview data. Through open coding of the data, I strove to identify and describe the meanings the couples interviewed placed on specific events. The concepts that emerged from this detailed coding of the interviews are grounded in the words and descriptions given by the respondents. With this technique, the analysis highlights the points that were considered most important by those I interviewed. I provide further discussion on how I analyzed my data in my section in this chapter on data analysis and interpretation.

Life Course Perspective

The life course perspective was a supportive theoretical approach which informed this thesis project by illuminating how the respondents' farming lives were influenced by preceding generations and various events that happened throughout their lives. The challenge of understanding the life course involves looking at the intersections of a vast range of issues that take place over time (Settersten 2002).

> Taking into account timing, process, and context, the study of aging and gender from a life-course perspective becomes an investigation of pathways, of connections between different phases of life, and how circumstances in early childhood may affect health and social integration later in life. (Moen 1996:177)

The life course perspective is an intersection of sociology and psychology because it looks at how individuals "grow and change in sociohistorical contexts" (Crosnoe and Elder 2002:311).

The life course approach focuses on the changing contexts that surround the lives of the respondents and the subsequent consequences for human

development and aging (Elder and Kirkpatrick Johnson 2003). This study demonstrates the adjustments these couples made over the course of their farming careers, such as producing different products, acquiring land, or using new farming techniques, and the cultural contexts that influenced those adjustments. I asked the couples I interviewed about their children's involvement in farming and if their children chose farming as a career path. We also discussed how changes within larger society influenced their decisions throughout their farming careers. The focus on these things in the interviews allowed the couples interviewed to tell their stories and helped to facilitate analysis of their family farming life course trajectories.

Research Design

This thesis project is an ethnographic qualitative study where I conducted in-depth interviews with five family farming couples to learn their experiences as members of farming families.

Sample

The sample for this thesis project consists of five family farming couples from Nebraska and Illinois. Three of the couples I interviewed were from central and southeastern Nebraska and two of the couples were from central Illinois.

The state of Nebraska is 430 miles across and 210 miles long (NETSTATE 2001). It has a total land area of 76,872.41 square miles (U.S. Census Bureau 2009). From personal experience, I know that Nebraska varies in climate and landscape from east to west and top to bottom. The state of Illinois is 390 miles long and 210 miles wide (NETSTATE 2001). Illinois has a total land

area of 55,583.58 square miles (U.S. Census Bureau 2009). The central region of Illinois, where two of the couples in my study were located, I found to be most similar to the eastern part of Nebraska, though I experienced higher amounts of moisture throughout the year during my time in Illinois than I had observed in eastern or western Nebraska. I was interested in seeing whether the interviews revealed differences across regions or whether strong similarities in farming experiences emerged despite demographic, environmental, and geographic differences within the sample.

My sample was developed through referrals from my own contacts and friendship networks and those of individuals I knew within the two states. None of the couples were personally known to me before beginning the interview process. When searching for potential couples to interview, I had three basic requirements. First, I wanted to interview married or cohabiting couples. Second, I wanted interviewees who had been involved in farming for at least 20 years so that we could discuss the changes they had experienced throughout their farming careers. Finally, I wanted to interview couples who were still actively involved in the direction and work being done within their farming operation. All of the couples ultimately interviewed met these three criteria.

As shown in Table 1, all five couples had been married for several years; the shortest marriage was 22 years and the longest married couple had been married for 56 years. The youngest couple, Todd and Sue Olsen (pseudonyms) from Illinois, was in their early to mid forties at the time of the interviews. The oldest couple, Don and Edna Davis from Illinois, was in their seventies at the

time of the interviews. At least one member of each of the couples had also been involved in farming for their entire lives.

Table 1. Family Farming Characteristics of the Five Couples Interviewed

	Illinois Couples				Nebraska Couples					
	Olsen		Davis		Doe		Smith		Mays	
	Todd	Sue	Don	Edna	Gene	Suzy	Sean	Edie	Jim	Beth
Age (at interview)	44	43	78	72	77	71	54	55	51	51
Years married (at interview)	22		56		53		33		36	
# Years farming (at interview)	26		60		51		32		40	
Grew up on a farm	X	-	X	X	-	X	X	-	X	-
Inherited/gifted land from family	X		-		-		X		X	
Held off farm employment	X	X	X	X	X	-	-	X	X	-
Participate in farming decisions	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Value "independence"	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Kids help on farm	X		X		X		X		X	
Helped kids start farming	-		-		X		X		X	
Kids now in farming (at least 1)	-		-		X		X		X	

All of the couples had at least one person who had been raised in a farming family, and all conveyed that they considered their endeavor into farming as a natural progression. They spoke with pride about the future of farming within their families. All of the couples had involved their children in the farming operation in some way during their childhood. Each of the couples also expressed at least a small desire for farming to continue into the next generation,

even though it had not happened for all the couples. Another universal point that came from all of the interviews was that they enjoyed the independence that their farming careers brought to them. More of the specific themes that arose from the interviews will be discussed in later chapters.

Interview Process

I conducted in-depth interviews with each couple. The initial and follow-up interviews with the two couples in Illinois were completed prior to the initial interviews with the couples from Nebraska. I interviewed each of the Illinois couples for the first time before beginning the follow-up interviews. This same pattern was followed during the interviews with the Nebraska couples; the initial interviews were completed with each of the couples prior to the follow-up interviews with the other Nebraska couples.

Prior to beginning the initial interviews with each couple, I explained my research project to them, making it clear that their participation was completely voluntary and that they could withdraw their participation at any time. This information was also covered on the Informed Consent Letter (see Appendix A), which included contact information for Institutional Review Board (IRB) officers, my thesis advisor, and myself. I had a basic set of open-ended questions (see Appendix B) that I took with me to every initial interview. However, for subsequent interviews, the interview questions were developed from themes that arose during the first interview with that couple. In the follow-up interviews I also asked questions about themes that arose in interviews with other couples, when it seemed appropriate.

I had an initial goal of learning about the meanings the couples attached to family farming and the gender division of work. However, as the interviews progressed I found that these topics, when addressed directly, were of little interest to the couples I interviewed. Instead, they wanted to talk about the actual tasks they completed in their work as family farmers and the decisions they made. We spent much of the interviews discussing the different decisions that had been made and why they made them as well as what had influenced their decisions.

I anticipated that I would begin with initial interviews approximately an hour in length and then begin the process of re-interviewing the individuals to gain more information and clarification of their experiences. My initial plan was to complete the first interview with both members of the couple and then do follow-up interviews with each person separately. Women are less listened to than men in mixed-sex dyads and in groups, and the topics they bring up are less likely to be discussed by the group (DeVault 1990). I wanted to talk to the women and men separately to see what, if any, differences in experience were discussed. However, each of the couples in my sample declined this interview technique, and so follow-up interviews were completed with both members of the couple together.

The couples declining to be interviewed separately was, in all cases, simple and matter of fact. For example, after I had explained to Sean and Edie that this first interview was with both of them and then I would like to interview them separately, Edie looked over at Sean, he looked at her, and then she said,

“That’s not necessary. We don’t need to do that. We share in everything together.” This was a first hint as to how the work these couples did was considered by them to be joint work and that drawing lines or seeking separate stories was “not necessary.”

The actual number and length of interviews varied depending on the individual couples, and I did not anticipate less than two hours of interviews with each couple. I did initial interviews with all five couples; the shortest initial interview was 1.18 hours and the longest was 1.83 hours long. I was able to conduct follow-up interviews with four of the five couples; the shortest follow-up interview was 0.53 hours and the longest was 1.48 hours long. Initial interviews averaged 1.61 hours in length and follow-up interviews averaged 1.14 hours. The total time spent interviewing these five couples was 12.6 hours. I was unable to conduct a second interview with Sean and Edie Smith. Due to an exceptionally busy season, they requested to conclude their participation as interviewees at that point. However, I felt that Sean and Edie’s first interview was thorough enough that I could include the information from their first interview despite the lack of a second interview. All of the interviews were conducted in the couples’ homes, as that was the location that seemed to be the most comfortable for them.

Ethical Considerations

I was cognizant of potential biases and role challenges as I planned for and conducted the interviews completed throughout this thesis project. I did not want the fact that I had grown up in a farming area and on an actual farm to keep me from hearing the stories that the couples interviewed were telling me. I also

did not want to interject accidentally my own experiences, or those of my family, on the data that came from these interviews. I felt it was important to disclose the fact that I had grown up on a farm to the couples I spoke with as I thought this would help build rapport. Therefore, I was open about my farming background when I met and explained my thesis project to each of the couples, but I told them I wanted them to assume that I knew nothing of their experiences and that I wanted them to explain things to me in a way that they would to someone who knew nothing about farming. During the interviews and the analysis I was very careful not to make assumptions based on my own experiences. When something came up in the interviews that I thought I had an understanding of from personal experience, I asked follow-up questions to make sure that I understood the situation from their perspective and not from my past personal experience.

During transcription, I changed all names of individuals and places to pseudonyms. The couples approved and in most cases selected or approved their name pseudonyms. The pseudonyms were used to help maintain confidentiality of all interviewed and/or all who were mentioned in the interviews. I assigned pseudonyms for their communities, keeping the same pseudonym whenever those towns were mentioned by other interviewees. While maintaining confidentially is always important, I felt it was especially important in rural areas because of the added risks that individuals mentioned could be identified. I took every precaution to assure this did not happen. As a safeguard to help insure confidentiality and also to ensure accuracy, I provided copies of the transcribed interviews and corresponding pseudonym key to interviewees so they could look

over the transcriptions for any inaccuracies and alert me to any accumulation of details that could reveal their identities. After the interviewees approved of the pseudonyms used, the pseudonym keys were destroyed.

I audio taped all of the interviews, after gaining permission from those I was interviewing. I also took field notes during all of the interviews as a precaution in case of a malfunction of the tape recorder or in case I could not understand the tapes. After I left each interview, I spent time going through my field notes to fill in anything that may be missing from my notes. I also listened to the tapes to make sure they were clear. If they were not, I went through my field notes again to put in as much detail as I could recall so I did not lose those data. All tapes and field notes were kept in a secure location and destroyed at the completion of the field research. I did verbatim (using pseudonyms) transcriptions of all interviews for a total of 357 pages of transcribed text.

Data Analysis and Interpretation

Since I utilized a grounded theory approach, my analysis consisted of reading, re-reading, and coding the verbatim transcriptions of the interviews. The purpose of grounded theory is to create theoretical conclusions that are derived from the data, systematically identified and analyzed through the research process (Strauss and Corbin 1998:12). To assign open codes to the transcribed interviews, I analyzed the interviews line-by-line and wrote a word or phrase that summarized the thought or idea that was being said in the line. During this time I was conscious not to attach words or phrases that I learned from the literature to

these interviews, but rather let the codes reflect closely the meanings shared in the interviews themselves.

After I completed open coding, I began to arrange these open codes into themes that were one step up from their open code. For example, open codes such as “changed brand of seed” or “switched to new fertilizer” were listed under the theme of “input choices.” The emerging themes were then arranged into main categories, such as “business decisions” or “financial planning.” Chapter IV reports the findings of this analytical process, including a concept map which assisted me with the process of identifying connections among the themes and categories. The map of themes and categories allowed me to communicate the information gathered from the interviews in a tightly organized, visual format. Chapter V compares the findings of this study to those found in the literature.

CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS: THE MEANING OF WORK FOR FARMING FAMILIES

This study was organized with a primary focus on the meaning of work for the selected family farmers. The findings of the meaning of work for these couples are presented in this chapter following the concept map, which is presented in Figure 1. All of the headings in this chapter correspond with their respective headings on the concept map. The entire concept map, which this chapter elaborates, is the presentation of data found on the broad research question. This broad question focused on the meaning of work for family farming couples and their survival into the twenty-first century.

In addition to the broad research question on the meaning of work and survival into the twenty-first century, the findings presented in this chapter also provide insights into the three research topics that were derived from the literature. The first research topic focused on identity; the findings relating to identity are presented under the sub-heading of “Identity Labels.” The second research topic derived from the literature focused on the division of labor and its meaning for the farming couples. The findings relevant to the division of labor are presented under the sub-heading of “Sharing Labor.” The third research topic focused on changes, including adaptations adopted by these couples to save time and maximize profits. The findings on changes and adaptations are

developed under the major heading of “Business Savvy and Vast Technical Knowledge” (see Figure 1: Concept Map of the Data Analysis on the Meaning of Work).

How these empirical results inform the research topics and address the broad research question presented in Chapter I on the meaning of work will be discussed briefly in the conclusion section of this chapter and in more detail in Chapter V. The discussion and conclusions can then benefit from a comparison in Chapter V of these data as well as other key findings of this chapter, with their relevant relationships to one another and the literature.

Conceptual Analysis of the Meanings of Work

The open-ended interviewing method allowed the couples to choose how to describe their work as family farmers and assign importance to certain aspects of the work over others. The grounded theory approach during coding and analysis revealed patterns in these descriptions. Thus, meaning could be seen in the three themes that emerged in all of these interviews, in spite of differences in farming locations in Illinois and Nebraska. The selection of couples with long and continuous careers in family farming and the focus on the meaning of work in the interview and analysis phases likely helped override possible geographic differences by location. These themes—the three major analytic categories—emerged along with multiple subcategories, and I sought to identify connections among these concepts. The schematic of these linked concepts is given in Figure 1.

The first theme that emerged from the analysis came from how these couples talked about the work of their lives. For these couples family farming

meant being called on to do all kinds of work, and they were proud of the variety of hard work they took on and accomplished. All of the couples partook in many different kinds of labor, long hours, and shared (and divided) labor among their family members. The work the men and women did also impacted on the identity labels they chose to answer the interview question about their profession. Quotes that illustrate these feelings and descriptions are presented later in this Chapter.

