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# Identities and Persistence of Family Farm Operators

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A thesis

presented to

the faculty of the Department of Sociology and Anthropology

East Tennessee State University

In partial fulfillment

of the requirements for the degree

Master of Arts in Sociology

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by

Parker Arnold

December 2017

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Dr. Martha Copp, Chair

Dr. Leslie McCallister

Dr. Joseph Baker

Keywords: Family Farms, Identity, Identity Work, Moral Career, Moral Identity

## ABSTRACT

### Identities and Persistence of Family Farm Operators

by

Parker Arnold

This study focuses on the identities of family farm operators and the challenges to maintaining viable farm operations in today's agricultural economy. Employing a grounded qualitative approach, the author conducted 18 in-depth interviews with principal farm operators from Iowa and Tennessee. Using the insights of farmers from geographically different agricultural regions, this study notes how preserving family histories, socialization processes, and farming as a moral career inform operators' understandings of themselves and the work they do. The analysis also focuses on how family farm operators contend with a globalized agricultural economy and the moral and ethical concerns of managing a farm. Farm operators implement various tactics and framing mechanisms for resolving and, in some cases, circumventing these challenging issues in order to maintain their farms, identities, and family farm legacies.

## DEDICATION

I dedicate my research to my own family farm. This location has served as the setting for many frustrating, educational, and enjoyable moments in my life. I also dedicate my research to my brother, Miles, whose ceaseless passion for farming inspired this project.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

First, I would like to thank my thesis committee members, Dr. Copp, Dr. McCallister, and Dr. Baker for their feedback on and support of my research. In particular, I would like to thank Dr. Copp for her seemingly endless reserves of encouragement. Her teachings and guidance have refined my skills as a writer, educator, and qualitative researcher. I am thankful to have had her serve as my thesis committee chair and mentor.

I am very grateful for the opportunities East Tennessee State University has provided me. The faculty and staff of the Department of Sociology and Anthropology have shown me an academic environment that is both welcoming and highly satisfying. I would also like to thank all the friends that I have made through the graduate program. Everyone I have met at ETSU has been a great source of inspiration and support during my time here.

I would like to thank the agricultural communities of Iowa and Tennessee for obliging my academic curiosity about their lives and sharing their experiences. Their kindness and perseverance are an inspiration to me and everyone they come in contact with. I thank them for inviting me into their homes and treating me like friend.

Finally, I thank my research assistant and wife, Ms. Olivia Egen. After completing her degree she told me, “It is your turn.” I have now taken that turn. Olivia’s unwavering confidence and encouragement has helped me accomplish goals I had not thought myself capable of.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

Family farms conjure images of vast open landscapes sown with uniform crops, weathered barns, bright silver grain bins, and livestock lazily grazing in pastures. In the distance, a figure wearing a seed corn hat begins the first of countless passes around a field on a tractor just as her/his father and grandfather had in the past. Hidden from this imagery are seemingly infinite concerns filtering through the farmer's mind. S/he is one of the millions of farmers producing food, fuel, and fibers that will provide the world with countless products ranging from the food on your plate to the ethanol in your gas tank. "Family farm operator" represents a unique social identity that is constructed and reproduced through life experiences, family traditions, and a sense of being morally good. The farmer identity, however, is under constant pressure from social and economic forces in and outside of the agricultural setting.

Today, the agricultural sector is one of the last remaining divisions of the economy that consists predominately of family owned businesses (Lobao and Meyer 2001). Ninety-seven percent of all farms in the United States are family owned, and small family farms make up 88 percent of all farms (USDA 2015). Although they make up the vast majority of the total farms in the nation, small family operations account for a mere 20 percent of total agricultural sales in the United States. Due to major changes in the nation's economy at the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, many farmers decided or have been forced to exit agriculture altogether, citing the constantly rising cost of production and uncertainty of income (Lobao and Meyer 2001). America's farm land is becoming increasingly concentrated into fewer larger farms (McDonald 2013). Farmers see this trend as a threat to their farms, family histories, and identities as farmers.



My academic interest in the social aspects of agriculture, and in particular family farms, stems from my own family history of farming and a curiosity about a lifestyle I left behind. Both my maternal and paternal grandparents farmed in the Midwest, as did my father, and as my brother does now. My father and brother both work(ed) full-time jobs in addition to being principal operator of the family farm to sustain a livelihood; this is an issue my grandparents never worried about as full-time farmers. Once I was far enough removed from familial obligations to the farm and took a more sociological perspective of the operation, I began to ask myself: why do families, like my own, continue to farm in an era in which small family farm operators are at a distinct disadvantage and their labor may go unrewarded? This thesis attempts to clarify this issue.

As social institutions, the family and the farm are connected by a long-standing history in which the family unit supplied the labor requirements of the farm (Hildenbrand and Hennon 2005; Lobao and Meyer 2001). Families developed unique identities based on traditions of agricultural production that transcend generational lines; as farmers pass along traditions, they inform the next generation of the meanings they attach to the family farm. The farming identity is one that honors family histories, informs their decisions, and positions them as caretakers of animals and the environment.

As the trend of fewer larger farms progresses and agriculture becomes increasingly capital-intensive, small family farmers have parted with some forms of production. The farmers of Iowa and Tennessee in my study have ceased the production of commodities that once thrived in these distinct agricultural regions. Farmers once used these now lost forms of production as vital sources of income that once informed their farming identity. Farmers have become increasingly specialized in fewer forms of production that leave them more susceptible to the

volatility of commodity prices. In addition to becoming less diversified, farmers also perceive their operations and farming identity as being maligned by government agencies. Farmers feel as though they are wrongly accused of detrimentally affecting the land and wellbeing of animals—actions that contradict their social identity as stewards of the land (Kessler et al. 2015).

This study offers an improved understanding of the farming identity and the challenges that farmers encounter. I analyze how those challenges shape how farmers think about themselves and the work they do. Based on 18 in-depth interviews with principal farm operators in Iowa and Tennessee, I present my findings on the processes farmers use to reproduce and reconstruct the farming identity. In addition to these processes, I examine the main challenges that threaten farm operators' livelihoods and farming identities, and how they resolve, and in some cases circumvent, these challenges.

## CHAPTER 2

### LITERATURE REVIEW

#### Conceptualizing the Farm

There are around 2.1 million farms within the United States (USDA 2015). The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) agricultural census typology requires the production of at least \$1,000 worth of agricultural products within a year to be classified as a farm (USDA 2015). This definition allows for a wide range of organizations and business operations to fall under this title. With such inclusive criteria, further subdivision of farm classification is imperative to understand the variety of organizations that fit this definition. A primary distinction is made as to whether the farm is owned or operated by a family unit; those that are not are classified as nonfamily farms. With 97 percent of all farms being classified as a family farm, further subdivision is necessary; this is achieved by categorization of farms based upon gross cash farm income. Family farms can be considered large, midsize, or small. The small family farm category comprises 88 percent of all farms, again requiring further subdivision according to the operator's employment on or off the farm or retirement status; the ceiling for small family farm classification is set at \$350,000 in earnings (USDA 2015). Given these broad categories it is difficult to use general statistics to describe farms. Reports show an uneven distribution when it comes to the overall size of farms, mirroring the polarizing effects of structural changes. In 2011, U.S. farmers had an average 234 acres of land in crop production. However, the median size of cropland for farms was 45 acres; 80 percent of farms were below the average for acres planted in crops in 2011 (MacDonald 2013). Although simplistic, it is important to note these findings indicate a concentration of agricultural production and land operation into fewer larger farms.

The United States is divided into multiple farm resource regions (USDA 2000). This study will focus on operators from regions known as the Eastern Uplands and the Heartland. Both regions have unique characteristics when compared to other agricultural regions. The Eastern Uplands, near the east coast of the United States, covers the western half of Appalachia extending from northern portions of Georgia and Alabama up to southwestern Pennsylvania. The majority of the state of Tennessee, where I conducted interviews, falls within this agricultural region. Unique to the Eastern Uplands is that it is home to more small farms than any other region, with commodity production consisting of cattle, tobacco, and poultry (USDA 2000). Interestingly, this region contains 15 percent of the nation's farms but makes up a mere 5 percent of the nation's agricultural production.

The Heartland, also referred to as the "Corn Belt," covers a region of the United States commonly known as the Midwest; it extends from central Ohio on west toward eastern regions of Nebraska and South Dakota. Its most northwestern edges reach southern portions of Minnesota and extend south, covering the majority of the state of Missouri. This agricultural region contains the most farms of any region and accounts for 27 percent of the nation's agricultural production; the highest share compared to all other regions (USDA 2000). The entire state of Iowa, where I conducted interviews, falls within this agricultural region. Interviews with operators in these two regions thus offered the chance to learn more about the general experience of farming in the U.S. and the unique experiences of farmers in distinct agricultural sectors.

### U.S. Agricultural Structure

Due to farmers implementing new technology and significant restructuring of how farmers buy and sell agricultural products, the farmer's agricultural experience is different from the past. "In the early 1900s, more than one in every three Americans lived on farms, a number

greater than that at any other point in our country's history" (Lobao and Meyer 2001:103).

According to the most recent agricultural census data, there are 3.2 million farmers in the United States—about 1 percent of the U.S. population (USDA 2014). Owing to this major reorganization of American society, the nation we live in today is defined by the growing distance between members of mainstream society and those involved in agricultural production.

At its inception, the United States economy depended heavily upon agricultural production; however, following the great depression, changes in economic opportunities resulted in large portions of the farming population being drawn to urban regions for employment opportunities. This mass out-migration coincides with the widespread adoption of technologies, such as self-propelled tractors, and policy implementations, namely the "New Deal," which gave rise to new forms of agricultural industries and bolstered production efficiency, increased labor capabilities, and, perhaps most salient, the need for capital (Albrecht 1998; Barlett 1987; Gebremedhin and Christy 1996). These societal changes resulted in an agricultural economy in which farmers must acquire more land and capital in order for their family farms to survive. The farmers' individual productive capacities grew, enabling fewer people to work more land. Along with these agricultural innovations, farmers' occupational goals changed; the purpose of farms slowly transformed from subsistence living to commodity production (Lyson and Guptill 2004). As will be discussed later, the farmer's overall focus also begins to shift from direct involvement with labor and production to a greater reliance on and understanding of commodity marketing.

Despite rapid and continuous development, farmers still work in a financially precarious occupation. An event, referred to as the "Cost Price Squeeze," occurred in which the effects of the 1970s oil embargo, rising expenses to operating farms, and stagnating and falling commodity prices placed substantial stress on farmers in the agricultural economy (Barlett 1987). Farmers

began to take out loans in order to keep pace with the financial requirements of maintaining farm operations all while experiencing declining incomes. In the midst of these deteriorating economic conditions, a major drought in the 1980s led to widespread crop failure and resulted in increased numbers of farmers defaulting on loans. Interestingly, family farms that experienced these same strains were able to weather these conditions better than moderate and large scale farms that relied on waged labor. The ability to cut costs and drastically back off production ultimately saved these types of farm organizations (Barlett 1987; Hildenbrand and Hennon 2005).

Subsidized crop production is a major point of contention among farmers and the general public. Subsidy advocates claim they stabilize food supplies and farm income in the event of unfavorable growing seasons or natural disasters (EWG 2016). Farm operators receive subsidies on the basis of the number of acres in agriculturally related production (USDA 2015). This allocation method places large-scale farmers, who can afford access to larger parcels of land and the necessary machinery, at a distinct advantage over small family farms. Small and intermediate size farms (i.e. the majority of U.S. farms) receive roughly 20 percent of all subsidies (Spittler and Ross 2011). To be eligible for subsidies, farmers must provide proof they are “actively engaged in farming,” meaning the individual offers land, capital, or management practices intended for agricultural production and have a net income of less than \$900,000 (USDA 2015). As one might expect, public concern arises over the use of tax dollars funding programs in which large “corporate” farms are the primary beneficiaries.

Subsidizing crops has implications for global food systems and foreign economies as well. Magdoff (2004) outlines how surplus production of crops being exported from the U.S. to developing nations harms local small farmers by driving down commodity prices. This argument

links global food insecurity and unemployment to large farms and agribusinesses. Stenholm and Hytti (2014) found that family farm operators are primarily influenced by and interact with others in their local agricultural communities. In light of these findings, my research focuses on developing an improved understanding of how family farm operators handle interactions in a globalized agricultural economy. Magdoff (2004) posits government agencies are responsible for health concerns related to subsidized crops. Corn, the most heavily subsidized commodity, is now used in a multitude of consumer products ranging from soft drinks to the plastic cups they are served in. Spittler and Ross (2011) make the connection between low income populations and consumption of high sugar/low nutrient diets and food insecurity. The authors suggest government subsidized crops are not compatible with consumer health and dietary needs. Further, the authors recommend subsidies be considered for more wholesome food production that will better meet societal needs (Spittler and Ross 2011).

#### Family Farm Labor

Historically, the family unit provided the majority of agricultural labor and management (Hildenbrand and Hennon 2005). However, as discussed above, the current agricultural economy places all but the largest producers at a disadvantage. As mentioned earlier, family farms benefit from easily adjusting to varying seasonal labor needs of the farm, as opposed to waged labor (Barlett 1987; Reinhardt and Barlett 1989). Compared to other commodity production sectors, agriculture is unique due to its inseparable link between production and biological processes. Where other forms of commodity productions or manufacturing can have multiple levels, agriculture is confined to the sequential and temporal biological process of crop or livestock maturation (Lobao and Meyer 2001; Reinhardt and Barlett 1989). Given that a consistent waged labor force is not needed between planting and harvesting, the family has traditionally best fit

this model of production. Additionally, agriculture remains one of very few sectors of the economy that is predominately organized around the family. However, technological advancements, while extremely expensive, have reduced labor demands and fewer people can handle more acres (Gebremedhin and Christy 1996; MacDonald 2013). This places family farms in a situation where in order to keep up with the most current and efficient forms of agricultural production they must “get big or get out.”

Because of the polarized agricultural economy and high costs and low returns within small scale agricultural production, most family farm households now rely on off-farm employment to maintain their livelihood. Farmers’ reliance on both farm and off-farm income for their household livelihood is called “pluriactivity” (Machum 2005). Only 16 percent of small family farms rely on the farm for the majority of their household income (USDA 2015). Goodwin and Mishra (2004) connect off-farm employment and reduced farm efficiency. As farmers work more hours off the farm, the agricultural efficiency (determined by income after expenses) of the farm decreased. This places the family farm in a vicious cycle; family members must take off-farm work due to the reduced income capacities of the farm, however in doing so, their farm realizes lower returns. This could very well lead them to spend more time working off the farm due to these lower profits, thus, further perpetuating the cycle of reduced profitability. This study offers observational support to the trend of concentration of ownership (larger farms in few hands) while small farms shrink and struggle to stay viable.

Due to off-farm work, farmers have altered what they choose to produce. Farmers working off the farm tend to specialize in less labor-intensive forms of agricultural production (e.g., beef cattle production as opposed to dairy) (Gillespie and Mishra 2011). Interestingly, an Economic Research Service report (USDA 2016) on farm household income shows these less



labor intensive forms of production report negative median incomes. Reinhardt and Barlett (1989) explain that the profitability of less labor intensive commodities rely on economies of scale. In order to profit from these forms of production, one must be able to produce a large enough quantity in order to outweigh the input costs. To run a profit, a family must have access to enough capital to start and maintain this level of production. Again, we find that the largest producers are at a significant advantage within these markets.

Compensation of labor is another factor that differentiates the family farm from all others. As opposed to corporate operation where shareholders contribute to the capital requirements of the farm, family farms use household income for capital requirements (Glover 2013). Farmers also engage in labor that is seen as self-exploitation; the amount of labor they put into farm production and management may not yield adequate income (Galt 2013). Farmers benefit from this self-reliance by reducing their labor needs in financially difficult times (Calus and Van Huylenbroeck 2010). The use of children as unpaid laborers is still a common practice. Children are viewed as symbolically benefiting from farming as an educational experience and through developing strong work ethics while contributing to the farm's labor requirements (Sepeda and Kim 2006; Stieger et al 2012). Family units running the farm are seen as having a more vested interest in maintaining the farm, not only for family livelihood, but in order to maintain tradition and identity (Barlett 1986; Calus and Van Huylenbroeck 2010; Kuehne 2013).

