

## **Finding Permanence in a Land of Loss**

By Emily K. Goodling

*Never get attached to a cow or an acre of land.* I found the mouse-colored calf out in the field and knew it was dying though it was hard to admit that fact to myself. As it lay on the floorboard of the old flatbed pick-up on the 25-mile trip to the veterinarian, I spoke to it, encouraging it to live but knowing that the harsh bawling sounds coming from its throat were an ominous sign. Once at the veterinarian's office, my fiancé made the decision to have an expensive intravenous fluid administered to the pneumonia-stricken calf because in his rationale "you can't bring an animal this far and not give it a chance." Three minutes after starting the IV drip, the vet announced that the animal's heart had stopped beating. I cried the whole way home, trying to remember the simple, yet sage advice about detachment that had been offered to me two days previously.

Though it did little to console me at the time, the words contained in that advice have a powerful meaning for residents of the northern Great Plains. When it comes to animals, we learn at an early age that their death is a normal part of the process. With livestock, the losses come often and it becomes easier to maintain a detachment from their lives. Even with the rancher's ever-present and much-beloved cow dog, it is understood that the frailty of these higher life forms leads them eventually to death with no blame ever placed on their loss. Land is of a different character, however.

The soils of our Great Plains can live on in perpetuity with the proper stewardship. As agricultural producers work and graze the same plots of land year after year, generation after generation, an understanding of the land develops in a manner wholly unlike any other relationship. Farmers and ranchers learn where the best crops grow and the choicest forage is found. From this knowledge, they rely on the land to support a family and most, in turn, provide a high standard of care for the soil to ensure its viability. However, with the present-day economic downturn and the emergence of globalized corporations, agricultural producers are being forced off their farms. Land-producer relationships that have developed over the past one hundred years or more are vanishing.

Whereas the end of a relationship with an animal is acceptable, the end of a relationship with land is not such an easy thing to recover from. If a farm or ranch can no longer produce enough to support the family, someone is to blame for poor management practices and most often the operator bears the brunt of that blame as land is transferred to ravenous neighbors or out-of-state strangers. Whether this blame is right or wrong does not matter. The Great Plains is experiencing a radical change in population and land use character for a variety of reasons, all of which are causing the agrarian ideals that our nation was founded upon to be pushed by the wayside. However, all is not lost. Efforts are emerging to maintain the character of the rural communities and to help the relationship between the farmer and the land become more stable so that the attachment felt becomes acceptable.

These efforts are wide-ranging in what they see as the best future for the Great Plains. On one end of the spectrum lie individuals such as Frank and Deborah Popper who

envision a “Buffalo Commons” where native prairie restoration would occur across vast tracts of land from the Canadian border south to Mexico. In their eyes, conventional agriculture in the region was one of the greatest “miscalculations” made in our history due to the settlement patterns promoted on some of the most arid land in our nation that was not ideal for row crop production (Popper and Popper 1987). While small initiatives such as the Million Acre Project in the Black Hills of South Dakota seek to make the Popper vision a reality, the hope for many residents of the Great Plains is that agriculture will continue in a manner that ensures sustainability for the future generations (Matthews 2002).

And it should continue. The American West of our past often reads like a fairy tale in the history books. We read of heroic acts, of riding off into the sunset on a magnificent steed, of the blood, sweat, tears and satisfaction that come with the annual cycle of production. Most never get to experience this West, still alive in many deep rural areas, firsthand. The lucky few get to live it and they do so because they enjoy it, not because there is a profit to be made. However, those few are in danger of losing this way of life due to globalization and practices which may not be sustainable in the long term. When questioned, most Americans agree that farming and ranching are worthwhile enterprises (Starrs 1998). They also agree that protection of natural resources should be of paramount concern throughout our nation, Great Plains included. What this leads to is an opportunity that some are beginning to realize that allows farming and ranching to become economically viable *and* dictates that small family farm production be sustainable and suited for the arid conditions found there.