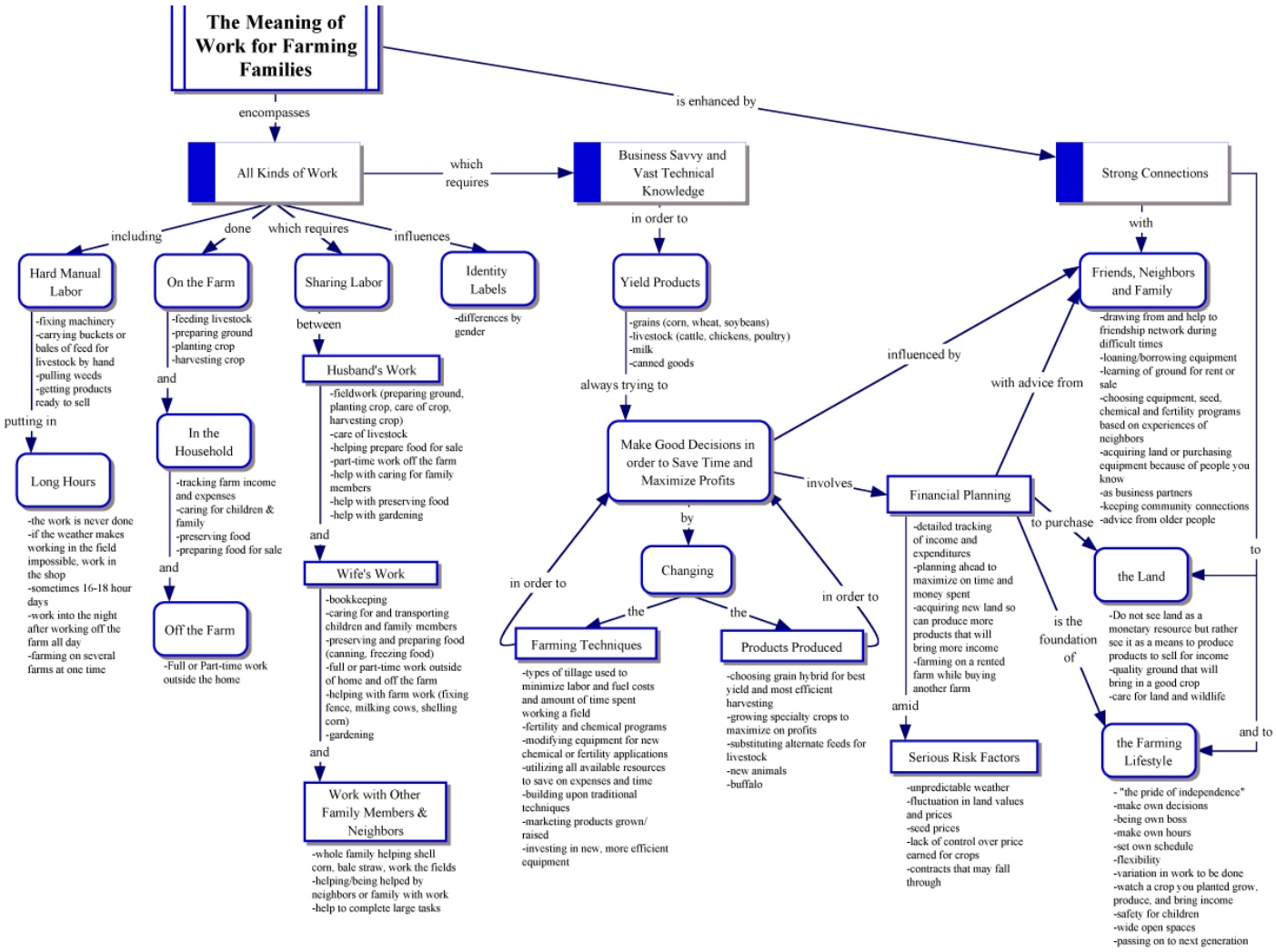
The second emergent theme focused on the strategies these couples had developed to help make their farm successful over their many years of farming. To these couples family farming meant having business savvy and technical knowledge. These family farmers used this business savvy to produce a variety of products, always calculating new ways to save time and money in the process. The couples were very conscientious regarding their financial situations and were always planning ahead in order to make the best profit so they could make a living off their farms. Good decision-making and adaptation were necessary to accomplish all the work that the farm required, all the while working amidst several serious risk factors, such as the weather and fluctuating grain prices over which they had no control. They were always mindful of new farming techniques and trying new products in order to make a higher profit margin and provide some security against an uncertain future for their farm business and their family.

The third theme that emerged was how this work was enhanced for these couples by the family, neighbor and community connections they had from which they gained help and advice. They also were ever mindful of the land that they worked as being the very basis of their family business enterprise and sought to

gain ever more to expand their farming operations. The couples also expressed strong connection to the farming lifestyle, including what Don Davis, a 78-year-old farmer from Illinois, described as the “pride of independence” that farming gave them.

Clearly, for these couples, the three major themes provide specific and key components of their broader social identity as family farmers. For example, a summary statement of these themes articulated as identity could be as follows: “As a farming couple, we are people who can do all kinds of hard work, have crucial business savvy and technical knowledge, and are vitally connected to family, neighbors and community.” The presentation of findings follows the concept map of these themes, their sub-categories, and their interconnections as presented in Figure 1. Referring back to this concept map[1] while reading this chapter will help you to better trace the interconnections between the themes and subcategories described under their matching headings in this chapter.

[1]Note on reading the concept map: The arrows on the lines connecting concepts in the map indicate not a causal link, but rather the direction for reading connections between concepts by making a sentence that specifies the link between the concepts. The map is designed to be read starting in the upper left reading that concept first, reading next the linking words located on the connecting line of interest, and ending your sentence with the concept closest to the arrow point. For example, the top linkage in the map should be read: The Meaning of Work for Family Farmers is enhanced by Strong Connections. You may want to start at the top left and read through all the linkages to “read” the map since some connections link through several concepts at once.


The Meaning of Work for Farming Families
encompasses
is enhanced by
All Kinds of Work
which requires
Business Savvy and Vast Technical Knowledge
Strong Connections
including
done
which requires
influences
in order to
with
Hard Manual Labor
On the Farm
Sharing Labor
Identity Labels
Yield Products
Friends, Neighbors and Family
-fixing machinery
-carrying buckets or bales of feed for livestock by hand
-pulling weeds
-getting products ready to sell
-feeding livestock
-preparing ground
-planting crop
-harvesting crop
between
-differences by gender
-grains (corn, wheat, soybeans)
-livestock (cattle, chickens, poultry)
-milk
-canned goods
-drawing from and help to friendship network during difficult times
-loaning/borrowing equipment
-learning of ground for rent or sale
-choosing equipment, seed, chemical and fertility programs based on experiences of neighbors
-acquiring land or purchasing equipment because of people you know
-as business partners
-keeping community connections
-advice from older people
and
Husband's Work
-fieldwork (preparing ground, planting crop, care of crop, harvesting crop)
-care of livestock
-helping prepare food for sale
-part-time work off the farm
-help with caring for family members
-help with preserving food
-help with gardening
putting in
In the Household
always trying to
influenced by
with advice from
Make Good Decisions in order to Save Time and Maximize Profits
involves
Financial Planning
to purchase
the Land
-tracking farm income and expenses
-caring for children & family
-preserving food
-preparing food for sale
and
Wife's Work
-bookkeeping
-caring for and transporting children and family members
-preserving and preparing food (canning, freezing food)
-full or part-time work outside of home and off the farm
-helping with farm work (fixing fence, milking cows, shelling corn)
-gardening
by
Changing
in order to
in order to
-detailed tracking of income and expenditures
-planning ahead to maximize on time and money spent
-acquiring new land so can produce more products that will bring more income
-farming on a rented farm while buying another farm
-Do not see land as a monetary resource but rather see it as a means to produce products to sell for income
-quality ground that will bring in a good crop
-care for land and wildlife
to
Long Hours
Off the Farm
and
Work with Other Family Members & Neighbors
the
the
Farming Techniques
Products Produced
is the foundation of
the Farming Lifestyle
and to
-the work is never done
-if the weather makes working in the field impossible, work in the shop
-sometimes 16-18 hour days
-work into the night after working off the farm all day
-farming on several farms at one time
-Full or Part-time work outside the home
-whole family helping shell corn, bale straw, work the fields
-helping/being helped by neighbors or family with work
-help to complete large tasks
-types of tillage used to minimize labor and fuel costs and amount of time spent working a field
-fertility and chemical programs
-modifying equipment for new chemical or fertility applications
-utilizing all available resources to save on expenses and time
-building upon traditional techniques
-marketing products grown/ raised
-investing in new, more efficient equipment
-choosing grain hybrid for best yield and most efficient harvesting
-growing specialty crops to maximize on profits
-substituting alternate feeds for livestock
-new animals
-buffalo
amid
Serious Risk Factors
-unpredictable weather
-fluctuation in land values and prices
-seed prices
-lack of control over price earned for crops
-contracts that may fall through
- "the pride of independence"
-make own decisions
-being own boss
-make own hours
-set own schedule
-flexibility
-variation in work to be done
-watch a crop you planted grow, produce, and bring income
-safety for children
-wide open spaces
-passing on to next generation

All Kinds of Work

The first major theme that emerged from the interviews with both the two Illinois couples as well as the three Nebraska couples was the emphasis they put on the variety in types of work tasks that needed to be accomplished on their farms. (See the far left of the concept map to view how this theme works with the other themes in this chapter.) The "All Kinds of Work" theme included descriptions of hard manual labor and putting in long hours. The types of work done by the couples interviewed also varied in where the work was done; for example, they described work that was done on the farm, in the household, and off the farm. These varying types of work required sharing labor between the husband and the wife, as well as other family members and neighbors. A summary of the work accomplished by these five couples, its meanings, and how it relates to preceding literature will be discussed in Chapter V.

Hard Manual Labor and Long Hours

Much of the work the couples in this study described was hard manual labor, such as fixing machinery, feeding livestock, pulling weeds in the garden, and getting products ready to sell. Don Davis, a 78-year-old farmer from Illinois, describes the type of work he and his wife Edna did on their farm in the early years by saying: "It was all labor, hand labor. We carried everything, you know, whether it was corn or whatever. It wasn't handy, like it is nowadays." An example of the couple working together is demonstrated when Don Davis described how he and Edna managed to clean up to 50 chickens a night after she got home from the office and he was back from the field.

> We always kinda worked together in an assembly-line fashion on the chickens and stuff like that. I'd put the water on, it'd be heating while I would kill … well 3 or 4 at a time. I think it was 4 at a time back then. Now we only do 3 'cause we've slowed down but. And then she'd go ahead and pick 'em. And she'd pick one and I'd pick one, then she'd take them two in and start dressing them and I'd pick the other two and bring them in, she'd dress them while the water was heating. I'd go back out and get 4 more and kill 'em, that sort of thing, and we worked together on that kinda thing. [laughs]

Although Don described the hard work required in times past, saying that things are "more handy" now, it became clear in our conversations that both he and his wife, Edna, still do many tasks now that require hard manual labor. For example, they still kill and dress their chickens and still have a large family garden. "Yeah, we had a big garden here all the time. [pause] Wherever we lived, we had a big garden. Yeah, we had a huge garden, and we canned everything" (Edna Davis). The big garden they kept, and still had at the time of interviewing, required a lot of work. The soil had to be readied for planting (usually Don's job), then they would plant the seeds, and it would need to be weeded, harvested, and eventually the bulk of the garden harvest canned. This work was done in addition to the fieldwork that Don did during the day and Edna's full-time day job, as well as feeding and milking all their livestock.

The experience of manual labor was similar for all of the couples I interviewed in Illinois and Nebraska. The amount of work done by these couples was astonishing. A good example of this comes from Gene Doe, a farmer in his seventies from Nebraska: "One summer, I was at the prime of my life, I loaded 'em on a truck and hauled 'em into a rake and stacked 'em into a rake, 80,000 bales of hay one summer by myself." Jim and Beth Mays from Nebraska

provided another example. Jim and Beth raised several varieties of poultry in addition to raising their grain crops, cows and buffalo. In one year they raised 1,375 ducks, of which 450 were butchered and sold, in addition to up to 400 turkeys and 300-400 pheasants. When asked how she and Jim managed all those birds, Beth replied,

> … [T]here isn't really time between the grain operation because we all work at the grain. And at certain times of the year I don't work [on the grain part of the operation], but when it's harvest, I do help with that. And the rest of the time we divide between feeding the ducks and (pause) there's quite a bit. We're not gonna have that many [ducks] again. [Jim and Beth laugh]

In addition to the hard physical nature of much of their work, all couples described working long hours in order to keep up with what needed doing; "The work never ends. It's an ongoing thing [the work on a farm], yeah. You can always fix fence" (Don Davis). The Olsen's, an Illinois couple in their forties, expressed similar views of work, discussing how Todd never seems to be caught up on the farm work he needs to do. Todd stated, "And sometimes that's good. Sometimes things you think you need to work on, you don't get to it and you don't get to it. Sooner or later something else comes along and takes its place and then you don't have to work on it." Similarly, Don Davis said, "Far as the hard work and all is concerned, there's a lot of it that's hard work, yes. But, I took that in stride." Both Todd and Don refer several times to the need to be flexible in what gets done and responding to unexpected circumstances.

During the interviews I asked all of the couples to describe a typical day during a busy season. Sean Smith, a 54-year-old farmer from Nebraska, told me:

> There isn't a *typical* day. Um… one thing you have to learn, I guess, is that nothing ever goes exactly like you want it to go. There's always something breaking down or the weather interrupts or…there's always…it's more of a management of problems as it is anything. But, ah… we would probably put in about a 14-15 hour day. Ah…during planting it would vary some. Some days longer, some days shorter.

Sean's response to my question was a succinct description of the types of answers I received from all of the couples. Their workdays vary greatly depending on the season, weather and what presents itself as the most important thing to attend to on any given day. The types of work needed to keep the farm successful also varied in different sites; that is, some of the tasks took place out in the field, the shop, the home, the garden or the yard. The types of work done on the farm, in the household, and off the farm were all different and plentiful. These examples give a good explanation of both the amount of work and the long hours endured by all of the couples in the study. The example of raising crops and livestock, as well as ducks, turkeys, and pheasants also gives insight into the differentiation in products produced which will be examined in more detail later in this chapter.

On The Farm

The on-the-farm work of the couples interviewed varied between caring for the grain crops and fields, gardens and livestock. Fieldwork, in particular, takes up a large amount of time and energy for these couples.

> Well, and usually you know, you're out of the house by about 7:00 or 7:30. Usually 7:00 in the summer and then before we get to going well, grease the combines, fuel it all up. Fuel up the truck and one of the boys [their sons] usually cut with me. Mark's been. So we run with two combines, and Bill hauls with the truck and Beth here runs the grain cart.

> And we do that until about ah… normally about 10:00 at night is when we get back in. And Bill hauls and usually when he gets back we have a load and so I'm going to the elevator but usually we don't have to wait. Usually, because we have two grain carts too so before we cut him a load, well, he's usually back. But, usually 10:00 at night. Our normal is 10:00 at night.
>
> When we get back in and have a beer in the shop and fix anything that we kinda got by through the day. Which if there was something broken, we fix that and … Go in and eat some supper and in the morning start all over again. It's the same thing at planting, you know. Only it's dragging seed to them. (Jim Mays, Nebraska)

As exemplified by the quote from Jim above, field work is very involved. It requires preparing the ground for planting, actually planting the crop, cultivating and/or applying chemicals to control the weeds, and then finally harvesting the crop—only to start again the next year. In addition to care of the ground they are planting or harvesting, there is also significant work to care for the equipment used in that planting or harvesting. The quote above also gives further example of the long hours required.