### The Identity of the Family Farmer

Understanding the construction and reproduction of what it means to be a family farm operator is essential in grasping how these individuals have persisted in the current agricultural context. In developing an improved understanding of how farmers think about themselves, I implement a symbolic interactionist framework. This theoretical perspective treats the self as a

social object to which people attach meanings and act toward based upon those meanings and past experiences (Blumer 1969; Mead 1934). From this perspective, the farmer as well as the farm itself are viewed as social objects on which meanings are attached (Blumer 1969). In discussing what it means to be a farmer, I use the concept of identity as described by Stryker as “parts which can be taken to comprise the self” (1968:559). People use these “parts” of the self to guide their interactions with others and with themselves. In order to maintain identities (e.g., farm operator), social actors engage in activities that are associated with and give meaning to their identity. This concept, in which identities are being reproduced and maintained, is referred to as identity work (Schwalbe and Mason-Schrock 1996). By continuing to operate the farm, farmers are simultaneously maintaining the family farm as well as their identities as farmers.

Applying Goffman’s ([1963] 1986) understanding of actual and virtual identities is also beneficial in understanding the vast array of implications associated with the identity of family farm operators. Identifying as a family farm operator (an actual identity) indicates an individual’s claim to a particular lifestyle and occupation defined by agricultural practices and responsibilities, yet it fails to capture the variability in how people perform this identity or how it is perceived by others (the virtual identity) (Goffman [1963] 1986:2). An individual could be operating several thousand acres or merely tending a small acreage and still claim the identity of family farm operator. The experiences of being a family farm operator vary greatly between individuals and also by temporal context; to be a family farm operator today is different than in the past.

Researchers and the general public treat farming as a masculine occupation and identity. Men’s relationship to manual labor and agricultural practices inform their sense of masculinity (Bryant 1999; Ferrell 2012; Nusbaumer 2011). However, with the agricultural sector becoming

more globally integrated and the demand for off-farm income rising, farmers have altered their occupational identity to adapt to this new setting. As principal operators place more emphasis on strategic marketing strategies (as opposed to labor on the farm) and as more women can hold an occupational identity independent of men, Bryant (1999) argues the farming identity is undergoing “detraditionalization.”

Using West and Zimmerman’s (1987) understanding of “doing masculinity,” Ferrell (2012) examined how tobacco farmers altered how masculinity is performed in response to their changing relationship to agriculture amidst the federal tobacco buyout program. When farmers’ livelihoods surrounding the production of tobacco changed, so did their understandings of masculinity and how farmers relate to, and assess, one another (Ferrell 2012). Nusbaumer (2011) identified how groups of men reconstructed past masculine identities through collecting and restoring antique tractors. A collector’s tractor serves as a vestige of masculinity among fellow collectors. They assessed one another on the basis of the machine’s mechanical soundness as well as the owner’s ability to operate and maintain the machine. Their tractors symbolized patriarchal traditions within their family histories. While working with the tractor, men solidified their connection to past family members and upheld masculine traditions with their own sons while excluding women (Nusbaumer 2011). These findings are consistent with West and Zimmerman’s (1987) analysis in which processes of reproducing identities reinforce social inequalities. Even though, as Bryant (1999) points out, women are now beginning to be recognized for their contributions to agriculture the contemporary understandings of farming identities appear to remain rooted in hegemonic masculinity.

Additional research on the occupational identity of farming distinguishes several different types: entrepreneurs, producers, and environmentalists (Barlett 1986; Burton and

Wilson 2006; Kessler et al. 2015; McGuire et al. 2013; Stenholm and Hytti 2014). Producer identities are understood according to traditional aspects of farming where direct involvement with labor and the maximized production of food, fuel, and fiber are the primary goals (Bryant 1999; McGuire et al. 2013). As the general public becomes increasingly concerned with the environmental impact of intensive agricultural practices, more farmers adopt and present an environmentalist identity. Environmentalist (or post-productivist) identities place less emphasis on production and more on environmental conservation (Burton and Wilson 2006; Kessler et al. 2015). In adapting to the new dependence on marketing, those with the entrepreneurial identity (or “Investors” as Barlett [1986] refers to them) see farms’ capacities for profit or high productivity as the main purpose (McGuire et al. 2013; Stenholm and Hytti 2014). These categories are not intended to be mutually exclusive; a farmer can enact both an environmentalist and entrepreneurial identity according to the situation. Farmers enact a producer identity most frequently (Burton and Wilson 2006) because it supports a traditional understanding of agriculture (Bryant 1999). Farmers must balance these varied, and sometimes competing, identities in order to maintain a “good farmer” identity (McGuire et al 2013). The type of labor farmers engage in and the social groups they interact with while farming inform and shape operators’ sense of identity. This occupational identity becomes more interesting when applied to the family farmer. For these particular farmers, the farm business and the family are, in essence, inseparable; this creates a farming identity that is less individual and more of a collective identity for the family.

Researchers have traditionally viewed farming as an occupation but not a profession. Meijboom and Stafleu (2016) argue for reclassifying farming as a profession by noting the growing distance between agricultural production and larger society and viewing farming as a

public service. The authors claim that farmers should be afforded professional moral autonomy in regard to ethical concerns where there are no legal codes dictating lawful procedures (e.g. animal welfare). Meijboom and Stafleu's (2016) reclassification relies on their observations of how small scale agricultural groups are developing ethical guidelines for members, and how many farmers view their labor and production as a public service rather than a business.

As previously discussed, the family unit has been historically linked to agriculture. As a result, symbolic meanings of the family within agriculture have emerged. An autoethnography by Kuehne (2013) describes personal experiences with selling his family farm. Through this process, the author describes his experience with role exit. Selling machinery and tools felt as though he were selling part of his identity. Along with his loss of identity came a loss of meaning and purpose. Relating personal experiences with that of the masses who exited farming over the last century suggest a large population seeking to reestablish not only economic stability but social identities and relevance as well.

Quinn and Halfacre (2014) explore the concept of attachment theory among South Carolina farmers, revealing a relationship of meaningful exchange. The land and livestock provide the farmer with economic opportunity, recreation, and safety. In return, the farmer offers stewardship in the protection and maintenance of the land. The farmer, land, and animals benefit from this balanced relationship of exchange. These farmers are more concerned with conservation and humane treatment of animals on the farm in exchange for the economic and security benefits they receive. Although not explicitly mentioned, this study presents a farmer identity that joins producer and environmental steward, which is consistent with the previous literature on the occupational identity of farmers (Barlett 1986; Bryant 1999; Burton and Wilson 2006; Kessler et al 2015; McGuire et al. 2013; Stenholm and Hytti 2014).

### Persistence or Exit

The strategies that small family farmers employ to maintain viable farm operations is one of my main concerns in this thesis. As previously mentioned, family members' off farm employment is perhaps the most significant method of supplementing family farms (Albrecht 1998; Brown et al. 1994; Gebremedhin and Christy 1996; Goodwin and Mishra 2004; Lagerkvist et al 2007; Machum 2005). With declining levels of farm income, farmers' off-farm work makes up the majority of household income for most farms (USDA 2015). Focusing on family farm dependence on off-farm employment calls for further research on rural community development (Brown et al. 1994). From this, one might predict that the stress of operating a farm and working off the farm could create significant role conflict.

The farming population is aging; the USDA agricultural census reports that from 1982 to 2012 the average age of principal operators in the United States has risen from 50.5 to 58.3 (USDA 2014). Over a twenty year period, Gale (2003) observed a 10 percent increase in operators 65 years or older and an 8 percent decrease in operators under the age of 35. Prospective farmers cited barriers to entry such as high startup cost and appealing off-farm employment as the main reasons for this trend. MacDonald et al. (2007) found business age and operator age to be significant indicators of farm survival. Younger operators starting a new farm business were found to have the highest exit rate over a five year period. MacDonald et al. (2007) suggest younger operators need to be the target of more aid policies and programs in order to allow younger operators the opportunity to establish and continue operations.

Aside from financial uncertainties, farmers choose to stay in farming in order to maintain family traditions. Operators' experiences growing up on a farm are integral aspects of the socialization process (Calus and Van Huylenbroeck 2010; Hildenbrand and Hennon 2005;

Kuehne 2013; Quinn and Halfacre 2014; Steiger et al. 2012; Zepeda and Kim 2006). These farmers' fulfilling and meaningful experiences are not easily replaced, especially those that are deeply rooted in family legacy. They perceive the activity of farming as an identity stake for the family and themselves. Interestingly, a successor's decision to continue the farm operation and reproduce this identity is strongly urged by parents, yet left optional (Zepeda and Kim 2006). The National Institute of Food and Agriculture reports that "An estimated 70 percent of U.S. farmland will change hands in the next 20 years" (USDA 2017). Regarding the sense of tradition and ties to family legacy farmers are likely to grow up with, farmers potentially view the choice to exit farming as a failure to realize the family farming identity (Kuehne 2013; Hildenbrand and Hennon 2005). Along with continuing the family farming identity, new operators have the opportunity to expand or implement new management and production methods. In doing so, these farmers strive to create economic opportunities for future generations (Stieger et al 2012; Zepeda and Kim 2006).

Farmers also sought out and integrated into niche markets in order to sustain their family farms. "Civic agriculture" is the main premise behind these niche markets. This form of production is different from commodity based agriculture in the sense that it is generally small scale and oriented to produce high quality product for local markets (Lyson and Gupitill 2004). One form of civic agriculture is referred to as community-supported agriculture (CSAs). CSAs offer a solution to the economic barriers that farmers face by suggesting that consumers contribute a portion of the input cost in exchange for regular access to fresh produce (Galt 2013). Although there is less associated risk by sharing the input cost, producers are still engaged in an unequal relationship with consumers; less than desirable growing conditions still places pressure

on farmers to fulfill the consumer demands even if it means buying produce from other farmers (Galt 2013).

Other forms of niche marketing included the creation of cooperatives. Out of frustration with large scale pork production contracts, Grey (2000) recounts how northeastern Iowa hog farmers banded together to develop a coop in order to support their local community of hog producers. By implementing organic production methods and collectively organizing, the farmers ventured to sell pork directly to local retail and restaurants (Grey 2000). The ability to label a product as being “organic” or “local” allows the product to be sold at a premium referred to as economic rents (Galt 2013). Although these methods of adapting and locating niche markets offer a solution, Grey (2000) found this particular cooperative to be one that would not endure. In the end, the high value growers’ placed on independence outweighed the collective group’s solidarity in bargaining for higher prices.

Overall, the literature on family farmers’ disadvantaged position suggests productive avenues for research. How do family traditions and the meanings farmers attach to their occupation shape their experiences? How do farmers perceive themselves and the work they do when it appears as though opportunities for supporting themselves are fading away? Finally, how have family farms managed to stay viable in an economy defined by uncertainty and volatility? In the following chapter I present my methodological approach for researching these questions and offer an analysis in the chapters that follow.



## CHAPTER 3

### RESEARCH METHODS

The focus of this study is to understand the social meanings and identities family farm operators create and continue to reproduce. This study also explores family farm operators' strategies to sustain themselves and their farms in an agricultural system that presents numerous economic pressures and ethical concerns for their continued operation. In order to obtain the details crucial to understand these identities and processes, I chose to implement qualitative data collection methods. From a grounded theoretical perspective, qualitative methodology promotes the continual analysis of emergent themes during data collection and analysis (Bryant and Charmaz 2007).

I conducted 18 in-depth interviews with principal family farm operators: 10 with farmers in Iowa and eight in Tennessee. The interviews varied significantly in length, lasting anywhere from 55 minutes to nearly four hours. The participants of the study ranged in age from 39 to 87 with an average age of 61 years. Two of the 18 farm operators were female; one resides in Iowa and one in Tennessee. Along with all participants identifying as non-Hispanic white, the demographic characteristics of these research participants are consistent with the predominately white male agricultural population within the United States. According to the 2012 agricultural census, minorities and females make up roughly 5 percent and 14 percent of farmers respectively (USDA 2014). Interestingly, both women in my sample held the title of principal operator on farms that deviated from all other farms in overall organization and production. One woman runs a largescale beef cattle operation and hires workers to fulfill all the labor requirements and the other woman owns the smallest farm that specializes in the production of raw dairy. The overall size of operations these farmers manage range from 17 to 4500 acres. Most of the farmers'

operations included a combination of land they owned and rented. Although the average number of acres farmers operated in my sample was just under 1200 acres, the median farm size was only 700 acres mirroring the trend of farmland consolidation (McDonald (2013). Overall, the farm operations included in my sample are on average larger than the national average of 434 acres (USDA 2014).

I recruited participants using a snowball sampling method (Lofland et al. 2006). Aside from familial and personal connections to the agricultural community in Iowa, I relied on participants' suggestions of other family farm operators within their social networks. The inclusion criteria for this study were fairly broad allowing for all operators who considered themselves to be the principal operator, the overall manager of the farm, and whose operation was family owned. Providing contact information and serving as mutual contacts to other research participants helped in "removing barriers to entrance" (Lofland et al. 2006: 43).

Establishing mutual contacts proved to be essential for accessing the research participants. On several occasions, when contacted, farm operators were more willing to speak and participate in the research after they knew my connection to a mutual contact within the agricultural community. One participant revealed to me that he was initially reluctant to participate given previous experience of past intrusions upon his operation:

I was hesitant yesterday because we've got... I don't know you from Adam but... You said you talked to [mutual contact] so that let me know... They warned us all the time about people coming out. Coming in like you did... But you come through and not looked at anything... You've not looked around any. They [those who are potentially seeking condemning information] want to come around and interview you but want to interview you in the operation...

This quote illustrates operators' reluctance to allow strangers around their operations. Much like the growing disconnect between farmers and the non-farming public in relation to the

debate over animal welfare discussed in Meijboom and Stafleu (2015), this operator is concerned that people unfamiliar with the inner workings of farms might wish to leak negative or condemning information to the public. Establishing myself as a trustworthy individual was therefore important for recruiting operators into the study; my experience and knowledge of agricultural practices proved invaluable in this regard. Family relatives, my father and brother, also served as mutual contacts to the farming community in Iowa; these connections signaled to others that I was a trustworthy individual. Although not all participants were as hesitant as the example above, several of the recommended contacts within the Tennessee area did not wish to participate or gave noncommittal responses to scheduling an interview, resulting in the smaller sample size.<sup>1</sup>

I developed an interview guide consisting of 26 open-ended questions to explore various aspects of the farm business and the social identity of operators (see Appendix A). All of the questions encouraged an open-ended conversational style of response in order to collect the most in-depth and detail rich data from the participants. I focused on the participants' perspectives on what it means to operate a farm in the current agricultural era and what they perceived as challenges to their operations. All interviews were audio recorded for the purposes of transcription and analysis. I conducted all but one of the interviews in person. The only exception was one interview with a farmer in Tennessee; this interview was completed via telephone and recorded using a call recording software application due to the farmer's restricted schedule. In addition to the interview guide, I asked participants to complete a short questionnaire, or facesheet (Lofland et al. 2006), which documented general characteristics about

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<sup>1</sup> The initial research plan involved conducting 20 interviews with family farm operators. However, due to scheduling issues and contacts declining to participate I was only able to conduct eight of the ten interviews planned for the Tennessee area.

each interviewee (see Appendix B). This helped trim the length of the interview and my transcription efforts.<sup>2</sup> Along with the facesheet and interview, I also recorded brief fieldnotes on the setting prior to the interview to serve as supplemental data.

A research assistant experienced in qualitative research methods aided in the completion of the transcription process. All interviews were transcribed using a voice to text application and word processing software. While listening to the digital audio files, I repeated the conversation aloud in order for the voice to text application to transcribe the audio recording to text format. From there, I transferred the content to a word processing document for ease of formatting, correction, and analysis. Of the 18 interviews, five were transcribed in this manner by the research assistant and I transcribed the remaining 13. Using the voice to text application, an initial transcription of each interview was completed capturing the bulk of the interview data. After the initial transcriptions, the audio recordings were played back a second time and the transcripts were checked to ensure the accuracy of the interview content and conversational flow as well as to adjust any errors (e.g. punctuation and technical/slang terms) within the document. As primary investigator for this research project, I checked each of the interviews for accuracy. I argue that, although the mechanics were unconventional, this process fostered a deeper level of immersion and connection with the data. During this process, I listened to each of these interviews no less than three times which helped me significantly in developing potential codes and in the actual coding process. In order to ensure the confidentiality of the research participants, the names of all farm operators have been replaced with pseudonyms.