That opportunity is tourism. This “agricultural tourism” is on the rise and is being implemented in an increasing variety of ways. The most obvious sign of this is the popularity of dude farming or dude ranching. Families are willing to pay large sums of money to “live the life” for a week or two if they are provided with accommodations and meals as well as instruction on some of the tricks of the trade of agriculture. However, they are more likely to visit operations that keep environmental health maintenance as one of the ultimate goals.

While most of these traditional “dude” operations may use tourism as the sole reason for operating, others continue to use agricultural production as the sole reason for operating with the help of both government and private initiatives. In Montana, one popular government program that sponsors tourism is the relatively recent Undaunted Stewardship initiative of the Montana State Extension Service, the Bureau of Land Management and the Montana Stockgrower’s Association. Landowners can receive technical and financial assistance in dealing with individuals who wish to access their land and in return they should pledge to operate the land sustainably for future generations. Though the stated purpose is to provide access to historical sites, namely those associated with the Lewis and Clark expedition, it also helps agricultural producers to benefit financially from these visitors through the construction of bed-and-breakfast-type establishments (Montana Extension Service 2002).

One private initiative which seems to hold a great deal of promise is the Corporation for the Northern Rockies (CNR). In return for operating a sustainable production system, landowners receive financial assistance and sponsorship from CNR.

This organization recognizes that consumers are willing to pay premium prices for products which can be raised sustainably and more in tune with nature. This also provides more permanence for the attachment between the producer and the land as the resources become more productive and paying guests may become a part of the operation (CNR 2003). The viewpoint of CNR is that agriculture is far superior to the sprawl of cities like Billings or Rapid City. Although sprawl may not be an issue in the deep rural areas of places like northeastern Montana, a sustainable and prosperous agriculture community also prevents the strong desire for extractive industries such as coal mining to turn towns into temporary “boom areas” (Id.).

These kinds of activities illustrated above and many other similar initiatives support agriculture. It shows that urban people (our decision makers on food issues by way of simple majority) want agriculture to occur sustainably in what has always been considered America’s “bread basket” and they are willing to spend both their tourist and food dollars on farms and ranches that operate in such a way. It also prevents the rural community members from being turned into low-wage tourism sector employees and helps to maintain their integrity and intimate connection with the land. The love these producers show for the land is not something that everyone in the United States knows, but it seems to be something that most want to try to understand on some level. A connection with the land is a primal feeling that runs through our blood back to the days of primitive hunters and gatherers. Many have lost that connection, but sustainable agriculture in the Great Plains is helping us to restore it and share it with a wider community.

As a newcomer to the northern Great Plains by way of marriage, I know that a daunting life awaits me. Farming and ranching are not easy financially, physically or emotionally due to local and national social constraints. The advice my new family offers me of maintaining a sense of detachment from certain things has not been heeded, nor will it be. The prairie has a way of grasping your heart and never letting go, especially after witnessing a full turn of the seasonal cycle that is the lifeblood of our community. Perhaps the realization that my childhood dreams of escaping urban idealism and living the rural reality are coming true has warped the beauty of the plains for me personally, but that is how the passion to work for something you love arises. I am often asked why I wish to stay there by people who have witnessed the youngest generation fleeing for the bigger cities. My answer is that I came to Montana for the mountains and the solitude; I am staying for the people and the prairie.

The future of the Great Plains begins with the people of my generation who feel this connection with rural life and believe that the land can be sustainably used for agricultural purposes. Although our numbers are extraordinarily low in these rural communities, we have the power and desire to make the lifestyle work coupled with a yearning to share our love with others who may not completely understand. With alterations that allow the more urban regions of our nation to experience and therefore demand products from this primal lifestyle, agriculture will succeed in an increasingly more sustainable manner. Someday soon our connection with the land may become less tenuous, and it may become acceptable to outwardly display passion and attachment to the land we so desperately need and love.

## References

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