Jim's wife, Beth, states that caring for animals adds another level of work to their farm duties.

> Most farm people don't have anything at all, they just use grain [laughs], and they don't have chores [related to livestock]. Well, quite a few of 'em probably have cows. But, most of them don't have anything. They just [pause] their income is just from grain.

The livestock, in this case poultry, that Jim and Beth have on their farm add more work to their farm work because they have to feed, water and protect their poultry in addition to the other work they have on the farm such as in the fields or garden.

In the Household

The types of work that needed to be done in the household included tracking farm income and expenses, caring for children and family, preserving food or preparing food for sale. There were many similarities in how these duties were distributed within the households of the couples interviewed in this study. The women were the ones primarily responsible for tracking farm income and expenses, and they took the lead role in caring for children and family and also the lead role in preserving food and preparing food for sale.

Sue Olsen (IL) gave me a detailed example of how she tracks hers and Todd's farm income and expenses using principles she learned to use at her off-farm winter job. She tracks every detail and expense they have including inputs (seed, fertilizer, etc.) and outputs (the sale of their products). Sue also tracks money they spend on extra labor, repairing machinery, loans, and contributions to their life insurance and/or health insurance among other things.

Another type of work done in the household is caring for children and family. After Edna Davis retired from her day job, she took in and cared for family members in addition to working on the farm. Her daughter and her children moved in with her and Don for a while; then when the health declined of Edna's invalid aunt and of Don's dad, both lived with them and were cared for by Don and Edna. They cared for Edna's aunt for 8 years and Don's dad for 26 months. Don told me, "We had to lift both of 'em. And all that washing. So that's where the rest of her retirement has gone. [Turning to Edna]: Just the last, it's been a few years that you've really relaxed a little bit, you know. Just a few years."

Another form of work done in the household was preserving food. Below, Suzy Doe, a Nebraskan farmwoman in her 70s, describes some of the work she did to preserve food from their garden.

> Always had a big garden. Out of the 53 years I think there was only two years that I didn't have a garden. [pause] And I always did a lot of canning and freezing and [pause] but one year I had a… we lived down by the interstate there by Maple [pause] and there was apple trees along the interstate. And there was some guys from the state come over there one day and they said, "You want any of those apples you're sure welcome to get 'em because nobody's gonna pick them and they'll just go to waste." So, that one year I made 56 pints of apple jelly.

All of the women interviewed in this study mentioned some type of preserving food or preparing it for sale. Suzy Doe described how preparing food from the farm for sale had paid off: "…[W]hen we went to town, [pause] we'd take the cream to town, cream and eggs, and that would buy our groceries for the week." This shows how the work done within the household also served to support the overall farming operation.

Off The Farm

All but one of the men I interviewed had worked off the farm for short periods of time at some point in their careers. Don Davis worked with the coal company for a while, Todd Olsen worked a few winters for an alternator repair shop, Gene Doe got his start in farming by working for other people on their farms, and Jim Mays occasionally does custom work for other people. Todd also still does some mechanical work for friends and neighbors now, depending on their need. Most of the men worked off the farm primarily in the early years of their farming careers, except for Jim who did not work off the farm in the

beginning of his career but now does custom work, such as digging basements for others, occasionally.

Three of the women interviewed worked off the farm at some point during their careers. Edna Davis worked full-time at a retail store in a variety of positions but primarily as a bookkeeper for 35 years. While she was working full-time, she also took care of chores around the farm when she got home. For example, when she got home from her job at the store, she would go to the barn and milk the cows, if Don was still out in the field. After the store closed and she retired, she still found herself very busy. “I don’t know. I thought I’d have plenty of time to do things when I got home but [pause] ya know, when I retired, but I don’t know how I done it when I worked [deep laugh]” (Edna Davis).

Sue Olsen worked for a company that was farming-related in the winter months. “Yeah, so it’s still the farm thing—basically. I mean, you know, it’s just a different aspect of the farm thing. … And so, I’ve learned a lot about just all different aspects about the farm thing, just doin’ that job” (Sue Olsen). Sue also worked for a few months at the fast food restaurant while she and Todd’s children were small, “just to get out of the house.” Edie Smith also worked off the farm selling curriculum-related products to schools across the state of Nebraska.

Sharing Labor

The second research topic of this study focused on looking at the division of labor both on and off the farm. It also queried if work carried the same meaning for the men and women within the sample. The answers to this question came out of the identification of the various tasks completed by the couples on

their farms. To accomplish all these types of work, the couples interviewed divided some of the work and shared other types of work with each other, their families, and their neighbors. Their family connections are intertwined with the work these couples accomplished in many places. The interview data from all of the couples indicated that the men did most of the outdoor farm work and that the women did the bookkeeping and the majority of childcare and domestic duties that were needed by the farm. However, the gender division of labor was not a hard-set line.

> And, you was askin' about the chores and that. If I didn't get home by the time she got home, she'd know I was finishing a field and maybe I wouldn't be in until 10 o'clock. She'd have the cows milked; you know everything would be done. Yeah, quite a bit to do. Once I started a field, Sheri, well, I stayed right there till I was done. [Laughs] (Don Davis).

Although the duties showed a division of labor by gender, the couples spoke of working together as a team or as families, as well. Couples frequently noted that the person who would do a particular chore was dependent on who had time to do it. Above Don speaks of how Edna took over chores that were usually his because he was occupied elsewhere. Edna, who worked a day job off the farm, described coming home to work on the farm: "I mean, I don't know how we did, but we done it. … We'd kill chickens in the night. We killed as many as 50 chickens a night after I got off work. (laughs) … We did it all by hand. Scald 'em, and we picked 'em all by hand."

Husband's work. Analysis revealed that men's work consisted primarily of outdoor or field work on the farm. The care of farm animals was done by both men and women in the study. Interestingly, the outdoor work was identified

primarily as “men’s work” in all of the interviews, and when women did outdoor work, they were often considered to be “helping” rather than working. The reverse was true of men doing work in venues primarily labeled as “women’s work,” such as in the garden or home. In these instances the men were many times referred to as “helping.” For example, Jim Mays and Don Davis prepared the soil for the gardens and helped to keep the garden weeded. Don also helped significantly with the harvesting of the garden.

Wife’s work. The work completed by the women in this study consisted of bookkeeping, caring for children and relatives, preserving and preparing food, part-time work off the farm, farm work or assisting with farm work and gardening. Three of the women interviewed in this study did the bookkeeping work of the farm. Edna Davis, Sue Olsen and Suzy Doe all took the primary role in keeping track of farm income and expenses. “And Suzy, thanks to her, she kept the books and stuff up. She did…what she did [on the farm] more than anything, she did all the books and she still does all the books” (Gene Doe).

Beth Mays gave a good summary of the farm and household work she does during a busy season. In the quote below Beth responded to my question of what she does during harvest.

> Just drive. [laughs] I go and pick them up from one field to another and then they start moving with the machines and then I follow them. Well, I come back home and cook something if it works out. And take it over to them. And then I go and pick them up wherever they were and then I take them back to where they came from and bring the rest of the things that weren’t…that were left there. So that’s my job.

Beth was one of the women I interviewed who did not work off the farm. She explained:

> And that's mainly why I don't work out. [Referring to the quote above.] You could have a job in town but they won't let you work in town and take time off, like two months off for harvest in the fall. [laughs] Maybe some would, but (pause) you could go and apply I guess, but at some places, if you are working there and you quit, then they won't rehire you back.

Work with other family members and neighbors. All of the couples interviewed relied on other family members or neighbors at some time to help complete the work of the farm. All of the couples talked specifically about how their children helped with the outdoor farm work. "While we were farmin,' the kids was growing up and the kids worked hard" (Gene Doe). Teaching children how to complete farm work started very early in their lives. Jim Mays explained:

> Whether it's smart or not, I don't know, but I did it [operate farm equipment] about [age] eight. You know, eight, nine. I was driving a tractor probably about ten; eleven I was combining. And that's just the way our kids was too, you know.
>
> [A]ll of them, I guess. When they was eight or nine, they'd start driving a tractor. They'd ride with you most of the day. When they was just little, they'd ride with you. They have around here. [pause] Well, most the people around here, 'bout all of 'em I know. [pause] You know, the wife works in the field too.
>
> So, you have a little kid with diapers and you make them a little bench behind the seat and that's where he'll ride for the rest of the day. Ride behind the seat. And so you know, before they can talk, they know how to run levers on the tractors already because they sit there. And ah, [pause] they know how to run it before they can actually walk. They know the levers to it [to operate the various tractor functions] [pause] [laughs] So they just, you know, automatically start to driving it.

Adult and adolescent children also play a large part in accomplishing the day-to-day work on the farm. "…like in the summertime it's quite a lot of a total family operation" (Sue Olsen). Sue described to me how the entire family gets involved in large projects, such as storing the corn. She also noted how working with

family members can add another level of difficulty to the work:

> Um [pause] but that's kind of a [pause] gosh how can I say [pause] That's kind of a double-edged sword a little bit because, you know, it's a whole family involvement and it's everybody and it takes days to get the entire job done. And by the end of that time period you are so tired of being around your own family, you just really want to do something else. [laughs]

Another form of working with family was partnering with siblings for their farming operation. Todd and Sue Olsen's entire farming operation was a partnership with Todd's brother. Sean Smith got his start in farming from working with first his dad and then his brothers. Eventually, the farming operation was done by the brothers. However, by the time of our interview, Sean had been farming alone for several years and was in the process of bringing his son into their operation. Jim and Beth Mays also work alongside their oldest son in their farming operation.

Farm labor was also shared between neighbors. "The last year that I farmed, I got burned. And there's things that happened. I got burned and burned pretty bad, and the neighbors [pause] it was right at harvest time [pause] and the neighbors all come in and harvested our crop" (Gene Doe). There were several instances of this that were described throughout the interviews. Many of these instances are related to the concept of "strong connections" these individuals expressed toward those around them. This concept is explored later in this chapter.

Identity Labels

The question of social identity was one of the research topics derived from the literature that drove my initial thinking about this project. I was interested in learning how, or if, the husbands and wives in my sample identified with farming

as a career. Although I feel that the answers to this question matriculated in a variety of ways through the interviews, the most direct means used to gain an answer to this question was done by my asking the couples what their professions were (see Question 7, Appendix B). The findings related to identity labels will show how the couples in my sample responded to this question. Additional discussion of the findings found through means other than direct questions will be provided in Chapter V. The ways the couples answered the question of their professed work identity, their profession, was greatly influenced by gender. To illustrate this point, I will display information about how this question was answered by each couple in my sample to provide the reader with access to the language they used.

During one of their interviews Todd and Sue Olsen from Illinois were asked what their professions were. Todd's answer was a quick "farmer," and Sue was a bit more reluctant to label herself. She called herself a "Jack of all trades, master of none." Sue expressed that she did not want to use what she called the "H-word" (meaning housewife). She never came around to a concrete title for herself. Instead, she focused on what she does around the farm and the house. In the end, it was Todd who gave her a title of "professional mother," which Sue then embraced. After her agreement with this label she went on to tell me about a trip she had made as a chaperone with one of her children.

Don and Edna Davis of Illinois answered in much the same way as Todd and Sue had. Don readily identified himself as a farmer and went on to say that he'd enjoyed it too. Edna's work identity was more encompassed by what she did

on a daily basis. She expressed that now she'd be more likely to call herself a "house-keeper" but that she had previously labeled herself as an accountant while she was working at her day job.

The question of identity or professional title was not directly asked in the interviews with Gene and Suzy Doe of Nebraska because they were more focused on telling me the progression of the events which encompassed their farming career. However, throughout the interview Gene referred to himself as a farmer and to the farming lifestyle. He took great pride in his ability to make his various farms survive and profitable. Suzy was also not asked the question directly[however, based on her comments throughout the interviews, it could be expected that she would have answered in a similar fashion as Edna and Sue above. She raised their children, and she kept books for the farm, a fact that she was not hesitant to point out in the interviews. Suzy also took a great deal of pride from the fact that she had managed a household on the meager resources they had at their discretion in the beginning of their farming days.

Sean and Edie Smith of Nebraska had a slightly different answer to the question of their professional identities. Sean thought of himself as an "agri-businessman"; he stated that he thought that he and Edie approached farming from the business side of things. Edie added on the title of ag-producer/agri-businessman because she felt it was more descriptive because Sean produced products as well as managed the business of their farm. Edie herself did not ever identify a label for herself. Sean included her in his description of himself as an

agri-businessman, but she did not include herself in the title of ag-producer/agri-businessman because she identified Sean as the producer of products.

Jim and Beth Mays from Nebraska answered similarly to the two Illinois couples. When asked how he would identify himself, Jim stated that he had called himself a farmer since he was in Future Farmers of America (FFA) in high school. Beth did not directly label herself. Throughout the two interviews she spoke of the different tasks she completed around the farm and within the house-hold; then. in the second interview. she stated, "…For myself, I can't picture myself being anything else and being happy." She went on to say that at this point in her life she did not want her life and work on the farm to change even though she probably could have pursued a job in town.

The topic of identity can be more fully developed following the data presented on the meanings these couples placed on their work. However, the consistent pattern of the husbands' ease in finding an identity label to embrace, and the difficulty of finding an adequate professional title for the wives is a topic discussed in Chapter V where the literature sheds light on this phenomenon.

Business Savvy and Vast Technical Knowledge

The second main theme that emerged from these interviews was that of business savvy and vast technical knowledge developed and relied on to be successful family farmers. (See the center column of the concept map to view how this theme works with the other themes in this chapter.) This business savvy and technical knowledge was needed in order to produce products while trying to make good decisions in order to save time and maximize profits. Making these

careful decisions was the core of the business savvy, which also involved financial planning amid serious risk factors. Farm survival techniques were mentioned in preceding literature; In Chapter V, I will discuss how the tactics used by these couples relates to the techniques described in the literature. The business decisions these couples discussed involved being open to changing their farming techniques and the products they produced in order to attempt to minimize their risk and maximize their profits, thus ensuring their farm's survival.

Yield Products

All of those interviewed produced a wide variety of products on their farms. All of the couples grew at least one or two varieties of grain, including several different types of corn, wheat, and soybeans. The couples all went through some type of decision-making process in order to decide on the varieties of crops they would grow. In some cases they would grow specialty grains, such as seed corn, to attempt to raise their profit margin. Todd explained their use of specialty products, "You can grow the specialty crops for certain markets, but it's not financially, really [pause]… There is a financial advantage, but it's not enough that you can specialize and ensure yourself a profit." So, even these specialty crops cannot ensure the farmers of a profit, but it is a decision that they sometimes make in order to try to make a little more.