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<sup>2</sup> Only after having the facesheet approved by the ETSU Institutional Review Board and implemented in several interviews did I realize that my question regarding income did not capture the size of the farms according to USDA classifications using Gross Cash Farm Income. As a result I am unable to determine exactly where the farms rank in relation to the categories small, medium, or large family farms (NASS 2015).

To code my interview and fieldnote data, I first conducted line-by-line coding followed by a focused coding process where the data were grouped into relevant themes and categories (Lofland et al. 2006). Along with the coding process, I also wrote theoretical memos in which I expounded upon my initial thoughts and ideas while analyzing the data. These notes helped me identify and further understand the interconnectedness of the overarching themes that surfaced in the data (Bryant and Charmaz 2007; Montgomery and Bailey 2007). This grounded process of continual analysis and reflection resulted in identifying major themes such as viewing farming as a unique occupational and moral identity which grows out of, in the case of family farms, a lifelong socialization process and challenges to maintaining the family farm. Meanwhile, the reproduction of this identity is under constant pressure from within, as well as outside, the agricultural community.

## CHAPTER 4

### SOCIALIZATION AND IDENTITY OF THE FAMILY FARMER

Farming as an occupation has undergone significant changes in the last century. Reacting to these changes, farmers have utilized more capital intensive methods of production with few alternatives other than to abandon farming altogether; hence the saying “get big or get out.” While sharing their perspectives on the current state of agriculture, the family farm operators I interviewed provided an insider perspective on what it means to be a farmer in today’s agricultural economy. Their insights expand our understanding of how farmers view themselves, the work they do, and the strategies they use for maintaining and reproducing a social identity despite constant pressure and influence from various agricultural organizations.

#### “From Generation to Generation”

Farming has been dominated by primary social groups, such as the family, for centuries. Cultural traditions reaching as far back as the middle ages have produced systems in which land is passed from one generation to the next along familial lines (Hildenbrand and Hennon 2005). These traditions have sustained deep and meaningful ties between the farm and the family unit. To be a family farmer is to be connected to the history of the farm and those who have worked the land in the past.

At the beginning of the interviews, participants related their family histories and detailed their ties to agriculture through the generations. Farmers shared chronological family histories of the farm with great attention to detail, eagerly shared stories of how the family farm began, and traced family lineage to the “home place.”

Greg: ...When it turned to a century farm. Back in 2011? Something like that. Um...We did more research and we did trace the home place in Holland and they’re... The home place is still in Holland. [Parker: Really?] Original [Family Name] farm...

Dennis: Well, my father... well that's... He grew up a farmin' back in 1900, I believe. Let's see he was born in 1910 and his daddy was a farmer. He was a custom farmer back then. He had a threshing machine and stuff like that so daddy went with him a lot... And they was... One... Two... there was four boys in the family... So they all couldn't stay at home. So my father then in [19]30. I believe it was 30... 29 or 30. He got employed at the [factory] down there and started and made... I believe... I believe he told me he... started out makin' ...25-30 cents an hour... and then him and my mother got married there in the middle [19]30s and from then on he worked at [the factory] 'til [19]50 I think it was somewhere around in there, and then started strictly back here [at the family farm]...

Daniel: [Holding a poster] "My great-grandfather bought this and I believe that poster said 1873 and he was a cattle trader... And he had land and must have had money... But um... That was the. [Reading text of poster] "Sale on Stoneshold Road." And my great-grandfather bought it [in] 1879... But he had another farm over there. He never did live here. And when he died he had five or six heirs and everybody got a piece. You know, every heir did and it got all busted up...

Participants appeared excited when sharing stories of family members and the types of production in which the farm specialized. Historical accounts of the farm did not serve as a mere backdrop for our conversations. By sharing this information, these operators communicated the endurance of the farm; their stories testified to its success. Not only were these histories helpful in providing me with information and practices of the farm, their stories also worked to etch out the operators' place in the history of the farm operation. The farmers' stories informed an individual identity as well as a collective family farming identity. One operator shared his experience of traveling to Pennsylvania searching for documentation of his ancestor's dairy operation and has maintained his agricultural ties to the Northeast by continuing to purchase livestock from farmers in that area. Setting the context and preserving family histories seemed to be essential for talking about the farm and the operator's current agricultural activities. Through

this ritual, farmers communicated that understanding and attaching meanings to their current operation required knowing the past.

Along with recounting histories, several families went to great lengths to reconstruct original parcels of land. Several operators shared their endeavors to reconstruct original family farms that had been previously sold or divided amongst multiple heirs. These farmers perceived the reuniting of land as symbolic of the original meanings of the family farm-- they view the land as a social object imbued with personal meanings (Blumer 1969). Reconnecting original parcels of land is similar to the behavior Nusbaumer (1999) observed of collectors restoring antique tractors once owned by a family member. The functionality or feasibility of a machine or, in this instance, the productivity of the land is of less significance than the meanings and people attached to it. The operators attached the symbolism of past family members to these pieces of land and reconstructed their families' farming identity. When these farmers recount family histories and reunite parcels of land, they are actively engaged in identity work (Schwalbe and Mason-Schrock 1996). Their actions not only serve to pass along information and expand their farm operation, farmers are reproducing and reinforcing their social identity as family farmers.

Although, as principal operators, they legally own and make the executive decisions regarding their land, many farmers suggested that, rather than owning the farm, they merely maintained it for the next generation.

Edward: That's all we've ever done and it's been instilled in us to keep it together and keep it going, you know, from generation to generation and the same way in our son... And um... It is important that we, it, succeed in what we do but at the same time I'm sure all have struggled through the generations...

Lucas: I'll give it to the kids but I won't sell it... They were here all their life, I worked here all my life. You don't walk away from it.



Craig: I hope I'm makin' a place that somebody can come back in and take it over after we're [wife]... getting' older and we're done with it.

Allen: He says "I'm not building it just because it needs to be built but I'm building it for the next generation" and that's what family farms are for, you know?

In these quotes the participants discussed the lengths to which families went to ensure opportunities for the next generation. In the last quote, Allen spoke about his father rebuilding a machine shed after a tornado destroyed the original structure; the importance of continuing the farm overshadowed any operational benefit of the newly constructed building. These particular quotes illustrate a mindset that transcends generational lines. Their actions are guided by a sense of obligation to the farm as well as the farming identity and history embedded within.

By ensuring the future of the farm, operators are reproducing a moral identity (Katz 1975). Katz identified moral identities as the imputation of "essences" in social interactions (1975:1375). Essences can be deviant (expressing inability or shortcomings) or charismatic (attributing ability or credibility) and therefore lower or elevate one's social status (Katz 1975). If a person's moral identity indicates ability or honorable past actions, then they may be seen by others as superior or a morally good person. Farm operators do not necessarily make decisions that will directly benefit the individual but contribute to the overall benefit of the farm. Their actions allow them and the next generation to lay claim to the moral identity of being a "good farmer." If they were to "walk away from it" or give up on family traditions, then they would risk being perceived as a "bad farmer." The farmers reflected upon the previous generation's actions to inform their understanding of how the family farm should function. When farm operators engage in this type of behavior they are reinforcing their moral identity, which is tied to the integrity of the family farm. The farmers' decisions to invest in and ensure that the farm is

accessible to the next generation are essential components of what family farms mean to these operators.

Despite going to great lengths to preserve the histories and the integrity of the family farm in hopes that the next generation will follow suit, farmers gave their successors the option to leave the farm.

Parker: Ideally, you'd like to see your family continue farming?

Craig: Yes. Well if that's... I told 'em when they was kids they'll be just as poor as I was when I was a kid. When I die, you can do whatever you want to.

Parker: You can do what you want? So it's still up to them?

Craig: It's still up to them. I mean, I probably won't turn over where I'm going. [Laughter] They're going to do what [they] have to... They['ve] got to do what they think is right and that's anybody's [decision].. You don't know that until the time comes you have to make that decision. That's management. Which job to let go first.

Jim: I don't want to push them, I never, I don't think I've pushed anybody to going into it or not to go into it. At least I hope I haven't, sometimes we say things. When you're with your, when you're out with the kids and you're like, I hope I didn't turn them off of farming and I hope I didn't encourage them to farm. I just kind of... want to let them be.

Hank: Oh... That's entirely up to them... I can't put um... I can't implant what I found joyful... What I found satisfaction in. If that's not what they want to do... Um... I would hope that, like I say, if you're not going to be first hand in it to at least understand the value of it and to be able to say well it's uh... It's not just money even though at some point it is worth a lot of money on the market place at least if it changes hands but it's... It's... If you can at least understand the management of it, it will at least do that. It will produce an income for you.

Although family histories are of great importance to these operators, they still viewed the continuation of the farm as an option rather than an obligation of the next generation. This leaves familial traditions in precarious situations; a history that previous generations worked to preserve can end within a generation. Similar to the findings of Zepeda and Kim (2006), children of family farmers are not restricted by their parents and family legacy. In these situations, potential

successors of the farm are faced with challenging decisions; uphold a familial tradition of agriculture or exercise one's option to leave the family farm. Because I did not interview family farm operators' heirs, I did not explore how open their choice truly felt.

In some cases, farmers did not limit succession to family heirs. Operators expressed that they would be comfortable with the farm being taken over by someone other than a family member.

Parker: You'd like to see it [the farm] continue?

Phyllis: Yeah, I would but um... Or, at least, somebody that would love it as much... Yeah... To take over the helm...

Parker: Okay. So you wouldn't be opposed to somebody else coming in and taking over?

Phyllis: I know if I could really find someone that I would know would go the distance... Because that's actually what this is... It's whether they can go the distance with it... And um... And like I said, come to love it, you know, the girls [dairy cattle]... And um be able to go through the god-awful days because somebody came in and said this is the best tasting milk ever and that's all they say and leave and that's enough to sustain you for two weeks [laughter].

Parker: You'd like to see another family farm here?

Glenn: Oh yeah, I'd like that. Let them live and say, you know, on as small a piece as this is, let that be their farm now let your all's legacy start where ours ends right there and go on but will share with you the history of what we know it to be... And then, you know, you can sit down and share the history as you learned with the history that you make to your grandchildren with the hopes that they can and go along with it... But whether or not, who knows... But the concept of the family farm is so vital in our country's heritage.

Within these examples, the operators are willing to allow someone outside the family to replace them on their farm. They stipulate, however, that successors should remain true to the farm's goals and meanings. Phyllis talks about her cattle as her "girls" and requires a successor that will properly care for them and continue the dairy production with the same unyielding effort. Maintaining the quality of life among the animals and products they produced were of greater concern than keeping the farm in the family. Glenn, whose sons did exercise the option to leave

the family farm, wished for his family legacy to not be forgotten with the transition to a new family. In both cases, sustaining the collective family history attached to the family farm is essential to its continuation. Whether the successor be familial or not, remaining true to the meanings attached to that farm is an overriding factor.

“They’re Just Man Things”

The farmers signaled their definition of farming as men’s work when naming successors. In many cases in which daughters are discussed, the operators did not see women wanting to do the work. Not having a son to continue the farm work in these situations was viewed as the “end of the line.”

Parker: Ideally, would you like to see your family [continue to] farm [in] the future?

Daniel: I would, but the trouble of it is we got all girls... Our boys have got all girls. That’s getting... kind of bad. I don’t know...

Parker: So if they were to marry would you want that family to continue the farm?

Daniel: I suppose. Yeah... I don’t know. They just don’t know how to work it... It makes it kind of bad for it to continue...

Frank: “I got two granddaughters... They had girls. They're all in school, college...”

Parker: Neither of them have an interest in farming?

Frank: None of them are interested... Two of them are married. Not even their husband[s] is interested in farming or anything they just...

An interesting conversation emerged in one interview with a married man and woman whose son and daughter stood to inherit the farm. The couple discussed their daughter in reference to the son’s future role as principal operator or as a wife in which her future husband will be part of the farm operation:

Angie: Well, we say [son] but [daughter] too. She is interested too.

Greg: Oh, right. Right. She might show an interest... Or might get married to somebody that wants to fit right in. That would be fine by me.

Although variable, daughters took a secondary position to sons in terms of future farm operators. In most cases, operators considered their daughters and granddaughters as disinterested or incapable farm operators without the presence of a husband. One of the women within the study held similar views about women being incapable of fulfilling the labor demands of the farm.

Um, I mean there are women that can hold down 150 pound hogs while you are trying to put a ring in its nose but it's too tough for her. You know, you usually don't run across women that can do that. [Parker: Okay] And there's jobs that um... now this is going to sound so sexist but... there are jobs that are just too hard and dirty... You know, they're just man things...

Although she is capable of fulfilling the labor needs of her operation, she still holds the notion that farming is inherently men's work. The hard and dirty nature of the work is coded as exclusively masculine, which the farmers viewed as incompatible with the abilities of women in general. This mindset of defining farming as masculine work reinforces traditional patriarchal understandings of the family farm in which fathers entrust their farm operations to their sons only, which, in turn reinforces their understanding of farming as inherently men's work. (Bryant 1999; Ferrell 2012; West and Zimmerman 1987).

Through these processes of recalling farm histories and ensuring that the farm is accessible to the next generation, farmers constantly engaged in identity work to faithfully uphold the meanings attached to their family's farm. They saw themselves as temporary proprietors of the farm with an obligation to preserve its history and ensure that their family legacy is continued. Agricultural traditions of work and family are inseparable in the eyes of farm operators. Their actions place them and their families in a position where they are viewed as good people for the work they do and by passing these traditions along to the next generation.

### “It Just Gets in Your Blood”

Operators’ ideas of what it means to be a farmer are deeply connected to life experiences growing up on the farm. Farming is a unique occupation in that those who are in this line of work generally begin at a much younger age than most other occupations. Farm operators facilitate this early beginning by relying on family members as a source of labor. Within farming families, children are socialized in an environment that values labor and productive contribution to the farm. All but one of the farmers I interviewed grew up on a family farm or worked on a family member’s farm. When asked about how long they had been the principal operator of their farm, all could provide an exact year that they started as the principal operator but were sure to clarify that their involvement in agriculture started well beforehand.

Lucas: Been the principal operator since 1993... But I’ve been farming... Basically, all my life... I grew up here... I can remember plowin’. I was born in ‘52. 1952. And I started plowin’ in about 1958. Yeah, so actually drove a tractor at, I mean... Not... I drove a tractor before then but... but a tractor with implements by 1958...so...

Wilma: I have been in charge since 2001, which is the year my dad died but I have been involved in farming my entire life.

Parker: How long have you been the principal operator of your farm?

Allen: Well, I've been farming since I was ten, I guess. I got my first calf when I was 9... Dad died in 2000 so that would be 17 years.

As seen in the first example, the farmer claimed to have been involved in operating machinery at the age of 6 years old. Farmers clarifying their lifelong tenure of operating machinery and productive contributions to the farm served to formulate their identity as farmers. From their perspective, beginning from an early age legitimized and strengthened their identity as a farmer. The operators’ claims to an identity backed by a lifelong history in the occupation of farming parallels Goffman’s ([1963]1986) concept of a moral career. Simply assuming the title of

principal operator appears to be secondary, or relatively unimportant, so as not to discount their lifelong experiences as farmers. In doing so, they emphasized the amount of time they have spent doing manual farm labor as evidence of their claims to identity; simply having the title of principal operator did not communicate the same meaning as farming one's entire life.

Involvement with youth agriculture programs were a common experience among many of the operators. The farmers indicated participation in organizations such as 4-H and Future Farmers of America (FFA) were some of the earliest experiences they had with animal management and accounting practices (i.e. learning to operate a farm). Figuring costs of production and monitoring the growth of project animals seemed to serve as rites of initiation into farm management.