Each of the couples also had at least one form of livestock. All raised cattle—to different degrees—and at different points of their careers other animals, such as chickens or buffalo. Sean explained what crops he and Edie grew, "Ahh [pause] cash grain. Um [pause] mostly irrigated. We raise seed corn

for Robust Seed, ah [pause] commercial corn, just your regular yellow corn; soybeans [pause], wheat, milo, popcorn. I guess those are all of our crops. But, we haven't had any cattle since [pause] for a little over 20 years now." They chose to get out of cattle because they didn't feel they were making enough profit. Jim and Beth Mays had the greatest variety of livestock. They raised Black Angus cattle, buffalo, rabbits, chickens, turkeys, pheasants, chuckers, ducks, and other poultry breeds. Edna and Don also sold milk. Edna, Suzy, and Beth all canned food from their gardens. All of these decisions on what crops or livestock to grow were part of strategies designed to reduce their input costs and increase their profits or save time. The interview data on connections to family, the land, and the farming lifestyle show that these strategies were also influenced by their hope for some security—that they would be able to remain on the land, raise their children on the farm, and even plan to have some assets for their later years.

Make Good Decisions to Save Time and Maximize Profits

Financial planning. All of the couples were constantly trying to calculate how they could use their financial resources wisely to purchase more land or purchase new equipment. They were looking ahead. Don said, "I wanted to own my own land. And so I had planned how to do it, you know, worked out to save money to buy it." Don and Edna often worked more than one farm at a time in order to increase their profits. In fact, for several years Don and Edna rented the farm on which they lived and worked while buying another farm in a different town.

> You see, we just, we just worked and saved our money and so on and bought more machinery and added more ground, you know. But see, when we started, we was renting ground on 50/50 you see. Like for 100 acres, I didn't have to stand all expenses for the input there. Half of it the landlord furnished. Then when we harvested, he got half and I got half of it, [half] the production you see. That's a good way to go. Till, well, like I told you, in 1954 was when we bought this down here. We was paying for it as we lived up there and worked. (Don Davis)

After a few years they moved down to live on the farm they were purchasing after the coal mines had stripped the land they had been farming. In other words, Don and Edna got ahead through hard work and sound financial planning. They also saved money by watching their spending; patience seems to be another of Don's many talents.

> Don: …We're pretty savin', Sheri, we didn't go out to eat at a restaurant. How would you put it? We just saved our money to put into the farm, didn't we?
>
> Edna: Yeah, we had to save a lot. [laughs]
>
> Don: And then we just kept it building it up [pause] and slowly, not go to the bank and borrow it all of it at once and jump in right now, ya see. We built up slowly.

Gene Doe also had a knack for sound financial planning. He and Edna purchased several farms over the course of their career. "Every farm that we've bought and sold, we've nearly doubled or more than doubled our money on it" (Gene Doe). Gene was a master financial planner. In fact, he retired for the first time when he was in his mid-fifties. He returned to farming shortly after retiring in order to help his son get out of debt with his own farm.

Purchasing more ground was as much about security as it was about having more ground to farm and thus the potential for more income.

> Sheri, I planned my life to buy a farm and then when I got older, if I need any extra money, I'd just sell off a little piece here, ya know, so we'd live a little better. That's what I'd planned on doing. Yeah, it sure gives ya a good, a good feeling—to get that old deed in your hands. (Don Davis)

Jim Mays also told me how having more ground that was more geographically spread out also added to his ability to work on any given day and, as a dry land farmer, added to the likelihood that they would have a good crop come harvest. "But, you know if a person wasn't spread out, then you just won't have luck." Jim was referring to how having their ground spread out provided them flexibility of where they could work, the amount of rain on their fields, and the varying yields of the fields. He also felt that it lessoned the chance that their crops would be hailed out, which leads back to the issue of providing them additional security. Having more ground also added efficiency.

> Todd: And havin' more ground, you have bigger equipment and you get more done in less time. Granted, you have more to do but you can still…you can be more efficient…now, with the larger with the larger equipment, than we could back then with the smaller equipment, than farmin' less acres.
>
> Sue: That's definitely true. He was almost busier farmin' less acres, than he is now. And I don't mean that to sound, you know, like he's not doing as much work, he is. But he has a little more time. Like he said, it's more efficient.

So, by adding more ground to their farming operations, the couples I interviewed felt that it gave them more financial security and at the same time allowed them to be more efficient in their work because of their ability to buy bigger equipment to work that ground.

As a means of upgrading equipment, Jim Mays had worked out a method to purchase new equipment that served their farming operation well. "Yes. That's

about how we got most of our tractors is I buy what I do not like, because it was really cheap, then I go and trade it off, or sell it" (Jim Mays). Jim explained to me how he would go to auctions or dealerships and purchase tractors that he did not necessarily like but were relatively inexpensive. He would then use the tractor for a while until he could trade or sell the tractor for one he did want.

> … I wanted a [pause] I had a tractor spotted that I wanted. But what do I do? I go to a sale. I thought it was too high, it was like $24,000.
>
> So I went to a sale and I buy an International 14 (pause) or 1566—which I didn't want to plant with. The most unhandy thing you could get. But, I got it for $4,000. So, I bought it instead. And to show how much I liked it, I planted with that for a [pause] sowed my wheat with it. I never checked the oil, and I never put fuel in it. It was full of fuel when I bought it and when I traded it it was empty. [laughs] I never did anything to that one. Then I traded it on the tractor I wanted, that 4640 for planting. And I got 79 hundred dollars they gave me on trade. (Jim Mays)

So, by using this method, Jim was able to have a tractor for planting, and then he nearly doubled his money at the end of the season when he bought the tractor he did want. Frugality in these farm families was another strategy toward the goal of protecting their land, lifestyle, and future on the farm.

Serious risk factors. For the couples interviewed, many times the decisions about farming techniques and the products to produce were driven by financial planning amid serious risks to their farms. Several risks were described, such as the weather, fluctuation in land values, grain prices, and contracts that may fall through. All of them seem to agree on the difficulty they face in predicting the price they will earn on their products when sold and stress that this is a major concern of theirs.

> The hardest part I've found [being a farmer] is marketing your products. The price of your production is up and down, Sheri. And, if you can hit the high—price, you know, there's no problem. But [pause] ah [pause] it doesn't go in cycles every year like say corn's gonna be high in March. It doesn't do that every year. So, you're at a disadvantage to the markets. (Don Davis)

Much in the same way, when asked what their biggest challenge in farming was, Sue Olsen responded: "Because we don't control the grain markets and so … Most self-employed people, they can set their price to be competitive, but we go with whatever the price is because we have to."

Jim and Beth expressed similar feelings about the marketing of grains. "You see, today… no matter what you do, you do it wrong. You sell it, and then it starts going up. [laughs] Or, it's dry so you don't have a big crop, and the grain is high" (Jim Mays). It seemed that Sue and Todd and Jim and Beth utilized specialty crops or livestock as a means of attempting to make more profits more often than did Don and Edna or Gene and Suzy. Don seemed to be more adventurous in changing the way that he farmed so that he could increase profit margins. He would adapt his equipment to utilize new technologies as they became available, and he seemed to have a real knack for making the right financial decisions. Similarly, Sean and Edie Smith from Nebraska seemed to use a combination of specialty crops and adapting their farming techniques to maximize their profits.

In the same manner, Gene Doe used fixing up farms as his way of making profits. He upgraded equipment and methods as well, but the means he seemed to find most profitable was through the sale of ground. In the words of his wife,

Suzy, “He’d do the leveling out and fix it up and then he’d resell it.” He used not only his knowledge of what ground was worthy of fixing up but also strong negotiation skills. In one case Gene purchased a farm, and after the deal was done, he found out that it was already leased to someone else, “And after the sale I says, ‘You know, that’s got a lease on it. I don’t think that’s right, I think you should compensate me for that.’” So, by negotiation they knocked $10,000 off the sale price [laughs].” He used a situation that could have brought him financial disadvantage to his own advantage through the use of his financial and negotiation skills. Below is an illustration of how Gene managed their finances.

> Gene: Now I’ve got a computer on my shoulders and I always knew just about where we stand, and another thing I always used to do, not to mention any more, but every, at least every month, I would sit down and just make a list of my assets and the value of them and the liabilities and so I knew where we stood all the time, didn’t I, honey?
>
> Suzy: Yes.

Gene used this evaluation method as a means to keep a constant eye on his farming operation, much as the way that one would expect a CEO to track his or her business. The financial planning skills displayed by these individuals allowed them to make their farming operations a success.

Changing

All of the couples interviewed in this study indicated they were constantly looking for a way to make good decisions so that they could maximize their profits. There were two primary areas where they made changes. They would modify their farming techniques and the products they produced. Don Davis and

Sean Smith spoke about making the most changes to their actual grain farming techniques, whereas Jim and Beth Mays looked at alternative livestock and ways to market their products. Todd and Sue Olsen along with Sean and Edie Smith were more involved in growing specialty grains. Gene and Suzy Doe relied mostly on purchasing and selling land to maximize their profits. Changing the farming techniques and the products produced will be discussed below. Both of these methods allowed these individuals to maximize their profits and made their farming operations a success.

Farming techniques. Changes in farming techniques included many different farming techniques and the changes were made for differing reasons. The farmers interviewed in this study talked about changes in types of tillage used, fertility and chemical programs, modifying equipment for new chemical or fertility applications, utilizing all available resources, building upon traditional techniques, marketing the products they sold and investing in new and more efficient equipment.

The couples interviewed also changed the type of tillage they used on their ground to both save time and maximize their profits. Here Todd Olsen describes why they decided to change their tillage techniques.

> Well, I just. [pause] That was a decision based on efficiencies, financial decision as far as less expense, as far as less fuel and wear and tear on machines. Felt we could make more money goin' to no-till than paying so much on tillage, which has worked out real well. (Todd Olsen)

They changed from tilling their land to no-till farming in order to save on time, fuel, and wear and tear on their machines.

Another change that the farmers in this study made to save time and maximize their profits was changing the type or way they applied chemicals to their farm ground. Don Davis described a time when he wanted to make a change to the chemical application on one of his fields and his boss' reaction.

> So that next year I told my boss, I said, 'I'd like to use some dry nitrogen. 33.3% ingredients in a 100-pound sack.' He said, 'I don't believe you'll get your money back on it, but I'll go along with ya.' … And that's what I did.
>
> … That corn just greened up, it was almost black. He come by and 'Look at that!' he stopped and 'Did you get that nitrogen put on there?' I said, 'Yep.' 'Boy,' he said, 'That's the best lookin' corn I've ever seen.' … [H]e says, 'Is it too late for you to put that on my corn?'

This quote shows how Don was not afraid to go out of the usual way of doing things in order to try to improve his yields. Here he explains his boss' reluctance to new techniques:

> He was of the old school; the boss was in the old school. You see, it's hard for farmers to change; they look at the price that you can get for this commodity and your expected yield from the farm. Then they look at the extra expense you want to put on for fertilizer, like maybe $10-15 back then, see, which sounds like a lot of money. "I don't think they'll make their money back," He said…the words he used. Well, we made it back and a couple times over that, you see. Extra than what we would normally grow. (Don Davis)

Therefore, the change Don instituted allowed him and his boss to see more profit due to higher yields on their crop.

Another way that the farmers attempted to raise their profit margin was by trying new methods of planting their crops. Sean Smith explained to me that in other climates farmers are able to grow two separate crops on one field each season due to longer growing seasons. He further explained that this was not the

case in Nebraska. However, someone in his area had tried a new method that allowed him to grow more than one crop on a field in a year.

> So, a few years ago someone over by Tiller started trying this. And it's planting wheat after seed corn in the fall because the seed corn is harvested earlier than normal corn. And you can plant the wheat at a normal, close to a normal time for planting wheat. And then you plug every third hole, in the way we were doing it, on the drill so it's a skip and then in that skip area you plant the soy beans about the time the wheat is heading out… approximately.
>
> So for about a month of time you've got wheat and soy beans growing in the field. And then you go in and cut the wheat and the beans are still only about so tall [gestures approximately 4-8 inches] and so then you get the wheat cut off and they're [the beans] ready to get off and grow. (Sean Smith)

This method allowed him and Edie to grow two crops after their seed corn was harvested. So far, it has proven an effective means for them to increase their profits from fields that are planted in this way.

Equipment is another way that those interviewed described as a means to raise their profits. Having efficient equipment allowed them to get more work done in less time.

> We'd bought this place in 1954; six years after we got married we bought this. We rented it out three years but, I said, what I'm gonna do is trade tractors and get four-row equipment and I can take care of my land up there and this one also.
>
> So, that's what we did and that helped a lot because I had traded for an Allis-Chalmers tractor and it was, it was a super-duper one. I don't know where it got all its power or anything like that. It had a lot of it. People had one just like it. [pause] I had a four-bottom plow and it pulled it in third gear. I could plow 20 acres everyday. Like a top. Everyone else had to go in second gear. And why? I don't know [pause] heh heh [pause] It just helped me to get my work done that much quicker, ya know. (Don Davis)

Here Don describes how by purchasing new equipment he was able to farm more of his ground instead of having to rent it because he would not have had

time to farm it otherwise.

Through this sampling of the changes made by these farmers to save them time and maximize their profits, one can see how they often utilize the "spend money to make money" philosophy. In many of these cases, the new techniques or changes they made cost them money in the beginning. However, all described how in the end they made additional profit.

Products produced. The second type of change described by farmers in this study in order to make good decisions and maximize their profits is changing the products produced on their farms. These decisions include changing the types of grain produced, growing specialty crops, using alternative feed for livestock and raising different types of livestock or poultry.

There are several factors that influence the type of grains produced on a farm. For instance, Todd and Sue Olsen from Illinois described how they chose the types of grain they grew in their fields.

> Todd: Well, sometimes different hybrids… Yeah. Different hybrids and different numbers of beans that were good for a neighbor, then you might try them on yours. But you look at a lot of plot results, yield tests and all that kind of stuff too.
>
> Sue: Which are in the magazines a lot.

They describe how they look to what grains have worked well for their neighbors, as well as test plot results and yield tests, to make an educated decision of what grains to produce.

Another factor that influences what crops are grown and where on their farm is the compatibility of the different types of grain amongst each other. Sean

and Edie Smith grow seed corn and in the quote below he describes factors that influence what and where they grow other crops because of their seed corn. For example, the seed companies have strict requirements around how and where the seed corn is grown.

> Because they [the seed companies] want clean fields from year to year, and they don't [pause] ah [pause] so they don't have volunteer corn growin'. Primarily to contaminate the field. It's just more labor to clean the field up if they grow corn on corn. And, ah [pause] some of the other decisions, I guess, would be based on the irrigation or dry land on what crops we put there. Um [pause] popcorn is ah…We need to keep it away from our seed corn so that determines what area we can put the popcorn. (Sean Smith)

As Sean states above, farmers have to be careful of where they grow the seed corn and what they grow around it to avoid contamination.

Choosing what products to produce can also be an enjoyable decision. Jim and Beth described to me how they have been growing a larger garden in the past few years. The garden has been an alternative source of income as well as entertainment.

> I guess we started gardening more than we ever did. We had a big garden and I kind of collect these antique tractors now. I got into them. A lot of antique tractors. And um…So we do our gardening with them. Little cultivators and little planters and all that stuff. We do some farmers markets now that we never used to do. We go to some farmers markets. (Jim Mays)

Both Jim and Beth talked about how they've enjoyed working in their garden. Beth has enjoyed finding new plant varieties to grow and developing the business side of selling their new products at farmer's markets, and Jim has enjoyed working with his antique equipment in the garden.

Growing seed or specialty grains was a method of trying to raise profit margins that both Todd and Sue and Sean and Edie mentioned. When successful, these seed grains can be sold at a higher price than “regular” grains. However, these ventures are not always successful as Todd and Sue explain below.

> Todd: We tried seed beans, growin’ beans for seed and they didn’t end up taking the beans cause the variety that we grew they didn’t have the demand for so they didn’t end up takin’ the seed beans. So, there was no premium on that.
>
> Sue: And if I can just interject here… Some of the hours that went into that was that they had to inspect the bin before you put the seed beans in it. I, personally, vacuumed it out with a shop vac. And the bin looked…well, better than my home at this point…I mean, you know, it was awesomely [Sue’s laughing] cleaned out and when the lady came to inspect it she even commented that she’d never seen one that cleaned out. So, it was just a change in their plan, that they didn’t take ‘em, basically.
>
> Todd: Well, it was a lot of extra work that didn’t ….
>
> Sue: Yeah. Well, that was the point…
>
> Todd: We tried to, you know, to have the extra income, that’s what… and it just doesn’t always work out that way.

As they describe above, there was a lot of time, effort and plain work involved in this decision, which was an attempt to raise the profit margin of their grain operation. Since the seed company did not end up wanting these particular seed beans for seed Todd and Sue ended up selling them as “regular” beans for the going rate for beans.

Don and Edna gave an excellent example of adaptation in the face of dire circumstances. One summer their barn burned down during a lightning storm.

After the barn burned down, with all the hay in it, they had to find a new source of feed for their cattle during the winter. Rather than buy feed, Don was able to harvest an alternative crop to feed his cattle, with the help of a neighbor. He and his neighbor harvested a field of foxtail that was growing wild on an unused field on Don's farm.

> …And this was later August, the later part of August you see, and I went and looked at that and said, "Look at that. Look how pretty and green that is." I said, "I'm gonna cut that when it starts to head." And I cured that out. And a neighbor had a round baler at that time. See, I didn't have [pause] His round baler made big old bales, about 2,000 pounds. And so I went and talked to him first. [pause] He said, "Oh yeah, I'd be tickled to death to." And I said "Well, it'd gonna be late in the season when that starts to head," and I said, "We'll have to get right on to it, you know before it comes to rain or anything." He says, "I'll be ready, I'll be ready to get it cut. …" (Don Davis)

This example shows how Don was able to adapt, with his knowledge and the help of a neighbor, when his normal source of feed for his cattle was taken away. When the barn burned down, he and Edna could have just sold their cattle—which in fact Don thought he was going to have to do—but a neighbor helped them build a new barn. Don was able to find an alternative (and free) source of feed for their cattle over the winter months.

Of all the couples I interviewed in this study, Jim and Beth Mays had the greatest variety of livestock and poultry on their farm. This variety has helped them diversify their sources of income. Perhaps the most notable of the types of animals they raised was the variety and numbers of poultry. "We've had up to… we've had up to 400 turkeys around in the yard. But, you know between here and the other place. Pheasants, maybe 3 or 4 hundred" (Jim Mays). As I mentioned

earlier, they also raise a variety of other poultry as well. Another notable choice for livestock is the buffalo they raise. Here, Beth explains how they got started raising buffalo.

> For about 15 years we had a cow that was a half buffalo. It was a half buffalo and a half regular cow and every year that calf that she would have, we would take that and that was what we ate for a lot of years. And you couldn't tell the difference in the meat.
>
> She was [pause] we did keep her with the cows but she was a quite a problem because she was so much stronger and we had to keep her in a separate pen. And she finally. [pause] Well, I suppose they live 30 years and I don't know how old she was when we got her, but I think we had her 15 years. And she finally became old, and so we sold her and then we didn't have buffalo for a while and now we got real buffalo, instead of a half. (Beth Mays)

They now raise several buffalo and sell them for meat. The transition into buffalo may have been by chance, but it has turned out to be both profitable and enjoyable for them.

Another recent addition to the types of livestock they raise is giant rabbits. These rabbits are Beth's "pet" project. These rabbits are sold mostly for pets or for showing, such as 4-H projects. Recently, Jim got her a mate for her first giant rabbit for her birthday so that she could start raising them to sell.

> Yeah. Then you branch out into the different colors. You have to sort of choose what color you want to raise. Because these things cost money. These aren't just middle of the road common rabbits like I have had for years. That I can pick up for $5 to $10 and raise them for meat or selling them back for pets. And they do cost more and so we're hoping to have a nice project with them. (Beth Mays)

So, this is just another example of the differentiation in their livestock operation that they hope will bring not only enjoyment for them but also an alternative source of income for the farm as well.

The meaning for these five couples of doing family farming was tied to developing business savvy. They had to take many variables and factors into account as they produced their products and made multiple strategic decisions about what to grow and raise as grain or livestock products. They had to be open to new farming techniques, ways to economize on purchasing equipment, inputs, and supplies.

Strong Connections

The meaning of work for the five couples was also enhanced by the strong connections they had to friends, family and neighbors, and to the land and the farming lifestyle. This is the third main theme that emerged from analyzing the interview data. (See the right column of the concept map to view how this theme works with the other themes in this chapter.) In addition, these connections influenced their business savvy and technical knowledge as well. The decision of farming techniques employed and products produced were made to save time and maximize profits. These decisions were influenced by their friends, neighbors and family. In addition, their financial planning was often done with advice from these same individuals. There will be discussion of how the findings related to connections discovered in this study relate to those in the preceding literature in Chapter V.

Friends, Neighbors, and Family

All of the couples interviewed in this study described strong connections to friends, neighbors and family members. These relationships influenced their farming careers on many levels, including financial planning, purchasing land and

farming techniques. These connections also provided a means for socialization.

> …I believe it's needed. I believe it's healthy to do stuff. People that stay home and never go anywhere, they'll probably be wealthy [laughs] but, they'll be other things. But, I think it's a healthy thing to go and compare notes. And you know, you don't go every week but if you go [to the community center] once a week or every two weeks throughout the winter. Um… it passes the time and guards against what they used to call "cabin fever." [laughs] (Beth Mays)

The connections felt between friends, family and neighbors materialized in many forms. Here Don Davis describes a time when he took advice from a neighbor after his barn had burned down.

> We had that [barn] full of hay and straw when the lightning struck it. Had all our winter's feed in the barn, see, and it burnt. And I said, "Oh, I think I'll just sell the cows and [pause]." A neighbor lived across the road, you know, he was a good guy. He was a good 'un. He was a widower, and he come over and he knew I was kinda down in the dumps. I told him, "Well, I guess we'll just sell the cows." He says, "I'll help you build a little pole barn." He said, "You can get by with a little pole barn. Get ya [pause] Ya get a round bailer to bail your hay; you don't put it up in the barn anymore." So that's what I decided to do. (Don Davis)

In this case his neighbor provided him an inspiration and positive choice when faced with circumstances that could have otherwise been overbearing. The advice allowed him to keep his cows.

Throughout our interviews, I was given several examples of times, such as the one above, when neighbors and family came to each other's aid. Todd and Sue Olsen described times when neighbors came to the aid of other farmers, for example, when other farmers were sick or someone had passed away.

> Different times like that [when a neighbor is sick], you'll help a neighbor out. Sometimes unloading hay, or bailing hay [pause] the boys will go help the neighbors. We borrow some equipment off of the neighbors and they borrow equipment off of us… When somebody gets sick [pause] [they] call the neighbors in the immediate vicinity. Not all. I guess there's a few that

> don't want to be a part of that. But, as a rule, most of us will help do whatever needs to be done. (Todd Olsen)

In that same manner, once a new skill is learned, it is often shared with another friend or neighbor. Below, Don Davis gives an example of how he passed on to another neighbor the knowledge he had learned with assistance from his neighbors when his farm burned down.

> My neighbor, and good friend, one year he didn't have any hay for his cows and [pause], "Well, you don't have any extra hay," he says. And I said, "Well, no." And we was talking about it and I said, "Well, wait a minute. I got by on foxtail one year and I got that wheat ground over there, [pause] same place." "Let's go over there and take a look at it."
>
> We went and looked. And the foxtail was nice in it that year. And I says, "How about this for hay?" He said, "Well, ain't that pretty and green?" I said, "Yeah and if we cut it at the right time, it'll be nice and green like that." "OK", he said "You got by on it. I've got some corn, if I have to feed it."
>
> So, we mowed it. But, he had a little baler. A little square baler. So we baled it with it. I had this great big old wagon that held 300 of those bales, and he wanted to borrow it so he could haul it from there down home. It was about 8, 9 miles per trip, you see. I said, "No problem." So, we loaded it up, a great big old load of that. We had it, [pause] well, it was over 300 bales up on that thing. (Don Davis)

Gene Doe told me about a time when neighbors came to his aid when he burned his hand.

> Gene: And…The last year that I farmed I got burned. And there's things that happened. I got burned and burned pretty bad and the neighbors…it was right at harvest time…and the neighbors all come in and harvested our crop.
>
> Sheri: You got burned?
>
> Suzy: Yeah, on his hands. …
>
> Gene: Yeah, on my hands and my arms and [laughs] anyway [pause] that's something that you never forget. And you just about want to

> cry when you think about it. And they come in [pause] didn't quite harvest everything but nearly did it. I really appreciated it. And when I got home, I was in the hospital for [pause] …

Suzy: Two weeks.

Gene: Two weeks. And when I got home, why I did the clean-up harvest.

Gene's neighbors helped him and Suzy at a time when they needed help. Without their help there is the possibility that they would have sustained substantial losses for that harvest. However, thanks to their neighbors, the situation became less dire.

Along with making many long-range planning goals, the couples described times when they had to improvise, such as during hard times. Many of their decisions regarding farming techniques, the products to produce and financial planning were influenced by family and friends. Todd and Sue farmed with Todd's brother through an informal partnership. Part of their financial planning also included utilizing the help of their children in order to get things done, especially to get large jobs, such as the harvest of wheat and corn, done.

Sue: …[I]n the summer time it's quite a lot of a total family operation. Because they [Todd and his brother] do grow wheat and so someone will be combining the wheat and then there's straw bailing that goes on and it's done on the field and it's taken up to the barn and it's put away in the barn and [pause] …

Todd: The kids get tired and it's hard to keep 'em motivated and [pause] but [pause] …

Sue: But it's we all do it. I mean every one of us does it. …And so that [pause] we have the kids [pause] [filling the corn crib] that's an everybody job as well. OK. Somebody [pause] you've got a few people inside the sides of the crib and they're scoopin' the corn out, after it falls as much as it's going to. Then [pause]

Todd: Then it goes into a machine that basically shells it, separates the corn from the cobs from the shucks. The corn's sold as regular corn, the shucks are either burnt or we take 'em down to the pasture and feed 'em to the cows. …It's more or less a specialty type thing. Where we've got two good cribs and if it works out in the fall where we can crib the ear corn it saves us drying expense. We get extra income from the cobs. It's a lot more labor, but it's just using the facilities that we have.

Sue: And it's using the labor that you have.

Todd: Yeah. It's using [pause] …

Sue: I mean, because we don't pay anyone to do that, we just use every kid we've got. [laughing]

They use the labor force that is most readily available to them. This same principle was described by Don and Edna because they also used their children's help when they were still living at home, and now that their children have moved away from home, they still help out on the farm when they can. These same situations are described by the other couples as well. Jim and Beth's children still help them on the farm and so do Sean and Edie's children. They were doing more than just utilize their children's labor power though. They were also taking advantage of their children's expertise. They also take advantage of the expertise of retired farmers when they need extra help. Below Todd offers further explanation:

Todd: Yeah, we have a guy in his mid 70s. He farmed all his life and retired. Then he just works for us in the summer and fall part-time, which is the kind of help you need to find to help part-time on the farm. You can't basically just go up to the local university and say, "I wanna hire part-time." You can do that, but I guess I really shouldn't say that you can't do that. You can do that but it takes a lot more hands-on training, you know, to get the experience you need—the know-how and…

> Sue: There is not that many young men that know what a 70-year-old man knows when it comes to the farm thing. So, this guy, Stan, he's just like… And it's not like these guys [Todd and his brother] tell him what to do or anything,
>
> Todd: He *knows* what to do on a farm…

Todd and Sue describe how the fundamentals of learning how to farm are not taught in a classroom. The needed skills are learned from doing the work. It is more of a learned experience over time.

Another example of using the resources and people available to them is explained below. Don Davis is speaking of how his father helped him and Edna to do some improvements on their home. In fact, Don's father helped him to dig a basement under their house by hand. Don's father helped them not only with the labor but also by saving a lot of expense.

> So, Dad says, "We better get started on your house before I get too old to help you." And I said, "Well, I don't have any money to buy anything, 'cause it needed new foundation, new blocks." It was just an old brick foundation, you know, and there's it's kinda sitting on the ground.
>
> I said, "Well, it has to have all that, and it'll have to have plumbing, it'll have to have piping, hot water heater and all those things."
>
> Then he says, "We'll dig the basement by hand. He says it won't cost you anything to do that." He says, "I'll mix all the cement by hand." I had a truck, and he says, "You go get the sand and get the gravel, and I'll mix it."

This example also displays a lot of the business sense that will be described in the following section. Don and his father used their own skills and labor to accomplish what needed to be done, and they were motivated to do so because it could save Don some money while doing the needed improvements.