Allen: I started...I tell you what... I took care of my 4-H calf and everything when I was like, [son]'s age. That was... That was pretty well the start of it because I already started keepin' records of feed and rate of gain and when we uh... Took 'em to sell 'em. We did a carcass class and we went and saw the cut out and the meat and everything at the locker and everything.

Kenneth: Between that and 4-H and FFA and such things I always had something... Since I was 10 years old I made sure I had some hogs to show... 6 of us boys and 1 sister and we, uh, always had stuff in 4-H and FFA and stuff like that so I had a little bit of a start that way.

Although for many, participation in these programs is viewed as formative experiences of their agricultural identities, several farmers mentioned they were unable to participate. In these cases labor requirements of the farm were noted as being prioritized over extracurricular activities.

Edward: I wasn't in FFA. Not because I didn't want to be. I was working... I mean, if I played ball or something I still had to come home and do the same amount of work...

Frank: I was never in 4-H, I was in FFA, but I never showed no cows or anything like that. My dad didn't think we had time.

Youth agriculture programs were viewed as credible sources of knowledge that could be obtained away from the farm. Even those operators who had limited or no experience in these programs indicated they were reliable forms of information for kids that want to farm. The farm operators otherwise approached education from a reluctant point of view. Although they agreed that education is necessary, most farmers communicated a preference for knowledge gained through practical experience as opposed to formal channels of education such as universities.

Eric: Typically, I disregard most of it 'cause I think they [university extension officers] are full of bullshit. [Parker: Really?] A lot of it, yeah. I mean, a lot of it is people sitting behind a desk that's never done it. You know, just tryin' to tell you how to farm and tryin' to tell you how to market and most... you know, it's idealistic.

Lucas: There's a million things you can learn from a book but there's also a lot of people teachin' you out of a book that don't know shit about the real world... Some of them do...

Wilma: ...my dad had no boys, we're all girls and we'd milk cows and feed hogs and we could handle cows with the best of them. And then I was always with daddy, he was my best teacher. I wouldn't trade my [father's name] education for my [State University] diploma, straight up.

Greg: Well, it used to be people that would understand that... They didn't necessarily have to have a piece of paper from a four-year college just [to] know that they'll go to work or they would... The people would understand that was hiring them that he is trainable. That means he'll be there every day. Education is great, common sense is way more. Uh, if you've got... If you've got the common sense you can go a long ways anywhere uh... some people you can send to school all their life, and I'm not knocking you don't get me wrong, but they can recite to you the whole way through but they never experienced it.. Until you've experienced it, it's tough, cruel teacher, but you will remember. If you don't, you shouldn't have bothered going to school at all. I don't know... I'm set in my ways. I'm getting worse, I know I am. You talk to my kids and they'll say he always has been but like we said a little bit ago there's nothing that aggravates you anymore than stupid... And it's not to say they're not stupid but they... they... they can't see the forest from the trees... I'll quit...



The same farmer from the above quote goes on to talk about an interaction with a university extension officer and comments on the lack of experience that the individual had on the matter he was coming to inspect.

Greg: I was looking for some advice... 'What do you think' type thing and... But he had never experienced that and I'm not knocking the guy I mean he's a nice guy and very knowledgeable but that just took him off guard. He hadn't seen that before and a lot of that stuff goes on that just hadn't experienced that...

Overall, the pessimistic view of higher education is communicated clearly within these quotes. The farm operators privileged practical experience and labor over formal channels of education. These farmers indicated their alignment with the traditional occupational identity described by Bryant (1999) in which high social value is placed on the doing of labor. While conducting the interviews, the number of times that university level education was approached may have been due to my position as a graduate student: "I'm not knocking you. Don't get me wrong, but..." Although education may help inform marketing or production strategies, farmers are not necessarily awarded any sort of advantage or qualify for a promotion through achievements in higher education like nonagricultural occupations. While they do recognize benefits to education, these operators retained a mindset that placed practical experience at the forefront of being knowledgeable.

The operators viewed the farm as an ideal setting for growing up and learning valuable life skills. As evidenced in the previous quotes, the farm operators began their agricultural occupations from a very early age. Primarily, individuals cited developing a work ethic as the most salient asset gained by being raised on a farm.

Edward: Well, my daddy had taught me how to work and I mean hard work... It has never... I mean, I'm comfortable with it. Doesn't [bother me]... No problem.

John: Kids have way more responsibilities when they're on the farm and they may carry that through. They [farm kids] know that when they go to a job somebody's expecting them to be there to do that job and whether it's here or wherever, you know, they understand that somebody's expecting them to work... I also think that farm kids have more pride in what they do because they want it to be right. Because they were expected to be right when they were kids and some try harder than others but yet they all know expectations. Sometimes they excel in other... They may not excel in school but they will excel in the workplace because of their abilities to work.

Parker: What would you say are the perks of living and growing up on a farm?

Craig: Clean-air, responsibility and having a good work ethic. I guess, just being able to work with your family. Sometimes that is not only always a good thing. Well I mean there's, there's a lot of value when, I mean you get to see your family more on the farm than if you're living in the concrete jungle. There everybody scatters first thing in the morning, you know?

Frank: Everybody kind of works together... Everybody knows how to work. They will figure out how to do a job that maybe would require more people to figure out how to do it. How I arrange things that I can do it ourselves. Ingenuity. Uh... Survival instinct.

Kenneth: Well I mean, it's not really farming, but watching the next generation growing [up]. Turning into good people, you know, they grow up. Now when they go to school, there's just something in the farm kids or just, like the town kids. There's a clear divide or maybe not a divide, but you can recognize them, I mean there's good kids that don't grow up on a farm, you know, but all the farm kids are just about a certain way. [Parker: Okay] You know what I'm saying, just going to college. I mean, you can see the farm kids on campus and the ones that did never grew up with responsibilities.

Greg: I mean, I'm not here to get rich by any means but... you learn so much more here than you do anywhere else. I mean... You found that out growing up. [Parker: Yeah] I mean... You've got way more of a work ethic. You know how things work... There is something about keeping your hand in the ground that keeps you... You know what's going on.

In these examples participants indicated that the farm provides an environment in which a valuable asset of a strong work ethic is developed and the family is more closely connected due to the work. "Knowing how to work" appears to be measured by the doing of manual labor. The farmers spoke of this knowledge in a way that made it limited only to those in the agricultural

setting. As mentioned in the quote from Kenneth, the operator claims that farm work created a distinction or identifying aspects between those that have experienced the farm and those that have not. Again, parallels to Goffman's ([1963] 1986) concept of the moral career emerge in which farmers grow up according to a lifestyle that sets them apart from the general public. The farm operators communicated a sense of pride by going through this process. The family and farm setting work together to foster a sense of responsibility and serious work ethic; a quality that they perceived as being unique to life growing up on the family farm.

“How Would You Describe a Crop Farmer? I’m Trying to Hold Back”

Understandably, farming has been examined in the sense of an occupational identity in many studies (Barlett 1986; Burton and Wilson 2006; Kessler et al 2015; McGuire et al. 2013; Stenholm and Hytti 2014). However, as operators talked about farming as a job, they also mentioned different aspects of farming as an occupation where one must make decisions based upon ideas of what is morally right. Describing what it takes to be a “good” farmer has been examined as a balance of being a productive and profitable farmer as well as being ethical in practice (McGuire et al 2013).

Congruent with the existing research, when asked “What does it mean to you, personally, to be a farmer?” the concepts of animal husbandry and environmental stewardship were the most common responses. These farmers felt that to be “a farmer” infers being morally “good” and obliged them to care for the land and animals with which they interact. Although these are required roles within the occupation, there is a sense that farmers feel they are doing a morally good thing when they are considerate of the environment or animal wellbeing.

John: Oh, I don't know. Try to take care of the livestock and the land and I guess my thought is to spend my time here... Raise a family and make a living and hopefully leave the land in better shape than it was when I got it for somebody else to farm.

Craig: Well, like I said before, I think I need to leave the ground... I try to leave the ground in better shape than the shape it was when I got it. I think you can demoralize a piece of ground, you can do a lot of erosion, you can do a lot of bad things to real estate. You can abuse ground instead of takin' care of it. That's one thing you can do. I try not to. I suppose I've done some of it over the years but not too much that I know of.

Lucas: It's rewarding, it's... it's nice to see the calf get up and nurse. It's nice to see the hill get green in the spring. And you never know what kind of harvest you'll have but you would rather have 200 bushel corn at \$3.00 as [opposed to] 50 bushel corn at \$7.00 because it shows that you've done all you could. And maybe both ways you done all you could. You can't dictate the weather but you would rather do that [put in the effort] than collect insurance checks because you take pride in what you do.

Henry: You don't over fertilize because that cost you money. You don't over apply chemicals or uh pesticides herbicides. You put on what you need to put on but you try to keep everything in perspective to keep your ground in the condition so if you get the right kind of weather your raise a good crop... On livestock you make sure that everything is well cared for.

Similar to Quinn and Halfacre's (2014) application of attachment theory, the farmers spoke about the care of land and livestock as being financially and psychologically rewarding. In exchange for their efforts, the farmer is rewarded with financial stability and a high quality environment to raise a family.

Ideas of honesty surfaced within the interviews as essential to being a farmer. The partner of a farmer being interviewed suggested that the family histories of farming on both sides of the family is where he "inherited his honesty." Farm operators mentioned that one must be a trustworthy individual or they risk finding themselves socially isolated from others in the farming community.

Wilma: That's right, ethics were the utmost. We made no deals under the table. My dad did not offer anything like that and I told these guys that. I said it all has to be on top of the table and there is no shenanigans

Edward: I mean, I, you know, you don't want... I always wanted to be fair and honest and straightforward in my dealings with everybody. I wasn't gonna' sell the grain that wasn't good-quality to somebody without them knowing about it. So I just take pride in being an honest farmer and that's about it I guess, that's about it.

Frank: Honesty goes a lot further with farmers. I think it does. For the most part if someone's not gonna' be honest, you can figure out who it is and you just learn not to do business with them or you just don't make any deals with them because you know if he's not gonna' be honest on one deal he's not gonna' be honest on another deal because you know who's who, you know who you can trust....

Daniel: I'd say 90 percent of the people you deal with, on a handshake. It's as good as anything, you know, I mean your word is your handshake. I mean it's as good as any contract, I mean that's kind of the nice part about it, I mean, if you want to do work for anybody.

Parker: You don't have to worry about getting ripped off?

Daniel: You know, if I don't do a good enough job they're out there telling me they don't like it. We adjust, we try to make it. We go again and now that... the agriculture people are, for the most part, a good bunch of people.

Communicating ideas of being honest in one's business dealings emerged in various forms across all interviews. Although honesty and integrity are common demands amongst most occupations, the farmers used these virtues to reinforce their status as good farmers and built social networks around this premise. Failing to be honest or to live up to one's word has the potential to end future business dealing among fellow farmers.

Farming is an occupation in which one's future is never guaranteed. When I asked whether or not the farm supported itself, the operators responded in short direct statements. They did not appear willing to discuss the profitability of their farms in great detail. Of the 18 farmers I interviewed, only seven indicated that the farm supported itself and provided for the family with no off-farm income. Another seven operators claimed the farm supported itself however the household depended on outside income as well as employer provided health insurance. Only four indicated that the farm was not profitable and that the household completely relied on off-farm

income. Three of the farmers indicated they were operating off of equity citing the recent downturn in commodity prices as the reason for the farm being unable to support itself. The remaining farmer remarked, “How could you quit?” He explained, although the farm was not profitable, if he were to sell his assets he would lose more money to taxes-- an issue I will discuss further in the next chapter. All farmers experienced uncertainties due to fluctuation and slumps in commodity prices. The participants were quick to point out that there is not an abundance of opportunity for financial gain by farming.

Lucas: We're not rich. A farmer's never rich until he dies and then you see what the net worth statement is.

Allen: They [cattle] worked very well for me. The grain... that's not been a real wealthy business I'll say but, cattle's been a lot better. I always felt like, with the cattle, I at least kept all my money together with that. But the real crops, I mean, you can lose a lot of money in one or two years. We're kind of in that area right now, for last couple of years. Even like this last year, even though it was a great crop in this area prices aren't high enough to justify it so it's kind of a bust.

So why do farmers persist in an occupation in which they must risk the financial stability of the family? Collectively, the participants of this study suggested that one must be passionate about farming. The farmers I interviewed framed the occupation as a “good way to live” as well as a preferable way to raise a family-- factors that seem to outweigh the financial risks they face.

Daniel: You just gotta love farming. [PA: Yeah] I want to make money, but you just gotta love it because there's always something comes and kicks you in the butt. I mean it. I don't care who you talk to there's always a situation. There's always a situation, you know. [PA: Yeah]. It's the only thing I ever wanted to do.

Henry: Well I take pride in it. I take pride in the job I do and putting out a good product.

These farmers perceived the responsibilities that come with maintaining a farm and their ability to deal with challenges as altruistic values they can attach to themselves. Their

involvement in what they considered honest hard work is viewed as a moral basis to live by. Several of the farmers talked about how family labor involved in operating the farm served to strengthen the social bonds between family members. One farmer described his experience with farming as though the experience had euphoric effects: “It’s kind of a natural high...” Although it may not always be profitable, these farmers have persisted in the agricultural economy because they see their work as a morally worthy cause. When the farmers spoke of their work as “a good way to live” they were again reinforcing the moral identity of farming (Katz 1975). By speaking favorably about the environment in which they raise their families, the farm operators emphasized how they raised their families under conditions superior to non-farming families. Their definitions of farming and ability to work were qualities that elevated them to a higher social status.

Not only does the doing of work carry tremendous value among farmers, but among these participants the type of work they did appeared to carry great significance as well. The type of work that the farmers did was important to them due to how it was perceived by others in and outside the farming community. Operators spoke of dairy farming as a type of work that commanded respect among fellow farmers. Dairy operators discussed the labor demands of the farm as though they are tied to the operation from before dawn and working until the late hours of the night only to do it again the next day. Being a “dairyman” was a title that one of the farmers claimed that she did not think she was worthy of because she operated a herd of only 11 cows.

It's kind of funny that you should ask that because um, I've told people I own a dairy but I would never, never, never, call myself a dairyman... [Parker: Okay. What are you?] I don't feel like I've earned that right... I really don't. Um, the dairymen that go to work at 3:00 AM and have, you know, like two hundred cows to milk and um. They're locked in because their daddy got locked in it and, you know, they have no way out. And they can take one look

at a cow and tell you exactly what her production is... I mean those, to me, are dairymen. [Parker: Okay.] It's... It's like they've paid their dues. As far as calling myself a dairyman I would love to. I would love to be able to call myself a dairyman but I don't feel I've... I don't think I paid my dues yet, you know? Now, I know that sounds strange because I'm in six years now. You know, March will be six years um but um... I'm not a dairyman...

Though her operation is not intended to produce at a commercial level, this operator held a particular understanding of what it meant to be a “dairyman.” In their eyes, a “dairyman” is a categorization that sets them apart from other farmers in the sense that their work is widely understood to be more demanding than other forms of agricultural production. Many farmers discussed how growing up and experiencing the demands of dairy work created a structure from which their whole day was built. As mentioned in the above quote, dairy farmers are essentially “locked” into the production of dairy because their family has done it in the past and now it has passed to them. Again, this notion of continuing tradition is well ingrained and the choice to continue may feel like it is out of their control. Further, her comments about being “locked” or being tied to the dairy business sounds more like imprisonment than an occupation that commands respect. When the farmers held dairy operations in high regard, they did not necessarily praise the situation that it places dairy operators in, rather they are praising the lengths the operators are willing to go to maintain the family tradition of dairy farming. Dairy farmers are upholding tradition that they see as morally worthy.

The farm operators were also cognizant of outsider perspective in determining the type of labor they identified with the most. After being asked “what do you do,” the following conversation revealed one farmer’s thought process of how he wished to be viewed by others within and outside of agriculture.

Greg: Livestock producer... I like my cows. I kind of want to be known more for my cows than anything, I guess, so. I raise cow-calf... and I like my



calves... so yeah, if somebody came up and asked me, I'd say I'm a cow-calf livestock producer or a cow-calf producer... That's how I'd say it I guess.

Parker: So over any kind of grain farming?

Greg: Yeah... I know... you're recording this but... I don't wanna'... I don't want to have my title as a crop farmer... I just don't want...."