Obtaining new land was often on the minds of all of the couples I interviewed for this project. Both Don Davis and Todd Olsen gave examples of times

when they were able to purchase or rent additional farm land because of someone they knew. "…I was good friends with the boss of the coal company, and he gave me some land [to farm for him]. And then I just stayed with him till the shovel dug everything up up there and then they went out of business…" (Don Davis). Here Don Davis describes a time when he was able to rent additional land because of a positive relationship with a landlord. It seems that positive relationships with landlords and others may play a very important part in the success of farmers. Both Don and Todd mention other people often when they discuss making decisions. Here Todd and Sue Olsen talk about one aspect of what's involved in trying to expand a farming operation:

Todd: It's just acquiring ground to rent. I mean, it's hard to come by.

Sue: Yeah, we have been very blessed over the years. We have always picked up more ground than… a lot of guys don't.

Sheri: How do you pick it up?

Todd: Just word of mouth. If you hear somebody's retirin'. If you've got a landlord that'll buy another farm. That's really the easiest way, if you've got a landlord that you're farmin' for now and he buys another farm. Then it's a good chance that you'll pick that up. You just gotta keep your nose to the ground and listen to what's goin' on…

When Todd talks about "keeping your nose to the ground," he is referring to the informal networks that are needed to stay competitive in the farming market, in much the same way that all of the couples have shown the importance of friendship or neighbor networks and the importance of staying involved in those networks.

The benefits of the connections with other people went both ways. The couples interviewed displayed a strong sense of “doing right” by their friends and neighbors. Below Sean and Edie Smith describe a time that they suggested to their landlord the switch from 60/40 profit sharing land rent to cash rent and why.

> Edie: Well, you might tell her…you’re like with Sharon, when you went to the cash rent with her. That happened real…real elderly lady who worried all the time. So, going to the cash rent was to benefit her peace of mind, wasn’t it?
>
> Sean: Yeah. I suggested that we move to the cash rent so she knew how much income she was going to have every year and then otherwise she lives out of state and she just worries to death about hail storms and whether it rains or not and those kinds of things. And, if nothing else, she sleeps better now so… [Edie laughs] Otherwise she’d just know that if she got a phone call from us it was to tell her that she got hailed out or that the pivot was broken or the well was broken or something, you know. So, in that case we chose to do that.

Gene Doe described a similar situation with one of his landlords.

> And I rented some ground next to that and the lady that I rented it from she rented for…I’m going to say $15,000 a year for rent. And I made money on it and when I made money on it I told her, “I made some money; I’m goin’ to give you more rent than what we agreed on.” And I did, couple times I did that and she said, “You know, you’re the only person that I ever saw that raised his own rent, raised the rent.” She appreciated it too.

The decisions that Sean and Edie and Gene made were not in the best interests of their own financial situations, but they did them anyway in order to help their landlords. This is due to the strong connection they felt with those involved in their farming.

The interviews conducted throughout this study were full of examples of the strong connections these individuals felt to their friends, family, and neighbors. A final example of this is the coordination that they must complete

with the farmers who own ground next to theirs or farmers who rent farm ground that their neighbors own. Below, Sean and Edie Smith describe how they decide where to grow their sensitive crops, such as seed corn, that cannot be planted near other types of crops.

> Edie: And sometimes just working hand-in-hand with neighbors and what they're growing. Sometimes figured into what you're growing where.
>
> Sean: Yeah, that's a little of it. Because of other farmers that are raising seed corn and what they need to isolate and some of that. As far as popcorn is concerned, you've gotta be farther away from popcorn so we try to … not cause any problems that way and hopefully they do the same for us, [Edie chuckles] we all get along then.
>
> Sheri: How do you work that out amongst each other?
>
> Sean: Um… We just need to contact the people who farm in the adjoining fields and find out what they're planting there. Usually, we don't have any say, of course, in what they plant. We just have to respond with what we do accordingly. But sometimes when people are familiar with the situation, they'll try to work with you. Usually, we have some type of agreements. Sometimes somebody will move one crop from one field to another just to help you out.

The decisions described by Edie and Sean attest to the strength of the connections they have with their neighbors. For instance, decisions about where to grow different crops have the potential to impact the profits of all farmers involved.

I think that Beth Mays sums up the connections to friends, family and neighbors the best in the quote below when she talks about the importance of talking to others, especially the older generation for advice and helping others when faced with a problem.

> Or you, in the back of your mind, someone's coming to you and telling you they have this problem and what are they gonna do about it. And you've already faced this problem in your life and you know what the answer is.

> But, you can always go and ask other people for advice. Um [pause] you can and you *should* ask older people for advice. It is [pause] most of the time helpful because they've already had these experiences and it flatters them and makes them feel useful and wanted. (Beth Mays)

This shows how the connections with other people are of use. She described how other people can be a source of information in difficult times and how the connections with others are healthy and useful in their daily lives.

The Land

The farmers that I interviewed over the course of this study displayed a strong connection to the land. As described above, they were constantly searching for new ground to rent or buy so they could expand their farming operations. They were in search of quality ground that could bring them a good crop and thus higher profits upon harvest. However, their connections to the land went beyond simply wanting to own it as a financial resource.

> Todd: Well, we could probably sell that farm today, that we paid $2,500 an acre for, for close to $5,000 an acre.
>
> Sue: Close to 100% profit. Yeah.
>
> Todd: But that's not the reason to…We don't buy ground to turn around and sell it. We buy it to farm it.
>
> Sue: A farmer does *not* buy ground to turn it over and sell it.

They did not see the sale of this farm ground as a monetary resource. Instead, it was a tool to do their work. As they explain, they could have sold it but they didn't because if they did, they would have less ground to farm. "… [O]nce people buy their own [ground], they tend to keep it" (Sue Olsen). Here is a hint that buying more ground may well go beyond just having a profitable enterprise, even one

which could help ensure a more secure future, but that buying land is for the long-term. The purchase of farmland, by a farm family, comes with a sense a stewardship of that land, over time.

The Farming Lifestyle

A keen sense of financial planning and striving to make good decisions is the core of the farming lifestyle for these two couples. Most of the farming decisions that Todd and Don shared with me made it back to money in some way or another.

> …The day-to-day decisions, no one's telling you what to do. But—you have to follow a certain regimen because there's people out there that… I mean there's limits. … Well, for instance, you have to produce so much because you have the real estate taxes. See, you have expenses, that's what I'm getting at; you have expenses that have to be paid whether you grow a crop or produce livestock, and make any money off it. That's what I'm saying. There's limits out there. (Don Davis)

Don gets to what I believe to be the heart of the meaning of work for farmers. He refers to how every decision matters because it could make or break them financially. They have to continually strive to make the best decisions they can in order to make a living.

> Being your own boss. Setting your own hours. Setting your own schedule. Basically, just work around the weather. Not that if it rains you don't work, I mean, if it rains you do something else that needs to be done. But, a different thing that you put off until it rains. (Todd Olsen)

The independence that they can experience is one of the main things that both Don Davis and Todd Olsen expressed as their favorite parts of farming as an occupation.

> But, there is a real work ethic involved that I don't know exactly how to describe it but you do have to be [pause] a self starter. You have to be

> motivated to, go out and do the work that needs to be done in order to be successful. But yeah, you don't have somebody there telling you you have to. [pause] In most cases you don't have a boss that's telling you to do it. You have to make those decisions and do it yourself. Ah, you know, that's an issue in that type of [pause] And it's not just farming. It's more of a self-employment type of business where that's important. (Sean Smith)

With many uncontrollable variables that all couples maneuvered within, the love for the lifestyle may seem a little surprising to someone who is new to the ways of farming. Below Todd and Sue Olsen describe the decision-making and adaptations that they must make in order to make a living:

> Todd: Oh yeah. It's a gamble. [Sue is chuckling quietly and Todd is smiling] You just keep trying different strategies and try to find something that you can survive by doin'.
>
> Sue: And the fact that he is very laid back has *a lot* to do with the fact that he is very seldom frustrated.
>
> Todd: If it doesn't work, you try something different [Todd and Sue laugh].

It appears that the struggles and constant need for change are just part of the territory, so to speak. All the couples also expressed a connection to the farming lifestyle and acknowledged that changes appear to be a large part of that lifestyle and getting older, with help from all that was learned, and earned, along the way.

> Sue: OK. You just feel more able to, you know, "I can take some time off and everything will still be OK." Whereas, at 24 you don't always feel that way.
>
> Todd: Oh yeah, we were more….before you were tryin' to work your butt off to impress landlords, to take up more ground, to make more income. Well, today we're pretty comfortable farmin' what we're farmin' and we're makin' a livin'…we're not gettin' rich, but we're makin' enough of a living that….

The lifestyle has become more comfortable to them; they worry less about what will happen. It seems to me that they are explaining how they've grown used to

the “gambling” nature of their profession over time and have learned to relax within the financial uncertainties of farming. Perhaps most importantly, they had been in the occupation long enough to have a financial “cushion,” to support the inherent ups and downs they experienced, and had developed confidence in their farming abilities.

Commitment or strong connection to their profession was expressed by all of those interviewed. “We were raised on the farm and I can’t… For myself I can’t picture myself being anything else and being happy” (Beth Mays). All the men were quick to identify themselves as farmers when I asked them what their professions were. “The yearbook, the high school yearbook when I graduated, said that “Don Davis is a farmer and he loves the land” (laughs).” Todd’s answer was just a quick and simple, “Farmer.” These interviewees expressed many different things that they liked about being a farmer.

> But, it’s just a good life. It’s just a good place to raise a family. It’s just a lot of fun. I mean, there’s plenty to do. I mean, you build a lake and you can go fishing. We built a lake down here and we can go fishing. Timber, you can go hunting. Comes the snow you slide down a hill. The kids and grandkids always enjoyed that. It’s just a [pause] a lot of fun. Don’t have to go to Disney Land or any place like that to have fun, you know. (Don Davis)

Sue Olsen expressed similar feelings about the farming lifestyle and how she saw the lifestyle as a benefit in raising her children.

> I would have to say that when my kids were smaller, it was my favorite part that they could be outside and I knew that if they were out of the road that they were safe. I mean, that was one of the first things I taught them, was to stay away from the road. But, I didn’t have to worry about neighbor kids or anything like that that would perhaps be a problem toward my children. (Sue Olsen)

Her statement above is an expression of freedom or independence in her ability to raise her children the way she feels fit. She feels that the “isolated” lifestyle of farm life offers her more control over the people her children associate with, giving her and Todd more control over what her children learn at an earlier age. She also expressed how she enjoyed the freedom to be involved in her children’s lives. She is able to attend most of their school events, track meets, and go on field trips with them.

Along the same lines, when Jim Mays was asked what he felt proud of, he responded as follows.

> Oh…I don’t know. I guess just that the kids, that they enjoy helping. One son farms with me and our youngest one here he does too, he’s starting to. And we’ve got him started with a cow herd, and Bill started with a cow herd, and Brian, our middle one, he … ah… bought himself a farm this year. He lives on the farm in the house and works in town. He works at Any Equipment in Masonville, but he wants to farm too. So, he bought a quarter this year. So he started farming.
>
> So, I think that’d be one of the main things. That…well, actually that our kids are involved in farming and that they are doing it too. (Jim Mays)

Jim was proud that he and Beth had instilled a love for the farming way of life in their children. This shows the strong commitment they feel toward their lifestyle.

> Well, I would say if we were thinking of doing some other profession as our living, the thing that we used to make money to pay our bills, we probably would have done it long ago. But, it seems to me that we have been here this long and we made it this far, made enough to pay the bills and raise kids and they’re almost all out of the house now. We wouldn’t change.
>
> Um… A certain day is gonna come along and some bad thing will come along and you just deal with it. (Beth Mays)

As Beth states above, if they were going to do something else they probably would have done it long ago.

Edna expressed that she liked the type of work that she did on the farm. “I like it outdoors… I’d rather be outdoors than indoors” (Edna Davis). Her husband, Don, stated that Edna is a hard worker and he thought that she enjoyed the types of work that she did on the farm. Considering that much of the work that Edna said she did on the farm was outdoors, caring for animals and the garden, he is probably right.

Conclusion

Farming is often referred to as “the simple life,” but after all I’ve learned from these five couples, I’d say it’s anything but simple. The amount and diversity of work and planning that these five couples put into their farm careers is impressive. The success of these five family farms was dependent on interconnected work, knowledge, and social connections that they pulled from to accomplish their daily work and simultaneously plan for the future. The traditional work and family boundaries seen in corporate work life are not seen here. The boundaries of the farm and the family were fluid and at times unidentifiable. The family lives of these five farming couples were as much defined by their farms as their farms were defined by their families.

As an illustration of the many complexities that both husbands and wives described as being parts of their day-to-day lives, I’ve included below Todd’s account of his typical day during planting season:

> Todd: Get up. Go up to Matt’s garage [Todd’s brother] and get the seed and the pesticide you’re gonna need for that day and load it on a wagon. Take it to wherever your planter is that you’re gonna plant that day. Start plantin’. Hopefully nothin’ breaks; if it does, then you gotta usually fix it if you have parts on hand or sometimes you’ve

gotta go to Emerson and get parts. Sometimes you can rob parts off of the other planter if nobody's plantin' with it. [pause] Ahh [pause] plant all day, I guess.

Sue: Well, you do usually come home for lunch.

Todd: Well, yeah.

Sue: I just had to throw that in there because that's part of my day.

Todd: And hopefully get done with the field that you're plantin' and you move to the next field or make plans to move to the next field or make plans to move the next morning. Take the tractor to wherever you need to take it. Put fuel in it. Closest place. Usually [pause] We don't have fuel on every farm. We've got fuel on several farms and we just go to the closest place to fuel up. [pause] Try to remember what you need to get for something that's causin' trouble that you need to take care of before the next day and you try to remember what you need to do first thing in the morning to take care of whatever was bothering you that day. If you've got a seed sensor on a planter that's not readin' properly or a monitor's alarm is goin' off because it's not reading like it should, then you need to do something about that. Unless you have the sensor and that doesn't fix it and then you just put masking tape over the buzzer so it doesn't bug ya all day. [Smiles[

[Everyone laughs]

This description of Todd's typical day during planting season shows how the many aspects of the meaning for work are interlinked and how his work life is interconnected with Sue's. He explains how he begins his day by planning for what he may need throughout the day and ends his day by planning for the next. He allows for variations within each individual day, the adaptation that has repeatedly been mentioned by all of the farmers in this study as necessary in their careers as farmers. He also mentions his brother's farm as a normal part of his day-to-day life. The way that he accomplishes his work is influenced by those around him. In the same way, Sue mentions her work as part of that farming day.

The interconnections between family, farm, and the community had fluid boundaries and reinforcing connections. As much as these farmers prided themselves on their sense of independence, they were also reliant on the community in which they were connected. Their community was the access point to finding new knowledge and skills for farming techniques, new products, and new land to rent or buy. At the same time, they contributed to their community by helping neighbors during difficult times and offering their services and advice when needed or requested. The pride they take from their work, their decisions and their hard-won knowledge and social connections ground their identities in the farming lifestyle.