Parker: "What's the aversion to being identified as a crop farmer?"

Greg: ....

Parker: You're not going to offend anybody.

Greg: Ok... ugh... They... They kind of got attitudes [Parker: Attitudes?]

They think they've got to have the best stuff than your stuff [sic] and

I... [Parker: Okay] I... and.... How would you describe a crop farmer? I'm trying to hold back...

[Laughter]

At first, he was hesitant to say what he was thinking about the implications of being identified as a "crop farmer." Later on in the interview he went on to share more of his perspective on being labeled just a "crop farmer."

Greg: Not all... Not all of them [crop farmers] are... Not all of them... I'm not going to put them all in one pool but I'm just sayin'... I've been called one before and I didn't like how they said it. "Oh, you farmers, you're just what you call 4x4 farmers." [Parker: What?] Work four weeks in the spring and four weeks in the fall and nothing else... [Parker: That's a pretty skewed perception of farming in general...] But that's what they see. You know? [Parker: Okay, yeah.] When you raise crops, I mean, you plant in the spring and you combine in the fall and then what they used to say... They used to say, uh... Plant in the spring, um, harvest in the fall and then go to Florida... A long time ago, that is what they used to say.

His concern was that outsiders devalued the amount of work he performed because it was invisible to them. The "crop farmer" identity implied that little labor is necessary to operate the farm given the seasonality of production and use of machinery. Getting recognition from insiders and outsiders for one's hard work is salient to the farming identity. Later on, Greg said that people have also accused him of "waiting at the mailbox" inferring that he, along with other farmers, abused and profited from government subsidies. This notion further undermined the

farmers' relationship to manual labor and their values of honesty as farm operators. Greg's aversion to the "crop farmer" label is a form of defensive othering (Ezzell 2009). When Greg rejected the title of "grain farmer" and spoke poorly of their "attitudes" he symbolically devalued work that seemed easy to outsiders. In doing so, he also elevated his preferred identity (and work) as a livestock producer to a morally superior position that was more consistent with his understanding of the farming identity.

The farmers believed this outsider perspective stems from more automated processes and technological advancements that have reshaped how farming is done; from the outsider perspective, the farmer's job is continuously getting easier. Choosing to identify with a particular form of work signifies their work ethic and amount of labor involved in this particular form of production. This comes as no surprise given the tremendous value the farmers placed on the learning and doing of physical labor in the farmer identity. A livestock farmer label symbolically emphasizes his labor in working directly with animals, an activity that outsiders may perceive as more involved in production and worthy of higher prestige.

Other farmers seemed to share this view. Greg and other farm operators showed a preference for identifying with certain types of work over others, suggesting the presence of an internal stratification among farmers. They appeared to rank identities such as "crop farmer," "dairyman," and "livestock producer" based on how much labor these roles required. When they identified themselves with more labor-intensive forms of agricultural production, they appeared to engage in identity work that reinforced their understandings of being a "good farmer."

Some operators were not as specific as Greg in mentioning a form of production they wished to be recognized for; instead, they emphasized their farming labor as varied and all-consuming:

Kenneth: Well I'd say I farm, but it goes to a whole lot more than that. I mean the financing, veterinary science, entomology which is the study of bugs, herbicides and so on. I mean wildlife control, you know, vermin control, pretty much just anything and everything you can possibly think of actually goes into it. Mechanic work, I mean heck everything you can possibly imagine. [Parker: Yeah] Kind of a jack of all trades.

Lucas: When you go out the back door you go to work. You don't transit any place. You never leave your work site.... If you're gettin' calves in the spring and it's cold... you'll check them every two hours and you do that to make things work... it's constantly...you're never not farming.. When my dad passed away my uncle said, "Well he farmed eight days a week, 26 hours a day." I mean... That was the way and it's...it just gets in your blood like... like a habit so... I don't know...anything that comes up that day is what you approach... If you need to do some carpentry work, at that point you are a carpenter. If you need to mechanic, you are a mechanic. If you need to go fix fence, you go fix fence. If you are shovelin' manure, that's just what you are doin'. That's your job at that point in time that's the way it is...

These operators talked about the occupation of farming in terms of handling the numerous responsibilities that arise at any given time. In their eyes, farmers must constantly do the same work that many other occupations specialize in, yet be able to transition seamlessly from one job to another. Rather than define the occupation of farming according to a particular task, they emphasized the numerous tasks demanded of them while operating a farm. Kenneth and Lucas suggest that the great breadth of jobs required on the farm do not allow them to identify with a single type of work; the type of work they specialize in depends on the situation. Their description of farming displayed the degree to which they must be worthy of the many demands required of farmers. Being capable of handling these various jobs emphasized and strengthened the farmers' relationship to hard work.

The family farmer identity is a complex collective, occupational, and moral identity. Due to the overlapping of farming as an occupational and familial identity, numerous aspects of the farmers' lives inform their understandings of who they are as farmers and what they do. Through

various practices and rituals incorporated in the socialization process and the labor demands of their day to day lives, the operators continually engaged in identity work that reinforced their identities as farmers and preserved patriarchal family traditions (Schwalbe and Mason Schrock 1996; West and Zimmerman 1987). However, as agriculture becomes increasingly complex and globally integrated, farmers are met with numerous challenges within the agricultural economy. The farmers perceived these challenges as threats to the continuation their farms and reproduction of their farmer identities. The following chapter highlights the issues that participants faced and their means of overcoming them.

## CHAPTER 5

### CHALLENGES OF OPERATING THE FAMILY FARM

Family farm operators encounter a variety of challenges to maintaining viable businesses. In my interviews with family farm operators, some challenges were as benign as finding quality labor and others were as crucial as learning to strategically navigate commodity markets; failure to do so could mean deciding between paying bills or staying current on loan repayments. Operators also discussed issues of animal welfare and environmental conservation. In these situations farm operators confronted a conflict between their virtual and actual identities (Goffman [1963] 1986). How they viewed themselves and how they were perceived by people outside of their farming communities stood at odds with each other. In particular, participants discussed how they sense and contend with opposition to their agricultural production practices from government organizations and the non-farming public, especially regarding the environment. Farm operators dismissed these outside perspectives as inconsistent with how they view themselves and the work they do. In addition to discussing various challenges, the farmers also offered strategies for dealing with and, in some cases, circumventing these issues.

#### “You’re a Price Taker, Not a Price Maker”

The farm operators I interviewed recognized the major trend of “get big or get out” over the course of their agricultural careers and the growing divide between increasing expenses and declining opportunities for income. The farmers reported changing how they thought about operating their farms in order to navigate a complex agricultural economy.

Kenneth: Yeah, you don't get to set your own price as far as what you produce. John F. Kennedy said that America's farmers are the only person that buys at... that buys at retail and sells wholesale on things. We pay for it with both legs, you know?

Interestingly, the quote Kenneth mentions comes from a speech John F. Kennedy delivered at a National Plowing Contest in South Dakota in 1960. This particular quote ends with “and pays freight both ways,” underscoring the farmer’s disadvantaged position in agriculture-related exchanges (John F. Kennedy Presidential Library 1960: 4). Every farmer seemed to commiserate: in general, farmers do not feel they receive fair prices for the products they must buy nor do they receive adequate prices for the commodities they produce and sell. Many of the farm operators blamed their disadvantaged position on large corporations dominating the agricultural economy.

Angie: The big name companies, you know, put [a] dollar amount on something and we have no say in... We have to use it but then when you turn around and at the end of production you sell. You have no say over that either so...

Greg: Yeah, it is expensive. I mean, yeah... It’s... It never used to be that way but... Anymore you got to stay right on top of it... It just takes more now to... It takes more now to live off of than it used to...

Allen: Yeah, when you're in agriculture you're a price taker, not a price maker. And, you know nowadays, they [investors] want everybody to trade on the Board of Trade...

These farmers expressed feeling estranged from all negotiations as both consumers and producers of agricultural products. Angie and Greg pointed out the commanding position that agribusinesses have established in agriculture and the farmers’ corresponding sense of helplessness. Above, Kenneth mentions that farming is an occupation in which prices for the commodities they produce are dictated by analyzing variables (supply and demand, transportation, storage costs and regional conditions); their commodities are sold in networks such as the Chicago Board of Trade (Hofstrand 2009). Although this system works as a safety net for buyers and sellers, trading commodities via contracts renders farmers incapable of bargaining or negotiating prices for their commodities; their only option is to take what they feel is the best offer. Greg suggested that the agribusiness-dominated economy is a departure from

the past and his original understandings of how the farm business functioned. These operators felt as though they are left to navigate the middle ground between those who control what they must buy and those who control the markets where they sell their products.

Parker: So what do you feel is the biggest challenge to operating a farm such as yours?

Jim: You know, there's a couple things. Right now I'd say it would be marketing, that's a huge one. Two would be, being profitable because you have to be profitable and three, because farms are getting larger, competing with them... Cash runs almost everything, you know?

Parker: What do you feel is the biggest challenge to operating a farm like yours?

Dennis: Keeping your name on the mailbox...

Nearly all farm operators cited financial difficulties and marketing as the main challenges to operating a farm. An operator from Iowa spoke of this issue in terms of “making the money go round.” These challenges mark an important disconnect in farmers’ identities: none of the farm operators mentioned marketing and finances when I asked them what it meant to be a farmer. As previously discussed, those conversations centered on attributes such as honesty and developing a work ethic--ideas that pertain to moral virtues of “doing farming” as an occupation. The farmers privileged these positive attributes over the challenges that come with the occupation in evaluating their identity. Their mentality is comparable to Comito et al.’s (2013) findings of Iowa crop farmers who emphasized positive aspects of their occupation and suppressed the negative as a means to preserve a positive public image of farmers. By separating the difficult and perhaps unpleasant financial tasks from their core farming identity, the farm operators engaged in identity work--creating a presentation focused on honesty and hard work helped them maintain farming as a moral identity (Katz 1975).

The farmers discussed various strategies for handling the financial difficulties of operating a farm. Repairing machinery, postponing projects, and cutting expenses during

financially difficult years were among the most frequently mentioned means to sustain operations.

Glenn: Just quit buying. [Parker: Quit buying?] Yeah, just quit buying any machinery. I mean, that machinery is expensive.

Henry: Don't spend it until you got it....

Overall, the farmers agreed upon this idea and many answered questions in these simplistic terms: in order for the operation to endure a tough financial period, farmers had to stop spending money. Although this seems like practical and somewhat obvious advice, this idea of cutting back spending was not limited to the farm business alone.

Parker: Say you had a bad year with low prices on either milk or beef, what are some of the ways you manage to keep the farm functioning?

Edward: We just had to tighten our belts considerably. [Wife nodding her head in agreement]

Parker: Okay. As far as the household?

Edward: Everything. Not just the household. I mean... Yeah, that's [the] first thing you cut back on. But then we had to cut back at the dairy and on the farm and, you know, like I said we went to work on more stuff and buying less new.

Their decision to cut back spending in the household in addition to the operation is indicative of the interconnectedness of the family unit and farm. The families viewed these sacrifices as a necessary and acceptable means of ensuring that the operation continued to function properly during financially difficult times. In the following, Craig pointed out that although he agrees with trimming the farm's expenses, reducing household spending made little to no difference compared to the large sums of money required for input costs:

[Loan officers] always talk that way, you know. Back in the 80s, everything you know, the bankers and all those people with real intelligence [sarcasm] sitting behind a desk and they've decided to tell you how to do everything... you gotta...you gotta spend less money living and we never did live like a king and you know if you save \$10,000 out here cause you cut your living expense down but you lost a \$150,000... What does that \$10,000 do for you, ya know? So I guess you kinda gotta plan out some years... You know, we didn't make much money last year and I kinda gotta get things shaped up for next year so I'm not



going to build much fence or I'm not going to build a pond or terraces or such things. I'm going to try to get along with what I've got. I'm not going to buy new equipment, I'm going to try to piece along [with] what I got and .... As far as takin' a family vacation, like we never took, ya know. What does saving \$5,000 do when you're losing \$250,000?

Craig's thoughts on the insignificance of cutting back household expenses speaks to the capital intensive nature of farming as well as what farmers feel are the underwhelming monetary returns for the household. Comments such as "We're not rich. A farmer's never rich until he dies and then you see what the net worth statement is," and "we never did live like a king" suggest that although farm operators work with large sums of money, the wealth they possess is dedicated to their farm operations. Their wealth may never be extracted from the operation unless a potential successor of the farm exercises their option not to continue the business.

Many farm operators discussed their resourcefulness in dealing with financial challenges. For example, Edward mentioned "we went to work on more stuff and buying less new," and Craig referred to "piecing along what I got." They referred to depending more on their ability to repair and maintain rather than replace aging equipment. Relying on their abilities to make the farm function is consistent with the previously discussed farming identity; farmers will find a way by means of their own labor. However, the farmer's self-reliance in times of financial hardship is also intertwined with elements of self-exploitation (Galt 2013). Farmers, like Edward and Craig, chose to increase their workload during hard times which may go unrewarded or unrealized when they sell a commodity. The farmers' unpaid work served to sustain the farm in hopes of future opportunities for financial stability. The operators' sacrifices served to strengthen the moral identity of farmers; they perceive maintaining the farm as being worthy of sacrifices.

Several farmers disagreed with cutting back on the operation as a viable way to manage difficult years and opted for a different approach. The farmers below suggest that in order to endure tough financial times they must remain consistent.

Wilma: Just keep plugging away. Don't look back. Daddy taught me you pick your program and you stay constant because the peaks will carry out through the valleys and agriculture is cyclical. He said just keep plugging away and it will work.

Henry: You try to use some common sense about it but... But you short an ole cow, it's going to show up... You short your corn crop, it's going to show up.

Lucas: There's not a lot of ways you can save and still... Still be profitable. You can't... You can't cut back a long ways on your fertilizer cost because you could lose an opportunity to raise a good crop. So you got to kind of stay at... You got to stay on kind of an even plateau and run uniformly.

Wilma, Henry, and Lucas suggested that in order for the farm to withstand poor conditions a farmer must maintain a consistent operation. Wilma's comment about the cyclical nature of agriculture informs this mentality. Commodity prices are in constant fluctuation; if prices are high, then they will drop as farmers rush to take advantage of high prices. If prices are low, they will eventually recover as demand increases. These farmers perceived cutting back on their operations as a risk of missing out on future opportunities. Henry and Lucas warn that if one were to cut back it will show up later on in the growing season and could mean missing out on a chance for financial gain. However, whether the operator chose to cut back or remain constant, the goal remains the same: ensure the farm survives with hopes that conditions will soon improve.

Borrowing money was also an option that some of the operators suggested as a means of enduring harsh economic periods. However, of the operators I interviewed, the farmers who suggested borrowing money owned the largest farms (in terms of acres operated). These farmers were capable of borrowing against the equity in their land, an option that owners of smaller

farms do not benefit from to the same degree. Donnie pointed out his financial situation placed him at an advantage over smaller farmers. His comments highlighted the predicament that many struggling farmers find themselves in when they are not approved for a loan:

If you can't get a line of credit... You can't stay in business. And if you can't stay in business you can't pay, you know, your loans, your mortgage... So, it's almost a situation where... if the banks could figure out like... if they see a cash flow imbalance which almost everyone can be showing that now [be]cause the inputs are high and the grain market seems low and going a little bit lower... but if you don't offer a line of credit so that person can pay those bills and keep going then.. It... The whole thing starts to fall apart.

Although he viewed this as a serious problem for struggling or beginning farmers, he recognized that banks will seek to limit their risk before supplying farmers with additional funds. Later in our conversation, Donnie mentioned that the size of the operation and the amount of money he is able to borrow is the biggest advantage of operating a 4500 acre farm-- this advantage helps him acquire more land. The salient concept is that the financial systems in which farmers function awards advantage to the established and largest operators and disadvantage the beginning and smaller operators; Donnie saw this as contributing to the trend of "get big or get out."

Of the participants I interviewed, the farmers operating larger amounts of land tended to participate in futures marketing. Futures marketing serves as a moderating tool for both producer and buyer. These options allow farmers to contract commodity prices and quantities for future delivery dates to protect themselves from a drastic drop in prices (Wisner and Hofstrand 2015). However, this also serves to protect corporations from drastic price fluctuations. In our discussions about futures marketing, the farmers often focused on the confusing and unpredictable aspects of the system.