As seen when addressing the first research topic on identity, the couples' work identities were encompassed by the various work tasks they completed on the farm and off the farm. The men in this study especially viewed themselves as farmers. The men displayed little desire to expand beyond that, because that one title described their identity to them and their work tasks fit well under that one label, whereas, the women in this study were more likely to define their identity based on what they did on a daily basis. They had very diverse tasks, though usually related to their domestic responsibilities.

The second research topic addressed the gender division of labor, and these couples described a gender division of labor that is typically accepted as the norm for twentieth-century century family farmers. The men took primary ownership of the outdoor work, and the women took primary ownership of the indoor work or work done near the home, such as the garden, caring for the

small livestock that resided in the yard, as well as caring for young or aging family members. However, the boundaries were occasionally crossed, and when that happened, the “non-owner” of that task was described as a helper rather than a doer. For example, the men “helped” with the gardening, and the women “helped” in the fields during harvest.

The final research topic questioned the ways that these couples’ views on farming as a career or their own farming careers had changed. The findings presented in this chapter demonstrate that change was a constant in the lives of these five farming couples. Changing farming techniques and products produced on their farms were techniques that these five couples used to make good decisions so they could save time and maximize their profits. Ultimately, these adaptations and changes carried greater meaning than simply maximizing profits or cutting labor time. These adaptations and the couples’ ability to constantly adapt allowed them to survive as family farmers. Chapter V will provide more discussion on how the findings presented here relate to those in preceding literature.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION

This chapter begins with a summary of the original three research topics derived from the literature (social identity, division of labor and changes) and compares the findings from this study to those discussed in the review of the literature. The summary of these three research topics will be organized by: social identity, division of labor and the meaning of work, and changes over time. Secondly, the chapter will summarize the findings organized by the three main themes that emerged from the grounded theory analysis on the broad research question: What is the meaning of work for couples who have been farming together for at least two decades and how do they explain their survival as family farmers into the twenty-first century?

Summary and Interpretation of Results

Findings by the Three Original Research Topics Identified from the Literature

Originally, this ethnographic research project was begun by focusing on three topics identified from the literature that served as research topics in the study design. The three topics from the literature can be summarized as social identity, the division of labor and meaning of work and changes that were made over time. I wanted to investigate the experiences and attached meanings that were lived by the five couples interviewed in this thesis project.

Social identity. I had several questions about social identity for the five couples interviewed as it related to their farming careers. I was interested in how their social identity was encompassed by their farms and, in turn, how their social identities influenced their farming; the discussion of social identities begins here and continues later in this chapter in the gender division of work section. I was also interested in learning how their social identities, both individual and as couples, shaped the way they viewed their places within the grander social scheme. What I found was that their farming careers influenced many aspects of their social identities. They all portrayed a strong loyalty to the farming profession stating that they valued the independence they felt it offered them and they professed strong attachments to the land. In fact, Beth Mays from Nebraska stated that she could not imagine herself being happy doing anything else.

Flexibility and independence were often mentioned in the literature as positive aspects of family farming. Rosenblatt (1990) discussed how the feeling of independence from others was cherished and made individuals want to maintain their careers as family farmers. Beach (1987) also described how this feeling of independence was important to the rural home workers in her study. In the same way that the farming lifestyle was intertwined between work and family for the couples I interviewed, Elder, Robertson, and Foster (1994) found that farm work integrated into the family lives of the farmers in their study as well.

Their farming decisions were often intertwined with their personal decision making, such as family and household decisions. Beth Mays from Nebraska stated that she could not imagine herself being happy doing anything else. Don

Davis from Illinois summed this feeling up well when he told me about the inscription under his picture in his high school yearbook. He told me that it simply stated, “Don Davis is a farmer and he loves the land.” The attachment that the five couples I interviewed felt to the land was undeniable. It came through in all of our conversations. The land had meaning to them that went beyond a tool for their careers—it was an essence that in some ways seemed to symbolize strength and longevity of their farming careers.

They also felt strong connections to the farming lifestyle, and shrewd financial planning amid serious risk factors were at the center of the farming lifestyle for these five couples. Sean Smith from Nebraska described the work ethic that is required for family farmers. All of the couples told me, in their own way, that even though no one is telling you what to do on a daily basis there are many, many tasks that need to be completed to ensure the success of your farm, which, in turn, ensures the survival of your family. All of the couples I interviewed described the same work ethic. They all worked long and hard to get things done so that they and their farms could be successful. The couples in my sample did not separate the work that needed to be done from their personal lives; it was all entwined.

As a professional in a non-profit organization, I have often felt pride and accomplishment at work. While that is important to me personally, I very much separate my “home” identity from my “work” identity. This was not the case for the 10 individuals I interviewed in the course of this thesis project. In the same way that the farming lifestyle was intertwined between work and family for the couples I interviewed, Elder, Robertson, and Foster (1994) found that farm work

integrated into the family lives of the farmers in their study as well. The work, business savvy, technical knowledge, and connections to family, neighbors, friends, and the land all combined to create their experience of the farming lifestyle. Each of these aspects had meaning to them that in some way gave them pride in themselves, their families, and their farms.

The stress that comes with the multitude of risk factors faced by family farmers was a common theme in the literature. The family farming couples interviewed in this study spent much time telling me about the various factors that posed risk for them and their farms but, in many ways, the way they told of these risks, it almost seemed like a game of chance, an enjoyable game of chance at that. The biggest risk factor identified by the couples in this study was the marketing of their products. They all described the process they went through to try to predict what products would bring the highest price at market when it was time to sell. They all used different means to try to overcome this unpredictability such as growing specialty crops, changing their farming techniques so that they could increase profit margins or a combination of these two tactics. So although they all acknowledged several things that caused them difficulty in their farming careers, they seemed to approach these difficulties more as challenges rather than stress factors.

The first research theme asked how these farming couples' social identities were or were not encompassed by the farm; on what they based their social identity; and how their social identities, individually and as couples, shaped the way they viewed their place in the larger social scheme. Using a qualitative

research approach, the facets of this theme were elicited for the most part indirectly during the interviews. The most direct interview question on the topic of identity asked the couples how they would label themselves. Slightly different self-labels emerged, especially by gender, but all participants answered within the context of being family farmers. The identity labels were elaborated and filled out by the details of the interviews. Even in instances where the identity question was not asked directly in the interviews, as was the case with one of the couples, the farming identity and related identities became clear through the descriptions of concrete activities, self-imposed labels, and accumulated experiences of those living the life of a family farmer over decades. The issue of what meanings participants have of their work as farmers, the core of this chapter, is similarly accessed through the interview details.

Division of labor and meaning of work. At the onset of this thesis project, I was very interested in learning about how the couples interviewed divided labor on and off the farm and if each person's work carried the same meaning to them as it did to their spouses. As mentioned in earlier chapters, I had originally planned to perform the initial interview with each couple together, as a couple, and then do follow-up interviews with each husband and wife individually. However, the couples in this study all declined this approach, and they were more interested in discussing the actual work that they did on their farms than how they divided it. Although gender differences did surface within the interviews, the most prevalent finding within the division of work was that each person pitched in where he or she was needed.

What I did find through their discussion of the work was that the men in the sample felt they were primarily responsible for the outside farm work. They prepared the land and planted and cared for the crops. They also cared for the machinery needed to perform the outside farm work. The women in this sample took primary responsibility for inside farm work such as bookkeeping and reproductive work. They were the primary caregivers for children, cooked meals, maintained the home and managed the garden.

The division of labor for these five couples was not static. It was flexible with both the men and the women pitching in to help the other when needed. They had a unity of effort where they each backed the other up to get what was needed on the farm done. All of the women interviewed spoke of driving trucks and assisting in the relocation of equipment during harvest. Beth Mays spoke of the vast amount of work she did caring for the animals she and Jim had on their farm. In the same way, Jim Mays told me how when their children were young, they did not hire babysitters but that the young children would ride with him in the tractor during the day. Edna Davis told me how she and Don would clean 50 chickens an evening when she got home from her job in town and Don came in from the field.

The fact that most of the men in this thesis project felt primarily responsible for the outside work on the farm and that the women felt primarily responsible for the inside and near home work on the farm aligned with the literature. Sachs (1991) states that women on farms perform a variety of tasks, both reproductive and income-earning. This was the case of the women I interviewed. Three of the

five women I interviewed had held off-farm employment at some point in their farming careers, and all had done work that directly contributed to the income earnings of the farm. The women in this sample were also similar to those in Lobao and Meyer's study (1995) in that they typically did the bookkeeping for the farm and were less involved in the field work and management tasks on their farms than were their husbands.

Liepins (2000) stated that "true farmers" are thought of as men in this era. Specifically, "true farmers" are thought of as men who are skilled in outdoor work and are knowledgeable and decisive in their farm management. I feel that this ideal was upheld in the thoughts of the individuals I interviewed in this thesis project. All of the men I interviewed were quick to identify themselves as farmers or agri-businessmen when asked what their profession was. The women I interviewed tended not to answer that question directly, instead telling me about the actual work tasks they performed.

None of the women I interviewed answered the question of their profession by directly saying she was a farmer, though I would describe each of them as such. This lack of pronouncement of the social identity of farmer by the women in my sample could be explained by DeVault's analysis of work language and women. DeVault (1990) states that language, especially language related to work, is embedded within the male experience and therefore often does not adequately allow women to explain their experience without them having to translate. The shortcomings of language related to work may explain why the women in my study focused on telling me what tasks they perform rather than

professing identity. It is possible that the work done by women farmers is not integrated into common language used to describe work done on farms thus preventing these women from adequately explaining their work on the farm.

The lack of pronounced identities as farmers by the women in my sample, possibly due to shortcomings of language related to work, relates to the findings of Campbell and Bell. Campbell and Bell (2000) state that in order to understand the disempowerment of female farmers, we must also understand the empowerment of male farmers. Liepens (1998; 2000) explains that there is a perception that farmers are rugged men who do hard outdoor labor and that farm women do household and indoor work, even if that perception is not true in reality. I believe that the experience of the couples in my study relates well to this discussion by Campbell and Bell and Liepens. Perhaps the reason that the women in my sample did not refer to themselves as farmers was because they, too, see “true farmers” as male.

Changes over time. The third research theme that I investigated as part of this thesis project was how, if at all, the couples interviewed had changed their farming careers or views of farming as a career as they aged. There was a vast amount of data within the interviews about changes and adaptations of technique over time. However, the majority of these changes were made as a means to make good decisions in order to save time and maximize profits on their farm. They did this by adapting their farming techniques and the products they produced. Don and Edna Davis made changes to their grain farming techniques. Jim and Beth Mays used specialty livestock as a means to maximize their profits.

Todd and Sue Olsen grew specialty grains. Sean and Edie Smith adapted both their farming techniques and grew specialty grains. Gene and Suzy Doe relied most on the purchase and sale of land to maximize their profits.

Don Davis, who farmed for others at the same time he was building his own farm, was innovative in the way that he applied fertilizer to his crops. He told me how he had to convince his boss that his idea would work and, when it did, it paid off in more ways than one. Not only did they get a record crop, he also gained respect from his boss. Sean and Edie Smith used a new planting technique to get more yields from their land. Sean told me about a technique where he planted wheat after seed corn in the fall because the seed corn is harvested earlier than normal corn, which allowed for another crop. Then he planted soy beans between rows of the seed corn about the same time the wheat was heading out. This allowed them to have a crop of wheat that was then harvested when the soybeans were still small enough not to be damaged by the harvesting equipment. After wheat harvest, the soybeans grew larger, and he would then have another crop.

Todd and Sue Olsen described a time when they tried growing seed beans to earn more for their crop. To do so, they had to follow very strict guidelines set down by the seed company, which required a lot of extra work on their part. In the end, the seed company did not have a demand for that particular variety of beans so they could not sell them as seed beans. Don Davis was innovative in the way he found feed for his livestock as well. One year his barn burned down and took his winter supply of hay with it. He thought that they would

have to buy feed that year until one day he looked at a field of wild grass and realized that it would make excellent feed for his cattle. So, instead of expending money to purchase winter feed, he harvested the wild grass.

Garkovich, Bokemeier, and Foote (1995) stated that the constant search for strategies that would assure farm success was the defining characteristic of the family farming lifestyle. The couples I interviewed for this thesis project were continually doing just that—changing the way they did things so they could save time and maximize their profits. In fact, Coughenour (1984) states that accepting new techniques is related to change in farm size. He goes on to state that most farmers are not satisfied with the size of their farms at the onset of their careers and that they work to increase the size of their farms, thus increasing the profits from the farm (Coughhenour 1984). All of the couples I spoke with told me how they had slowly grown the size of their farming operations through either inheritance, purchase, or renting of more and more ground. Coughenour (1984) stated that as farmers age, their tendency to rent land decreased while their farm ownership increased. This was the case with all the couples in this sample. All had stories of how they had managed to buy land they previously rented or had acquired additional land as their farming operations matured.

In the review of the literature found in Chapter II, Coughenour's four ideal characteristics of farmers in the modern era of farming are given. These ideal characteristics can be summarized as rational planning, the ability to evaluate performance based on outcomes instead of expectations, the ability to do cost/benefit analysis where they consider net farm profits as successes, and

finally, the ability to see oneself as a farmer and recognize that he or she is working within farm enterprise norms (Coughenour 1984). I draw special attention to the work of Coughenour because it was particularly salient in the stories told by the couples in my sample. All five couples interviewed displayed each of the four ideal characteristics Coughenour described. Each of the couples was continually planning their next endeavor or activity as it related to their farm. All five of the couples also performed some version of cost/benefit analysis where they counted their level of success based on the end result, not what they had originally planned for. Each couple was also aware of the happenings in the wider farm enterprise system; they watched the local, regional, and global markets as they prepared to sell the products produced on their farms. Each of the couples in this study was indeed skilled in the technical knowledge and skills that Coughenour stated was necessary for farmers in the modern era of farming. These five couples maneuvered the technical requirements of their farms in the same manner they managed all other aspects of their farms. They wove the new technical knowledge they learned and to which they had adapted together with their own years of experience, hard work, and the experiential legacy passed down to them from the generations preceding them.

Findings from the Analysis of the Meaning of Work

This study focused on one broad research question which examined the meaning of work for couples who had been farming together for decades and how they explained their survival as family farmers into the twenty-first century. These findings are organized by the three main themes that came from the

grounded theory analysis of the research findings; all kinds of work, business savvy and vast technical knowledge, and strong connections. The couples in my sample were most interested in telling stories of how they had adapted their work, changed the products they produced, and used savvy business management and financial planning to insure the survival of their farms.