Hank: It's tough. You can't hardly... It's hard to know how to do it...  
Parker: How did you figure it out?

Hank: You just... When you have to have money, you sell corn.. [Parker: Yeah] And I mean... that... It's just... You can't figure it out. I don't know anybody that can figure it out. Do you?

Parker: I don't know. So just experiencing [participating in grain markets] is as best you can do?

Hank: I think so, yeah.

Like Hank, several of the operators I interviewed chose to completely avoid dealing in futures markets and dealt strictly in current cash values with local buyers--a risky strategy more vulnerable to the volatility of regional yields and grain prices. Kenneth shared his experience of completely selling a year's crop before he puts the first seed in the ground:

Well, right now... I'm selling crops right now for next year. Ya' know, what I haven't even got planted yet. A lot of people won't do that. I've never gotten to a place financially where I could hold over a year's crop. Some people, well, they won't sell anything less than the bin.

Although intended to safeguard farmers' investments in a crop, futures marketing does not entirely alleviate financial risk. Farmers must produce the quantity of grain as priced in the contract. If a drought or a natural disaster caused crop loss, farmers might have to supply grain at a lower price than it currently trades for, or pay their way out of a contract at an overall loss (Leer 2012). Nearly all farmers commented that commodity marketing is complex and required experience to successfully navigate. One participant shared a joke illustrating the variables that must be considered when choosing the right time to sell:

I heard a joke one time about... Let's see... This guy goes... [A] Farmer goes to a psychiatrist. And the psychiatrist is trying to figure out why he markets or when. And the [psychiatrist] says, "Well, when do you sell your grain?" [The farmer] says, "Well, I.. I try to sell my grain when it is going up." [Psychiatrist] says, "Well, do you get it all sold?" [Farmer] says, "No I keep thinking it is gonna' go higher." [Psychiatrist] says, "Well, do you sell it when it starts to go down?" [Farmer] says, "No, 'cause I figure it's going to stop going down, so I don't sell it, but then it goes down some more so... so then I have to sell it." [Psychiatrist] says, "Well, do you sell it based on... on... how much income you want to guarantee a profit?" [Farmer] says, "Well, no cause then you gotta'... You sell it real high... High profit, sell it, now you might have to pay more income tax." So the psychiatrist finally says, "So, let me see if I got this straight. You don't sell when

it is going up. You don't sell when it is going down. And you don't sell when it's sorta' staying even 'cause you are afraid you might have to pay taxes." So he calls his secretary and says "I think we are going to need a couple more hours in here."

This story, although suggested as a humorous anecdote, holds truth in identifying the numerous variables farmers must consider when deciding to sell a commodity. First, farmers do not want to sell themselves short for fear that prices may increase. On the other hand, they do not want to operate at a loss so they will bide their time in hopes that prices will rebound. In the end, operators are forced to act regardless of the current value because of the financial requirements of operation. These farmers found themselves in tense situations due to these types of marketing decisions. The farmers' abilities to maintain the family farm in the current agricultural economy depends on successfully navigating commodity markets.

Beyond when, how, and to whom farmers sold their commodities, the other concern on their minds was "how much do I sell?" The farm operators expressed great concern about restricting income for the year to reduce their farm's tax liability

Parker: Even when [cattle] are high you don't sell as many as you can?

Daniel: No, I just sell enough to meet the fertilizer bill and seed bill and... No, I just... If you sell it you[re] gonna pay taxes on it...

Lucas: ...You go along and you try to stay the same so if you sell cattle... So many cattle in November or so much grain in that year. You don't want to put two years grain in one year or two years cattle in one year because the income tax reasons. So that's one reason sometimes you can. Once you get in a plan of things you think well I made big money but if you come along and they take \$7000 or \$8000 [in] income tax you have not made much..

Managing tax liability came up in nearly every interview. From an outsider's perspective, it seems counterintuitive that farm operators would choose not to maximize their income given their previously mentioned concerns with production costs and uncertain income. When I asked about taking advantage of high commodity prices, Daniel suggested that he only sells enough to cover his expenses because he does not want to pay taxes on profit. Lucas spreads out when he

receives income throughout the year to avoid increasing his tax liability. One of the operators took the step of transferring his land into a trust (i.e., like a corporation) so that his children could avoid paying inheritance taxes associated with the farm. When facing the uncertainties of the agricultural economy, these operators felt they must actively protect their available sources of income from being taxed.

John: Anything that gets taken out of your paycheck probably never comes back. It goes for taxes. I figured I have a business, I can have business expense deductions and everything. Depreciation... And that protects some of your income you are keeping rather than sending it to Uncle Sam.

Their desire to avoid paying income tax was backed by a pessimistic view of agriculture-related subsidies, which are funded with tax dollars. Several of the operators disagreed with how subsidy and assistance program funds were distributed. An Iowa farmer felt that other farmers bought land so that they could benefit from funds designated for the Conservation Reserve Program. This program pays land holders for taking ground out of agricultural production for 10 years. He suggested that “it’s all just weeds” that are detrimental to soil quality and thought these farmers were only interested in profiting off the program: “They aren’t farmin’ the ground, they are farmin’ the government.”

In the past, many of the operators were only concerned with local grain and livestock markets. Farmers in the current agricultural economy have learned to think about farming as a globally integrated system.

Donnie: Well, we get used to thinking in terms of the small circle instead of thinking ok, I’m going to have to figure out and have some source of knowing what the weather forecast is in Argentina as opposed to what it is in [Locally].

Jim: I listen for what’s going on in South America. So if they have a bad crop that means our crop will probably... could probably be a little better. Prices could be going up.

As Jim and Donnie remarked, the farmers now note the growing and market conditions in other countries because they observe the effects of imported agricultural products on domestic commodity prices. South America in particular has become a major source of soybeans; a recent “bumper” crop undercut U.S. prices (Hunt 2017). This creates a system where farmers must be strategic in planning when and how much of each crop they are going to sell in order to pay off the debts acquired in production.

In addition to domestic grain prices, several farmers discussed how the federal order of removing of the country of origin labeling or COOL (AMS 2016) from beef and pork products resulted in foreign beef flooding domestic markets and bringing prices down.

For the last so many months [commodity prices] [have] all been... Straight across, they've all been in the gutter. They ain't nothin been... Butcher cows... When our secretary of agriculture... When he accepted the beef out of South America... [Parker: Yeah, removing the country of origin requirements.] Yeah, it took 3 weeks for our butcher cows to go from \$0.75 a pound to \$0.50 a pound and that does make a big difference. Beef calves, they got cut in half... It... it's really... It's... It's sad to think that somebody that is supposed to be involved in agriculture would do something to hurt the man that is producing but they did... And they can say whatever they want but it just took 3 weeks after they announced that... The [prices] dropped...

This operator suggests that removing this labeling also removed any chance of a premium that may come with labeling products produced in the United States or “economic rents” (Galt 2013). These farmers believed that regulations surrounding beef production are not as strict in foreign countries. Two operators who specialized in raising grass fed beef thought that imported meat was produced and processed using methods that were not acceptable in the United States. One beef producer from Tennessee claimed that foreign beef cattle could be fed harmful chemicals. Another operator shared his perspective of globalized food systems:

I do believe our food source is incredibly compromised. I think we eat pure, unadulterated junk and, I mean, we ship in stuff that we have no earthly idea of what it's been subjected to. It's kind of like... You're probably... Well, no. I don't

know how much research you've done but you're probably too young to remember DDT... [Parker: I know what that is, yeah.] Well, when we outlawed it here... We sold it to South American countries... Well, where does most of our fruit come from? And they didn't buy it to throw it away, ya know. So when we outlawed it here we said, "Hey, you know, if you spray it down there and ship it here we'll eat it that way." And [company], I don't know if you know it. [Company] sold out to China. [Company]? [Okay] It was sold to China. So now all that stuff is coming in from China. Well, we don't know how or what [hogs] are being fed.

In general, farm operators felt as though the globally integrated food market threatens their farm operations; they felt their commodity prices were undermined by the U.S. government's actions to allow low quality food to be imported. Nearly every farmer had a pessimistic view on food that is imported into the country. These farmers felt as though the quality of the products they produce are superior to what is being imported. They believed that government agencies are not working in their best interest when international trade agreements make it easier for foreign agricultural products to be sold in the United States. Interestingly, many of the commodities these U.S. operators produce will eventually end up in foreign markets as well. This would result in local farmers in other regions of the world realizing lower profits as well (Magdoff 2004). It is unclear how the farmers viewed this contradiction because I did not question farmers about their perceived effect on the global agricultural economy.

#### "The Only Thing for Him to Do Is Get Out"

The dairy farmers I interviewed found themselves locked in economic exchanges out of their control. Farmers who produce grain or livestock have more flexibility as to when they sell these commodities because they are easily stored. Dairy producers, however, must take the current price set for their region due to the perishable nature of their product. In east Tennessee, dairy farmers expressed concerns about these prices and the milk buyers. Farmers in this region have few options; some of the closest processing plants are nearly 70 miles away. They also



discussed how operating their facilities and feeding their cattle cuts into, and sometimes eliminates, their profit margin during periods of low milk prices.

Daniel: Well, the university tells us that normally you've got a percentage of debt load. [You need] \$18 or \$19 [per hundred weight] to break even. So at \$14 we was... we were under the breakeven point.

Edward: The best I could do that day, I lost \$600 because it cost me \$3 per cow to own them. After all expenses. I mean, taking in all the income, I still lost \$3 on every one of them milk cows a day... I was milking 200. That's \$600 a day... And I mean, that will eat on you because you're thinking, how long is this going to last? It's not as simple as just walking over and turning off the light switch. Saying you're not going to use electricity anymore, we're going to save on that... [If] you shut that dairy down, what's your help going to do? I know how hard it is to find good dairy help...

In many cases, the opportunities for continued dairy operation are increasingly slim for these individuals. They had experienced periods where their milk production failed to outweigh the cost of maintaining their operations. Due to the travel distance and dwindling number of dairy farmers in east Tennessee, milk processors now pass additional costs, such as fuel and freight, on to dairy producers, which cuts further into their slim-to-nonexistent profit margins. The additional charges from dairy processors, according to Daniel, force small family farms out of the dairy industry:

The only thing for him to do is get out... We had one this summer do the same thing because he was milking 50, him and his wife, and they milk for years... And... All these little charges they just couldn't muster it for a while... ...And uh, what I don't know [is] how long it's going to take before they start on the other size [operations], you know?

Dairy operations have grown significantly in size and extent of automation within the past century (Capper et al. 2009). Small family operations, like those found in east Tennessee, operate at a higher overhead cost in comparison to large dairy producers. Daniel, like other dairy producers in the area, fears that soon his operation will be in jeopardy. Edward, who operates a

dairy farm consisting of 200 dairy cows, talked about the struggle that small producers face when competing with larger producers:

Where [large scale dairies are] producing a lot of milk, [if] they get the [feeling] that [prices] are going to go [up]... Man, they can... Like I say, they bump 500 cows in a month and they can have production just bustin'... First thing you know we got a gluttony. An' we're right back down in the gutter and we... I would like to see, and they sure don't want to hear it, the ones that's producing a lot of milk... They don't want to see no quotas of any kind. [Parker: Right] I mean, if they tell me... ...We're going to buy this much and anything over that we're going to buy it for a dollar on 10... Well, it wouldn't take you long to figure out you don't want to go over that. You understand? That would hold our production to meet maybe where it needs to be. Maybe rather than getting \$20 a hundred [weight] maybe we could all be getting \$34... Because we'd have it where we need to be... Canada does [that]... They're on a quota system and it works for them...

Edward points out how large scale producers enjoy the advantage of scaling their production up or down based on the current price of milk. These large scale operations make competition difficult for smaller farmers, like him. Edward suggested the solution of implementing quota systems into the dairy market to protect small scale producers. He immediately suggested that this idea is unlikely before he shares it by stating “they sure don’t want to hear this.” Edward’s interest in this form of regulation, one that could be considered a form of social welfare for dairy operations, stood in contrast with his traditional farming identity consisting of hard work and independence. He and his wife spoke of the inefficiencies of the government and how they hoped that in the future the nation would see an overall scaling back of regulations. His support of production regulation, however, hints at a sense of solidarity he feels with other disadvantaged dairy farmers who might benefit from this government intervention.

As previously mentioned, dairy farming in general was held in higher regard compared to other forms of production. Across multiple interviews, the farmers used the specific title “dairymen” in a way that separates them from other farmers such as grain and livestock

producers. Several of the farmers who had produced dairy in the past, spoke of how they admired the hard work of dairy farmers. Operators structured their lives according to the labor demands of the dairy farm. These farmers shared how involvement in dairy production was a major part of their personal and family histories.

It'll take the wind out of your sails when you need it. It definitely will... So yeah... I guess I'm grateful for that, you know, and it's just nice... There's a lot of peace to be had working around livestock... Um as a matter of fact the day my father died I was tucked up under a cow and I couldn't go... And it was kind of ironic, this was before I had milking machines and um, I mean, I just leaned my head into her haunch and, you know, just... You know, she was so warm that day and just the sound of the milk hitting that pail... You know it was very rhythmic and soothing... And it just kind of calmed and made sense of everything.

The dairy farmers expressed passion for the work they did and concern for the future of the industry. These operators thought dairy farming was not something that was simply stopped due to being unprofitable. They viewed their dairy production as a long standing family tradition that should continue into the future -- a future they felt was at risk. Only one of the dairy operators thought their operation would continue to operate in the future. In general, farmers felt that the economic barriers, as previously mentioned, will eventually force small farmers out of the dairy industry.

“The Hogs Were Makin’ the Least Amount of Money and the Most Amount of Work”

Every farmer that I interviewed had discontinued production of a commodity due to reduced profitability. Iowa has historically been one of the top pork producing states in the nation accounting for 37 percent of national pork production (USDA 2015). The pork industry has followed a trend of corporatization similar to the dairy industry. Large scale producers are capable of offering large quantities of consistent size hogs at a faster rate than small family farmers (Grey 2000). All Iowa farmers that I interviewed had produced hogs at one point in their

tenure as principal operator and have since quit, citing the slump in pork prices in the early 1990s and 2000s.

Allen: Pigs, oh gosh I've been out of them for at least 20 years. Yeah, the early 90s hogs got really cheap, in the single digits. Which I was done, I was done then anyways, at that time.

Parker: You don't plan on ever being back the hog business?

Allen: It's too much capital to get into that nowadays. You're looking at, I think anymore, it's about a million bucks a barn to put one up. Which means then you better put about 250,000 to 300,000 of your money and... And I don't know. I'm not interested, I just don't want to do it.

Lucas: The hogs were makin' the least amount of money and the most amount of work so I got out of the hog business. Self-explanatory...

Greg: That's the only things, yeah. Well, it was kind of... kind of a sad day when the last hogs left [be]cause dad raised hogs for 41 years.

For Iowa farmers hog production has been a major part of their agricultural experience.

Various perspectives associated with hog production can be observed in these quotes. Lucas and Allen talked about their decisions to exit hog farming as being practical and financially motivated. Greg, however, noted the nostalgic feelings associated with the last hogs leaving the farm. To him the production of hogs held deeper meanings associated with the family legacy of farming rather than a mere source of farm revenue. When the farm no longer produced hogs, Greg felt as though he'd lost a connection to the family farm and the history associated with the operators who came before him.

The state of Tennessee is the ranked 3<sup>rd</sup> in tobacco production in the United States preceded by North Carolina and Kentucky (USDA 2015). Although as of 2015 Tennessee only accounts 7.3% of the nation's tobacco production (USDA 2015), farmers in east Tennessee have a long cultural history connected to the production of tobacco. The farmers I interviewed in Tennessee had all produced tobacco in the past. All have now ceased tobacco production citing

the government buyout program. For Tennessee farmers, tobacco was, at one time, a source of income that the farm and family greatly benefited from.

Daniel: Tobacco paid for everything we've got. We milked them cows... and we paid the bills with those cows and paid the labor. Paid the feed bill. And then when you sold your tobacco you had money and we always as soon as we sold the tobacco we were... We went to Farm Credit and handed them the check [laughter] and as soon as we got that piece paid off we'd buy more... And that tobacco just keep buying land.

Dennis: That was the mainstay for the family farm for years. You always had a couple acres of tobacco somewhere to pay the taxes and buy a few Christmas presents. And regulations, the way it's being bought and sold, that's pretty much put an end to that if you're not a big producer. If you're not a big producer you get out of it. You're done.

Glenn: The tobacco was a viable area for us as an income stream and it brought income into the farm operation when you did not have income normally coming from a cow-calf operation.

Edward: We quit growing the tobacco when we got in on the tobacco buyout program. That was a... That was a commodity that we utilized here for a long time. A lot of property in this area accumulated by the sale of tobacco. Tobacco was pretty big here at one point. In this area it's um... It's just not. One or two may be growing here in a 15 to 20 mile radius now and it used to be everywhere. And a lot of people that worked in town still grew a small tobacco patch or an acre or two because it was, you know, if you invested in it all year you got paid all at one time it seemed like a lot. You know, at one time it was pretty good but now it's getting a lot harder to sell...

These farmers talked about how the production of tobacco created financial stability for their households. Families used the income from tobacco to expand their farms, pay taxes, and supply the household with additional income. The farmer's relationship with the production of tobacco is symbolic of their ties to the agricultural history of the region: when farmers stopped producing this valuable commodity, they also ended a long-standing tradition that formed part of their identity. Several of the operators discussed their disappointment with how the "tobacco buyout" occurred in the state of Tennessee.

Dennis: The state was supposed to take that money and reeducate us old tobacco farmers into something that would pay and so... The state of Tennessee got some \$73 million, I don't know how much it was I used to know but I can't remember now, and that was when they had TennCare. And TennCare was going broke... And the state of Tennessee took our money and balanced the budget... We didn't get shit.

Edward: The Congress or whatever balanced budget with the tobacco money that we was supposed to have gotten... And that money got gone... And of course there was a lot of questions as to what happened because we were supposed to get a kickback and it didn't happen and then they came up with the Tennessee agriculture enhancement [program].

As mentioned, Federal funds were redirected to balance the state budget rather than to reeducate tobacco farmers in new forms of production. Instead, the state introduced the Tennessee Agriculture Enhancement Program (TAEP). TAEP is a cost sharing program that assists farmers in funding conservation projects as well purchasing new machinery and facilities (Tennessee Department of Agriculture 2017). To be eligible to participate farmers must attend classes on their various forms of agricultural production and obtain a “master producer” certificate. Several of the farmers in Tennessee spoke highly of the program and the benefits of participating.

The farmers of Iowa and Tennessee shared the experience of losing a major form of agricultural production that once helped sustain their families. Neither the Iowa nor Tennessee farmers suggested they had successfully replaced pork or tobacco with a new commodity or source of revenue. These losses indicate how family farm operations are becoming increasingly specialized (or constrained) to pursue fewer forms of production. Without the cushion of a diversified operation, farmers must endure the financial uncertainty discussed earlier. In addition to losing financial stability, the family farmers also lost opportunities to perform the labor that fulfills their farming identity. For the farmers of Iowa and Tennessee, opportunities to maintain

the family farm and reproduce their identity dwindle, along with their means of preserving ties to family histories and cultural traditions.

“They Can Make Up the Rules All They Want”

The occupation of farming is not without its share of moral and ethical concerns. Family farm operators discussed issues pertaining to environmental regulations and animal welfare. As I mentioned earlier in this analysis, the farmers saw environmental conservation and animal husbandry as integral aspects of their identity as farmers. By highlighting their claims to these traits, the farmers created an occupational identity that is morally superior to others. They can view themselves as the caretakers of the land and animals that “feed the world.” Aside from blanket (disparaging) statements about government regulations, the farmers specifically named the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and the Department of Natural Resources (DNR) when asked about organizations that make farming more difficult. In general, the farmers felt as though these organizations create and enforce policies that are ill-informed and a nuisance to their farm operation. Worse, these organizations--charged with pursuing matters of environmental and animal welfare--call their farming identity into question.

Interviewees framed the government as an organization that makes farming more difficult. They spoke of the DNR and the EPA as if they were the police of the farming community.

Dennis: Well, the EPA is always on you. [Parker: Okay, you had experiences with them?] Yeah, I've had the letter saying you owe \$5,000 until you address your problem...

Lucas: .. They [Government organizations] dictate how you do your work... Conservation is great and we try everything we do to protect the soil and have it but every time you disturb any ground in any way there is always a possibility that you will lose your nutrients or lose your ground...

The quotes above illustrate the pessimistic attitude that farm operators had toward government agencies intervening in their work. Dennis spoke about the potential fine he faced if he had not attended to an erosion issue near a stream on his property. Lucas, on the other hand, resented people outside his farm dictating how he does his work. He continued by framing the matter of erosion as a natural part of farming; a consequence that he feels should be expected and merely accepted. Many farmers took a similar tack on environmental issues such as erosion. The farmers reframed situations to alleviate their responsibility for environmental concerns. Although they recognize erosion as a problem, they appeared unwilling to modify their agricultural practices that harmed water quality. Treating erosion as inevitable, rather than avoidable, offered a way to sound concerned without altering farming practices.

A farming couple shared an incident in which they received a fine due to manure runoff contaminating a local stream. Although, this couple recognized that the contamination did occur, they insisted that they had done everything in their power, including building a containment area, to abide by regulations.

Angie: Another challenge would be the people that are above and over us putting criteria and stipulations on what can be done and what can't be done and sometimes farming can't be done by the stipulations they want it done by.

Parker: Are we talking as far as governmental regulations?

Greg: DNR... and they don't have a clue what's going on out here.

Parker: So uninformed policy is a big challenge?

Greg: I mean, they can make up the rules all they want. Mother Nature is still gonna win and we're... We're caught in the middle [Parker: Yeah] I mean, we got Mother Nature, workin' with her, and then you got some people that don't know what's going on makin' rules...

Angie: And we had to pay because of...

Greg: Yeah, we have been penalized!

Angie: We've been penalized because there's been a rain storm and...[Parker: yeah?] We have paid thousands of dollars because it rained...

Similar to the above examples, the couple's explanation places their operation in a situation where the pollution is outside their control. They mentioned "Mother Nature" as an



overruling abstract force that prevents them from abiding by environmental regulations. Angie's comment "We've been penalized because there's been a rain storm" frames the situation in a manner that distances them and their farm from any responsibility for the water contamination. In other examples, farmers mentioned government organizations in relationship to their use of chemicals on crops. A common argument made among the farmers was that these regulations were also misinformed.

Kenneth: You know, I mean the EPA says that, they're saying that you're, you're over-applying and the nitrate levels come up in the creek and the rivers and we get blamed for it. Just like the city Des Moines has it against farmers and farmers near the streams. I mean, they're saying we're polluting it, when actually I've done a little bit more research on it and when they take, a lot of times, when they take the water samples it's taken out below the storm sewers. So when they're, when they fertilize the golf courses, and the yards, and get rain then it goes in this storm sewers and then into the river. And we're taking the blame for what the city people are actually doing, making their yards prettier.

Again, Kenneth discussed how blame for water pollution is not the direct result of farmers' activities. By reframing the situation and creating distance between environmental issues and themselves, these farmers are engaging in identity work (Schwalbe and Mason Schrock 1996). Their reasoning safeguards the stewardship role of the family farmer (Comito et al. 2013) and protects their identity claim of caring for the environment. All farmers talked about how they would never intentionally damage the environment. Later in the interview, Kenneth argued that it would be counterintuitive for farmers to pollute the environment because of the negative consequences to their livelihoods. These arguments are similar to Kessler et al.'s (2015) interviews in which beef farmers displaced blame by "distancing themselves from others who are perceived to be environmentally harmful" (2015:19) therefore justifying their own production methods. In both instances, the farmers can claim that policies surrounding environmental

protection are misinformed, unrealistic, and present themselves as knowledgeable stewards of the land.

This antagonistic relationship between farm operators and state and federal organizations brings about a contradiction in the farming identity. The opposing views of government organizations and farmers creates a conflict between the virtual and actual identities of farmers (Goffman [1963] 1986). The operators perceived their production practices and conservation work as fulfilling their stewardship role and being “caretakers of the land” (i.e. their actual identity). However, when they received fines from government agencies for environmental pollution, they were marked as “bad farmers.” The farmers’ perceptions of themselves clashed with how government agencies treated them. The farmers tried to resolve these conflicts by reframing situations and through defensive othering (Ezzell 2009). Farmers, like Kenneth, engaged in defensive othering by claiming that other members of society, such as “city people... making their lawns prettier,” were more responsible for environmental damages than farmers. While many of them spoke honorably of “leaving the land in better shape than I got it,” they claimed that environmental regulatory agencies and policies impeded their ability to operate their farms. The farmers talked about “Mother Nature” as an abstract uncontrollable force that absolved them of responsibility for environmental problems and they separated environmental concerns from their identities as farmers. By reframing situations and shifting accountability away from themselves, they preserved their virtual identities of being a good farmer and upheld their self-appointed duty as stewards of the land.

#### “The Yogurt and Cheese Will Get You Time”

One dairy farmer completely avoided commercial agricultural practices in favor of producing raw dairy products (i.e., unpasteurized milk). Phyllis, who owns a small dairy herd of

11 cows, created a business in which she sees her dairy products as superior and more wholesome compared to those from commercial dairies. Her business operates in what Galt (2013) refers to as a niche markets and cashes in on the economic rents of the “raw diary” market.

After a long and spotty history of inconsistent state regulations, the federal government declared the sale of raw dairy to be illegal in 1987 (Weisbecker 2007). This code can be overruled on a state by state basis; both Iowa and Tennessee do not allow the sale of raw unpasteurized milk. In addition to legislation, the Tennessee Department of Health and Iowa Department of Public Health have published documents on the dangers of consuming raw dairy (Iowa Department of Public Health 2017; Tennessee Department of Health 2015). Although illegal and discouraged by both states, Phyllis explains that her business attracts a wide variety of people:

I don't want to say they are doomsday or preppers but we have a healthy... um... A healthy supply of them... but on the flipside we have quite a number of doctors... And attorneys. [Parker: Really?] Yeah, yeah, as a matter of fact, the last attorney I used, he was a customer at the dairy and had been for years. Homeschoolers. We have a boatload of homeschoolers but most of our customer base seems to be college educated but at some point they became disenfranchised and kind of went out on their own and started realizing a lot of things [in the food industry] aren't adding up..

Throughout the interview, Phyllis narrated the atrocities perpetrated in the commercial dairy industry. She claimed that the quality of the milk was severely compromised by the amount of foreign material in the milk due to the large-scale automated process and the poor living conditions for the animals. She believed that her customers understand the quality issues surrounding the dairy industry, which drove them to fulfill their consumer needs outside commercial and legal means.

At first, Phyllis started dairy production in 2011 to meet a household demand for unpasteurized milk. She explained that having a few cows led to producing more dairy products than she and her family could consume, and so she began to offer them for sale in the community. As mentioned, she cannot legally sell raw dairy products for human consumption.

Phyllis: Actually, I have a pet food dealer's license. [Parker: Okay] So, I sell it as pet food...

Parker: Okay, so it's sold under the legal status that humans are not going to consume this?

Phyllis: Right, that humans aren't consuming it. And, um... I have been surprised at how many customers already knew that... But now, I've gotten plenty of calls you know people will get it home. "I just read that label on here, you know. Should I drink this?" And of course legally I can't say that they can but what I do is I explain to them the law in Tennessee and then I say, but I can tell you this, me and my family drink it.

Phyllis used her status as a pet food dealer to maintain a legal business selling raw dairy. Other producers of raw dairy have also taken creative measures to circumvent state prohibitions against raw dairy sales. Phyllis explained that other raw dairy producers crafted a system to sell "herd shares," in which customers pay a fee to become a legal owner of the dairy cow. The consumers then have legal access to a source of raw dairy as their private property. Although Phyllis has been able work around the legally precarious nature of the raw dairy business, she has not been without pressure from government institutions.

Phyllis: Well, we're not supposed to have a dairy inspector because we're selling pet food but we do have a dairy inspector... [Parker: What does that mean?] Um, the first time I was notified that... Well, the first time he ever called me well his name is [Stan] and it was a really snowy day and he said "I'm [Stan] and I'm the inspector to come up and inspect your dairy." And of course my first impulse was to go, "No habla English" and hang up... And I thought, 'Now if I do that he'll know I'm afraid of him' and I was... God... I was... So I said, "Sure, come on up just anytime you get ready." He said, "I'll be there in about half an hour" ...Holy Shit.... And I'm not kidding you, Parker, I was stashing yogurt and cheese in every little hidey-hole I could find because raw milk is different from the yogurt and cheese... Actually, the yogurt and cheese will get you time. Well, the raw milk can too... Because I processed it. [Parker: Oh] Once you take something and process you've ramped it up into a whole other court case because I've had people ask me

to make bacon. I can sell you all the pork belly you want but once I process it into something else...

Parker: So they're considering that intent to sell it as food [for humans]?

Phyllis: Yeah. And well, you have to have all kinds of licensing and the equipment and everything it's a whole mess... So I'm stashing everything that's not milk. I mean, I'm just stashing it. And so he gets there and I'm still trying to make everything real calm and cool and um... And after he was there for about 20 minutes it dawned on me... And I just kind of shook my head like this [shaking head slowly, eyes rolling] and I looked at him and said, "How big of a check do I need to write you?" He told me and I wrote the check... That's all it was... It's just that the state wants money. [Parker: Okay] It's kind of like legalizing marijuana. I don't think the state cares either way about marijuana they just want to make sure they get their cut...

Phyllis represents an overall divergence from the other farmers I interviewed. For her, the farming identity is informed by the need to offer local "raw" products due to the travesties committed by commercial agriculture operations. Her operation stands as a symbolic antithesis of commercial agriculture; not only does she strive to be organic and provide a product that she holds superior, she willingly works around the grey areas of state laws to remain faithful to her operation. Throughout our interview, Phyllis criticized commercial agriculture practices (i.e. pasteurized dairy, uses of GMOs, livestock confinements, and imported food products). Although she admired the work ethic of other dairy farmers, she completely disagreed with their methods of milk production. As I mentioned in the previous chapter, she referred to her cattle as "her girls" and she prides herself on the quality of her products. She shared stories of customers thanking her for the homeopathic qualities of her dairy. Through her operation, Phyllis lays claims to and reproduces a moral identity in which she performs a public service by providing raw dairy products directly to consumers. Although state health departments may view her actions as unlawful and deviant, she views herself as a model for how food should be produced.

## “They’re Going to Walmart Us”

Overall, the farm operators held a pessimistic view of the future of agriculture. When I questioned them about the future prospects of family centered agriculture, the family farm operators responded that conditions were unlikely to improve and the end of family farms was in sight. In general, farmers in Iowa were less pessimistic than the farmers of Tennessee. Iowa farmers expressed the most concern for where family farms would fit in the future of agriculture.

Craig: Well I think it’s gonna get bigger all the time. With farmers... I think it’s gonna keep doin’ what it is doin’. There’s gonna be bigger [farms] and fewer of us. I hope that somebody in my family... I hope somebody’ll run part of this here instead of the next door neighbor that buys all the ground and just adding it on to his portfolio... And you know, that’s nothing against him or anything else it’s just... You hope to see that some small farmers be able to stay in and I mean I consider myself pretty much a smaller farmer in all this... I’d like to think that there is still a place for people like me and you guys [my family] out here.

Henry: I talk to some other neighbors around here some. Guys that are my age and we... it's hard because there's hardly any young kids anymore in this area. There used to be kids, you know. And we asked each other that, you know, what's gonna happen to these small farms? And you know, you riff-raff farms you know, you got hillsides and you got creek bottoms, and small hills. Who’s gonna farm these farms? And when you start counting around here there's no young boys to take over. It’s kind of scary. Are they going to be these guys from Northern Iowa come down here with a flock of machines? Come here in the spring and plant everything in one day and come back here one day in the fall and harvest it? I mean that's so sad. Another 20 years and I hope I'm still alive... no tellin’ who's gonna farm the small farms around here because you don't make as much money. [PA: No, you don’t.] And the guys up North, they've got a mile-long rows. They come down here and it's damn near suicide, you know?