All kinds of work. The couples interviewed during this study identified all kinds of hard manual labor, much of it done by hand. Don and Edna Davis from Illinois described how they would clean up to 50 chickens in an evening after Edna got home from her job off the farm. Similarly, Gene Doe told me about one summer when he loaded 80,000 bales of hay by himself. All of the couples described astonishing amounts of hard manual labor that they performed on their farms, but they seemed to take the work in stride as part of the job. They enjoyed the flexibility that being their own boss allowed them in choosing the order in which they did their work. Although I found mention in the literature of the variety of different skills required of family farmers (Salamon 1992), I did not find any studies that directly spoke about vast amounts of hard manual labor required. The amount of work required to make their family farms survive was a central theme in my interviews with these five couples.

There was also a lot of work to be done inside the household. Edna Davis took care of their relatives, again after she got home from her job in town. Sue Olsen did extensive bookkeeping of their farm's expenses, a task that is typically the job of the farmwife (Lobao and Meyer 1995; Garkovich et al. 1995). Sue would track inputs, outputs, labor, machinery repairs, life and health insurance,

and loans. The research shows that, regardless of the amount of productive work farmwomen do, they are still responsible for the majority of reproductive work (Sachs 1991). This was the case for the wives interviewed in this study. They all took primary responsibility for the home and family (reproductive) work. They all also worked outside the home on the farm as well (productive work). McKinley Wright (1995) stated that women often served as helpers in farm tasks. All of the women I interviewed referred to themselves as helpers at some point when describing their contributions outside the home.

Four of the husbands in the couples I interviewed had worked off the farm at some point in their farming careers and three of the wives worked off the farm at some point. Fellows and Lasley (1995) found that younger families with higher levels of education were more likely to take off-farm work in part because having more education made it a more viable option. I did not see a difference in the five couples interviewed for this study between levels of education and likelihood to take off-farm employment. However, due to the small sample size of this study, it cannot be said that the findings here can be generalized to the larger farming population. It has been stated that farm men are more likely to take a second job to allow them to put more money back into their farm (Elder, Robertson, and Ardelt 1994; Elder, Robertson, and Foster 1994). Other research shows that farm women are more likely to take off farm employment to put money toward the household or the family (Elder, Robertson, and Ardelt 1994). During our interviews the couples did not feel the need to indicate where the extra money was going, only that it was needed by the farm in general and so they sought it out.

Business savvy and vast technical knowledge. Each couple had a somewhat different approach to guaranteeing their survival. Todd and Sue Olsen and Sean and Edie Smith all used specialty crops as a means of insuring their survival. The Smiths used new techniques of planting and harvesting to get more crops out of a piece of land in a year. The Olsens paid close attention to the research being done on new seed hybrids. Don and Edna Davis ensured their survival by being thrifty in the way they did business and by adapting their farming methods and fertilizer usage to get the most out of their crops. Jim and Beth Mays diversified the livestock they raised, strategically grew their farm ground to increase productivity and efficiency, and were continually looking for the best deal available on new equipment. Gene and Suzy Doe used negotiation skills and hard work to ensure their survival. They would negotiate for a good price on a sub-standard piece of farm ground, fix it up, and then sell it for a profit.

The difficulty of marketing crops was unanimously named by the couples interviewed in this study as the most difficult part of ensuring their survival. A study by Garkovich, Bokemeier, and Foote (1995) found that farmers have a common sense of struggle for farm survival. All of the couples interviewed spoke of the unpredictability of the grain and livestock markets. They worked hard to accomplish the tasks needed on their farm, and at the end of the day they knew that their hard work was what ensured their survival to that point and that it would, in turn, ensure their survival into the years to come.

The existing literature agrees with the feelings expressed by the couples in this study and the survival techniques used. In his study, Cougenour (1984)

stated that accepting new techniques is related to rapid change in farm size. Each of the couples in this study spoke of their efforts in increasing the size of their farms. They did this through a variety of means—inheritance, purchasing land that was previously rented, and purchasing neighboring land when it became available. More land meant that they could get more use out of their equipment or purchase bigger, more efficient, equipment.

Rosenblatt (1990) stated that the freedom from the control of others is a key aspect of farm life that people cherish and strive to maintain. This is where the couples I interviewed felt the greatest sense of attachment to their farms. They liked having the flexibility to do what needed to be done on their own terms. Garkovich, Bokemeier, and Foote (1995) explained that family farmers see self-reliance, resourcefulness, civic pride, family strength, care for friends and community, and honesty in their work as central to farming.

Strong connections. Despite the trials faced as they fought to make their farms a success, all couples felt passionate about their farms and the farming lifestyle. Their lifestyle was enhanced by the strong connections they felt to the people around them and the land, as well as the farming lifestyle. All spoke of their love for the independence and ability to control their own work environment that their careers brought to them. They all seemed to adhere to a similar sense of responsibility to their farms, which they called responsibilities or work ethic. This strong sense of doing what needed to be done because they knew that it did seemed to be where these five couples found their sense of independence. They

all spoke of multiple responsibilities, but all felt pride in their ability to meet these responsibilities on their own terms.

The couples interviewed also spoke of strong connections to their communities, neighbors and friends. Other research shows that since family farms are tied to a particular location, their communities become the focus of their daily lives because of the nature of their work (Garkovich et al. 1995). The connections felt by the five couples in this study went beyond just common location. They valued the insights and advice they could learn from other farmers as well as the ability to count on others around them in times of need. They were also quick to help others when the need arose.

These couples talked about a real sense of community with their friends, family, and neighbors where they expressed genuine concern for each others well being. They expressed care for their business partners too. Gene Doe told how he gave the woman he rented land from more rent than she asked for because he made more profit than he expected to. In the same way Sean and Edie Smith talked about a woman they rented land from who was constantly worried about the crop because they had a profit-sharing agreement. Sean and Edie offered to pay her cash rent instead of the percentage-based rent to ease her mind.

Limitations

The findings of this study cannot be generalized to the entire family farming population on a national, state, or even regional basis. Five couples were interviewed for this thesis from two states–three in Nebraska and two in Illinois.

Although I feel the experiences of these five couples are likely to be similar to those of other family farmers in Nebraska and Illinois, it is impossible to state that fact with any certainty due to the small size of the sample. The purpose of this thesis project was to learn from the experience of these five couples as just that—their own experience. While I have compared the experiences of these couples with each other, I do not assume that their commonalities would necessarily hold true in a larger sample. However, the fact that these findings are similar to findings of other research on family farming adds credibility to these commonalities.

Using the couple as the unit of analysis instead of individuals made it difficult to identify individual meanings for each husband and wife from the data. It also made it difficult to pull out the differences in experience based on gender. Although some information on the gender division of labor presented itself in the data, I was not able to specifically address these differences with the individuals interviewed. I had originally hoped to be able to compare the couples' experiences to the experiences of the individual husbands and wives. The couples' decisions to continue with couple interviews made this impossible.

Future Research

I would recommend that a similar study be conducted with a larger sample of family farming couples in Illinois and Nebraska, perhaps even expanding the sample into other Midwestern states. I believe that this would allow for a more accurate and generalized picture of the experience of family farming couples. Future researchers would be able to compare the experiences of the larger

sample and get a wider view of their experiences and the meanings they associated with their experiences as family farming couples. It would also be telling to expand the sample to three generations so that a larger picture of changes, adaptations, and meanings could be seen as they changed from one generation to the next. I was able to see glimpses of these generational differences from the interviews conducted in this thesis project, but a study with generational differences as one of its key research questions would be able to learn much more on how the generations differed in their approaches to family farming. I would also like to see future research done on the ways in which woman farmers find meaning from their work. I was able to get glimpses of their meanings from this study, but I would be very interested to learn more of their experiences as women and not just as one half of a couple.

Relationship of Theoretical Frameworks to Findings

Each of the theoretical frameworks used throughout this study informed my work and findings a different way. Symbolic interactionism provided a framework for thinking about the interactions that the couples in my study discussed. It gave me a means to think about the progression of their farming careers and how these couples created meaning as they faced new situations in their careers. These meanings were created through their connections to other farmers, their families, and their communities over time. The symbolic interactionist approach asks researchers to obtain “descriptive accounts from the actors of how they see the objects, how they have acted toward the objects in a

variety of different situations, and how they refer to the objects in their conversations" (Blumer 1969:51). This premise guided the interview process.

Ground Theory guided my analytic process. Using a grounded theory approach allowed me the tools needed to stay close to the descriptions of their experiences provided by these couples, while at the same time aggregating their similarity of experiences and actions together to display a shared meaning of farming as articulated by this group of five family farming couples. By using the concept map derived from the open codes assigned to the interview transcriptions, I was able to provide a visual representation of the major concepts that emerged and their interconnections. The map synthesizes all the major findings from all five couples. The major concepts and subcategories are all grounded in the actual interview data, and thus, in the findings chapter the reader hears the details of those interviews. These farming stories are documented for others to read, even future farm families in generations to come.

The life course perspective gave me insights into both the impact of preceding generations and the adaptations these couples made over the course of their careers. The number of adaptations made throughout the farming careers of these five couples was astounding. The life course perspective provided insights into my thinking on these adaptations and how the adaptations influenced the meaning of work for the couples. These four theoretical frameworks worked well together because they each informed the project in different but related and complementary ways.

Contributions

Despite the small sample size of this project, I feel there are several contributions that validate its importance to the body of literature about family farming. This study allowed an in-depth look at the trials and successes of five family farming couples. It offered each of these couples an opportunity to share their stories with someone outside their normal circle of acquaintances. Through telling me their stories they were able to reinforce to themselves all they had accomplished. I was able to sense the pride they felt for the work they did as they told their stories, and I believe that this is perhaps the greatest contribution of this thesis project.

An important contribution of this thesis project is in its telling of the vast amount of changes and adaptations these couples undertook to make their family farms successful. Even though I grew up in a farming community and on a farm, I was constantly amazed by the ingenious ways that these 10 individuals had adapted their approach to farming in order to make their farm a success. I heard stories of how they had adapted equipment to better meet their needs, changed crops and livestock, and strategized new farming techniques that would save them time and money.

Another contribution of this study is the way that it demonstrates the lack of separation of work and personal life for these five family farming couples as well as the sheer amount of work that they do to assure farm success. I feel that many times those of us who work away from our homes or for another employer take for granted the security that gives us. I believe the fact that these couples

homes and families are so integrally tied to their farms is both a blessing (as I believe they would describe it) as well as a curse. They do not have the luxury of leaving work at work and home at home; there is no separation between the two for these five couples. What happens on their farm affects their home and what happens in their home affects their farm. Their work lives as well as their home lives are intimately tied to hard work, business savvy, and connections with their family, community, the land, and the farming lifestyle.

The final, and perhaps most poignant, contribution of this research project is the ability to share the experiences of these five couples with readers now and in the future. This study provides an in-depth analysis of the tactics used by these five couples offering valuable insights into the real-life experience of these Midwestern family farming couples. I argue that the careful documentation of the experiences of these couples adds to the existing farming literature and may offer encouragement and hope to family farmers in the future. Although the findings from this study cannot be generalized to the larger family farming population due to its limited size, their trials and successes provide insight into the lives of the modern family farmer. The findings presented in this study align closely with existing literature; however, this study goes beyond the extant literature to provide a detailed model for how family farmers can use their versatile skills to succeed within new economic conditions. The successors of this model are those family farmers today who have moved into organic farming, growing flower, raising specialty livestock, or renting their land to wind turbine companies. At the time I started this study I could find no other qualitative study

focusing on long-time family farming couples in the Midwest. The practical implication of following the work and decisions of these five family farming couples is that these data illustrate just how it is that a “dying occupation” can have the tenacity to survive.

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APPENDIX A

LETTER OF INFORMED CONSENT

Sheri Hink is a graduate student under the direction of Professor Barbara Heyl in the Department of Sociology & Anthropology at Illinois State University, and this research project is part of her graduate thesis research study. The purpose of my study is to study the meaning of work for a rural farming family.

I am recruiting participants to be interviewed regarding their thoughts toward the meaning of work and farming. These interviews will take place over the next year's time and each interview will last between one to one and one half hours and the audio will be recorded to ensure accurate transcription of the material shared during the interviews. The study may also include a period of observation, with permission of the study participant, into some aspect of his/her daily life relevant to the study.

I do not foresee any risks or discomforts to you of participating in this project, but if you have any reservations about participating, let's talk about them right away.

Some benefits of participating may be the opportunities for you to consider the issues raised by the research and interview questions and for you to reflect on your own experiences. If I pursue this topic further, such as write a thesis, report, or article, others may benefit from the insights that you share with me, and I will maintain your confidentiality at all times. In fact, no real names will appear on any documents connected with the project, including field notes, audio tapes, final reports, or publications. No identifying information will be used. If audio tapes are used, they will be kept in a secure place at all times; no one but me will have access to the tapes. I will strive to be careful to avoid the accumulation of descriptive details about you written up in any final report to be sure that others reading it will not be able to identify you.

If you have any questions, please feel free to contact Dr. Heyl at ([redacted]) [redacted] or the Nancy Latham in Academic Research Services at Illinois State University at (309) 438-8451 or me at ([redacted]) [redacted] (cell phone) or [redacted]@[redacted].

Please be assured that your participation in this study is absolutely voluntary. If you prefer not to participate or you wish to withdraw at any time from the study, that is fine and there will be absolutely no penalties of any kind. Indeed, it is always your choice to participate at every point in the study. And if you do not want to answer any specific questions during an interview, just let me know, and we will just skip those or stop the interview, whichever you prefer. I would like to be able to tape record our interviews, but that, too, is entirely up to you. Any audio tapes will be destroyed after completion of the project.

Thank you for considering helping with this project.

_____	_____
Please initial, if you are comfortable with the above description and are willing to participate in the project.	Please initial, if you are comfortable with the above description and are willing to be audiotaped.

APPENDIX B

SAMPLE INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. When did you first start farming? How did you begin?

2. How do you and your spouse (husband or wife) split the various duties of the farm?

3. What's it like being a farmer today. Do you have one "big" concern about your farm?

   Possible Probes:
   - Biggest challenge or problem?
   - Biggest concern related to farming in general?
   - Biggest source of pride or happiness?

4. Do you ever worry about your finances (personal and farm)?

5. Have you ever worked off the farm? When? What motivated you?

6. How did working off the farm affect the farm? Affect you?

7. If you had to label yourself into one profession what would it be?

   Possible Probes:
   If answers "farmer":
   - When did you decide you were a farmer?
   - Was there a defining moment when you began calling yourself a farmer?
   - What does it mean to be a farmer?

8. When do you plan to retire?

9. What will you do with the farm when you retire?

10. What is the hardest part of being a farmer?