Lucas: Factory Style. If they ever become partially unionized which would be very difficult to do because they're so independent they will control... It probably will not happen because the government's too involved and most of them can't make it without the government assistance but if it ever become that.. It would be.. It would be terrible for the country. I think that's one reason the government wants to be in it so they can try to control it.. To a certain degree but I don't think three and four five thousand acre farms is good. It's the same... it would be the same as not having the diversification have your gas stations or your grocery stores or your department stores if.. If a Walmart moved into a town how many places close up. [Parker: Right right] That's not good for the local economy...

These operators foresee the trend of farms continuing to grow in size and economic pressures will eventually drive small farmers out. They also felt that although farm land is being consolidated, there is still a need for small family farms in the agricultural economy. Lucas later spoke of how small farmers enjoy and take more pride in the products they produce and the work they do. As Harry points out, the small portions of rough ground that farmers work in his region of Iowa do not easily fit into the large-scale agricultural system. Iowa farmers indicated that family farmers will need to integrate newer forms of technology in order to survive in the changing agricultural economy but insisted that physical labor was how farmers will survive.

I think there's a real opportunity in agriculture if people will work and take advantage of the [technological] resources. It can't all be corn and beans and there's got to be some physical work done. There's the problem. But I think this farm could be a leader in that area because of what we've shown the public so far.

This operator predicts that farmers will need to stay current with the most efficient agricultural practices but insisted that “there’s got to be some physical work done.” Later in the interview, the operator said that those farmers who rely too much on “using their thumbs” miss out on the valuable insight of older generations and agricultural opportunities that are still out there. To Iowa farmers, performing manual labor still serves a means of the farm’s survival in the future. In general, Iowa farmers shared concern for the future of family farms. They feel their way of life is threatened by the ongoing trend of “get big or get out” and yet they hope that the family farm still has a place in and will benefit the future of agriculture.

The farmers in east Tennessee were much more pessimistic in their views of the future of family farms. Most claimed that the future in which family farms would disappear was only a few years away.

Dennis: It's going to change dramatically. I can see, probably five of the farm[s] right here, within a mile of us that will not be operating as farms 10 years from now.

Glenn: Small family farms in east Tennessee are a thing of the past.

One Tennessee farmer merely replied by stating, "Factories in the fields." His thoughts were consistent with others that in the future, family farms will serve as mere hobbies for those with disposable income. Farmers will continue to struggle due to increasing expenses and disappearing opportunities for income. His statement also alludes to the growing dominance of large-scale agribusiness. The farmers see the end of the family farm as a result of the consolidation of farmland into fewer larger farms that are linked to food systems--the vertical integration of farming.

Glenn: There was something like 40 different meat processors... And now it's like 5... There's only like 5 now.

Daniel: If we keep on the path we're going I see just um the Walmart of agriculture. They're going to um... They're going to Walmart us.

For the farmers of east Tennessee, developing agribusinesses were not the only threat to the shrinking availability of farm ground. Several operators were concerned with the number of housing developments that were purchasing farm ground.

Eric: The young people coming on, they're not gonna work the farm. I don't know, I don't know if any young person right now who would take on a dairy farm job. Milking every day in this area. There's not enough land to grow and expand and due to the fact that it's such hard work. The young people, when the parents die off, the grandparents day off for, the money's gonna look so good in the land, just sitting there. It will be sold off to somebody else and probably for houses.

Dennis: I mean there's... The young man... There's not enough of I guess I don't know how you say this... ...If they build more in this area I don't say it will be too many more years... Take 10-12 years ago... or 15 years ago.. You could get land up in here to rent anywhere... But now it's all houses...



Farmers in the area felt as though the opportunities for future farmers were disappearing as builders converted the land into housing developments. Many of them cited the growing population as a concern that needs to be considered as more land is converted to non-agricultural property.

Only one of the farmers in east Tennessee felt certain that their operation would still be around in the future. Edward recognized that conditions are going to be tough, but his son will be able to keep the farm going.

Edward: I mean, we're going to be here... I'm not going to say we're all, you know, we're all not going to be as happy but we're all going to be here. Mainly because this is what I do... You'll meet our son here in a minute and you'll see what I'm talking about. This is what he does and I mean this is why we do what we do. It's... Hell, it's bred and born into him. I mean, we are genetically focused on making things happen. Excuses aren't part of the game. Excuses don't get anything done. Work gets it done. Makes it happen. It may not be always the right thing but you're going to do whatever it takes to make it work. But we[re] going to be here ain't we honey?

Beth: With the good Lord's will and we get the rain.

Edward and Beth spoke of their dedication to farming as a religious and physiological essence of themselves. Edward and his son deeply embrace the farming identity and see it as their means of being able to overcome challenges. They hope to preserve a valued occupational identity that they perceive as morally good and worthy of maintaining despite a myriad of financial barriers.

Overall, the challenges that these farmers face appear to be due to the growing and increasingly globalized agricultural economy. As the capital requirements of agriculture continue to increase, the operators' means of maintaining the farm become increasingly tenuous. Their traditional methods of being profitable-- through the "doing" of labor-- are becoming increasingly obsolete, and the continuation of the farm increasingly depends on the task of successfully marketing the products of their labor. As I explained in the previous chapter, these

farmers are socialized into and develop an identity around an occupation that has traditionally placed high value on self-reliance, performing manual labor, and preserving family legacies. However, as the demands of their occupation shifts, their attachments to family legacies appear to be slowing their adaptation to the evolving agricultural economy. Again, we see that the larger operators-- those capable of implementing the newest technologies, production methods, and marketing strategies-- are advantaged by this globalized economy. The smaller operators are forced to navigate these challenges in hopes that their farm survives.

My analysis explores how family farm operators in today's agricultural economy face numerous challenges to maintaining their existence. Throughout their lives and careers, difficulties emerged at different times and in various forms. They perceive these challenges as threats not only to their occupation and family livelihoods, but to their identities as farmers. They seek to sustain farming as a moral identity: a "good" farmer is a good person who holds ethical, familial, and personal values that have been inculcated in them and passed down along family lines. In response to these challenges, farmers have developed tactics and forms of identity work to counteract these threats. By doing so, farm operators aim to preserve their farms and identities as well as the family histories embedded within them.

## CHAPTER 6

### CONCLUSION

My analysis shows how farming, as an occupation, is a moral career. Farming is an identity that informs how farm operators view themselves, the decisions they must make, and work they do (Goffman [1963] 1986; Stryker 1968). People's family histories, in particular, provided a basis for their farming identity. In their interviews with me, the farm operators shared their knowledge of their farm's history. Their stories held a common thread: operations and operators of the past informed and influenced how they run their farms today. The farm operators also marked their place in the farming legacy and their contributions to its history.

My analysis suggests that the family farm operator is a unique and complex identity. Although farmers share common understandings of what it means to be a farmer and to work like one, their individual family histories inform and shape their identities as farm operators (i.e., no two are exactly alike). When farmers uphold family traditions, they are doing identity work (Schwalbe and Mason-Schrock 1996). To fully understand their reasons for continuing the family farm, researchers must plumb those family histories in order to understand the range of meanings farmers attach to their farming identity. For example, Greg and his family saw hog production as part of the family farm legacy. After stating the farm no longer produced hogs, Greg commented that his father had raised hogs for 41 years. Greg no longer felt he had the means to fulfill the farming identity the same way his father had in the past, which triggered feelings of sadness.

The farmers of Iowa and Tennessee related that farming is an occupation in which their future is never guaranteed. Their position as principal operator entails facing numerous challenges and considering a multitude of variables when deciding their best course of action. In

response to these challenges, they reevaluated how they thought about and approach the occupation of farming. Overall, these farmers felt they hold a disadvantaged position in the agricultural economy. With little to no control over the prices they must pay or receive for the commodities they produce, the farmers expressed feelings of helplessness and having no choice other than to play the hand they are dealt or fold.

Participants expressed their concern over the complex nature of commodity marketing and the prominent role it now plays in maintaining the family farm -- a change from their original understanding of the farming occupation that centers on doing physical labor. In addition to financial barriers, these farmers confronted ethical concerns over their identity as good farmers. The farmers claimed that government organizations create and enforce misinformed policies that hurt their operations and their image as stewards of the land. Although these farmers felt these financial and ethical challenges threatened their operations, the more salient threat may be to their identity as competent farm operators. If they were to fail and the farm goes bankrupt, the farmers are confronted with damaged identities that are inconsistent with their notions of what a good farmer ought to be. In response to these threats, the farmers implemented strategies that helped them to maintain the family farms. As could be expected, the larger operators had more means of sustaining themselves than the smaller. Overall, the farmers often implemented self-exploitative practices as a means of their farm's survival, which are indicative of the high input/high output trend in agriculture. In some cases, farmers reframed situations to shift blame away from themselves to protect and reinforce a highly valued depiction of farmers as stewards of the land. Farmers not only ensured the continuation of their family farm businesses--they engaged in identity work that reproduced their farming identity (Schwalbe and Mason-Schrock 1996).

As I explained in Chapter 5, all of the farmers I interviewed discontinued the production of commodities that were once viable streams of farm revenue and important means of reproducing their farming identity. As the agricultural economy becomes increasingly complex and globalized, small family farmers expect to be forced out of additional forms of agricultural production by larger farms and agribusinesses. The farm operators of Iowa and Tennessee foresee a future in which family farms will increasingly become a relic of the past. Despite these feelings, they still see a need for family-centered agriculture. They believed that family farmers take more pride in their work and care more for the well-being of the land and animals compared to large-scale operations. Their values of pride and stewardship are integral aspects of their farming identities and perhaps their reasons for persisting in an agricultural economy that disadvantages them.

This research also contributes to the idea of nostalgia as informing the farming identity. Beck (1990) proposes the concept of nostalgia as individual or group histories that are charged with emotional meanings and used in informing our sense of self. The farmers I interviewed used their family legacies and life experiences on the farm to inform their sense of who they are and what a farmer ought to be. Beck observed that we collect objects in order to preserve our pasts and “we tend to be especially concerned with having a past when our current identity has been challenged” (Beck 1990: 669). Farmers collect and maintain family farms as social objects of their past (Beck 1990; Blumer 1962). By attaching meaningful family traditions and symbolically linking family members to the farm, operators view the farm as a place where their efforts honor the family legacy. In doing so, farmers are engaging in identity work that reproduces a farming identity imbued with meaningful history. As previously discussed, farmers feel that the various challenges they face threaten the future of their farms and disparage their

identity as farmers. As small farmers continue to be forced out of various forms of agricultural production, they are losing these emotional connections to the past.

The family farm merits further research to explore the meanings and contradictions of the farming identity. Although the farming identity is adapted to each family and depends on farmers' labor, the evolution of agricultural production will necessitate changes in family farms. Farm operators will eventually incorporate the challenges and obstacles they face into their farming identity as it becomes part of the farm history and reformulate what it means to be a farmer. As discussed in Chapter 5, future research should explore the contradiction of domestic farm operators condemning imported products. Commodities produced in the U.S. are sold to other nations and thus affect local commodities prices and the profitability of foreign operations. In addition to further research on small family farms, qualitative researchers should also consider evaluating the perspective of large family farm operators, owners, and agribusinesses. This potential research could explore how the farming identities that large family farmers hold compare to their smaller counterparts and how they perceive their influence on the agricultural economy.

A farmer from Iowa shared his insight on the future of agriculture by stating, "There is always going to be the need for agriculture because we haven't figured out how to live without eating. You agree?" Indeed, the work that the farmers in Iowa and Tennessee do make life possible for a society that is becoming increasingly removed from agriculture. Family farms do not necessarily persist based on the financial opportunities they foresee, but on their devotion to family traditions and their identity as farmers. It is unclear how their understandings and efforts to reproduce this identity will manifest in the future, but it is likely that it will be increasingly

difficult. In the meantime, family farm operators will continue to make their way in an agricultural economy in which the windows of opportunity appear to be slowly closing.

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## APPENDICES

### APPENDIX A

#### Interview Guide

1. How long have you been farming? How long have you been the principal operator of the farm?
2. How did you get into farming? Did your family farm? When did you (or your family) get this farm?
3. How many acres do you farm? What do you raise? About how much of each of these products (acreage; number of animals; etc.)?
4. Have you always produced these commodities?
5. Are you employed off the farm as well? Are any other members of the household employed off the farm? What do you or your family members do?
6. Would you say the majority of your household income comes from farming or off the farm?
7. If I asked you “What do you do?” what’s the first thing that comes to mind?
8. What does it mean to you personally to be a farmer?
9. What do you feel is the biggest challenge to operating a farm such as yours?
10. Tell me about the contributions that other members of your household make to the farm.
11. Would you say that the farm supports itself?
12. What plans do you have for your operation in the future? Where do you see your operation heading?
13. With the exception of veterinary services, do you hire any additional labor or services?
14. What are some of the “perks” of living or growing up on a farm? Other than income, does your farm provide any other benefits for your family or your local community?



15. Given the unpredictability of farming from year to year, how far ahead do you plan?
16. Are there any strategies or activities that you or your neighbors use that help reduce some of the costs of the farm?
17. Compared to other farms (bigger or smaller), what are some of the advantages of operating a farm such as yours?
18. Say you've had a "bad year" with low crop prices or low production, what are some of the ways that you manage to keep the farm functioning?
19. Is there a situation where you would consider getting out of farming?
20. With regard to navigating the crop and livestock market, how did you learn the farm business? Did you ever receive any formal education or take any classes in business?
21. Do you always sell your products in the same market? What kind of options do you have as far as selling your farm commodities?
22. Are there any businesses or organizations that make it easier for people to operate a farm at this time? Are there any businesses or organizations that make it harder for people to operate a farm?
23. Are there any ethical or moral issues that come with operating a farm?
24. As a farmer, what keeps you going? What do you find most rewarding?
25. Ideally, would you like your family to continue farming after you retire?
26. What do you foresee the future of agriculture to look like? Where do you see your farm fitting into that future?

Are there any other aspects that I may have left out that you feel would be relevant to our conversation?

- Would it be okay if I were to contact you again if I needed to clarify some of our conversation or ask you for your thoughts on another topic?

## APPENDIX B

### Demographic Questionnaire

#### **Identities and Persistence of Family Farm Operators**

Primary Researcher: Parker Arnold

#### Instructions:

This questionnaire is completely voluntary. It is intended to be filled out prior to the interview and will be collected before we proceed. The purpose of it is to create a better aggregate understanding of participants' backgrounds. There are a total of 8 questions.

You may skip ANY questions you do not wish to answer.

For questions 1 and 8, please write in your response.

For questions 2 – 7, please circle the dot beside the answer choice that best represents you.

#### A. Standard Demographics

##### 1. YEAR OF BIRTH:

- \_\_\_\_\_

##### 2. GENDER:

- Male
- Female
- Other: \_\_\_\_\_

##### 3. HISPANIC/LATIN HERITAGE

- **Yes**, I am of Hispanic / Latino descent
- **No**, I am not of Hispanic / Latino descent

##### 4. RACE:

- Caucasian / White
- African Ancestry / Black
- Asian / Pacific Islander
- Middle Eastern
- Native American / American Indian
- Multiracial / 2 or more races
- Other: \_\_\_\_\_

5. HIGHESTLEVELOF EDUCATION

- Some High School or Less
- High School or G.E.D.
- Technical School
- Some College
- Associate's Degree
- Bachelor's Degree
- Post-Graduate Work
- Master's Degree
- Doctoral Degree
- Professional Degree
- Other (Explain): \_\_\_\_\_

6. What is your marital status?

- Single
- Married
- Divorced
- Domestic Partnership

7. HOUSEHOLD INCOME RANGES

- \$24,999 or Less
- \$25,000 to \$49,999
- \$50,000 to \$74,999
- \$75,000 to \$99,999
- \$100,000 to \$124,999
- Over \$125,000

8. How many people are included in your household? (please write in a number)

- \_\_\_\_\_

VITA

PARKER THEODORE ARNOLD

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M.A. Sociology, East Tennessee State University  
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