

Excerpts from "A Special and Terrible Irony: Hunger on Iowa's Farms during the Agricultural Crisis of the 1980s," 2019

A Special and Terrible Irony: Hunger on Iowa's Farms during the Agricultural Crisis of the 1980s
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ON APRIL 16, 1986, a tiny news item titled "Farm Families Receive Food" appeared in the Kingsley News-Times. It was buried on page five, just to the right of and above another news item titled "Area Suicides Prompt Outreach Programs." The article began by stating that 78 Plymouth County farm families had received food distributed by Mid-Sioux Opportunity of Remsen, Le Mars, and Akron during the month of March. The families, the article noted, received pork loins, ground pork, chili, rice, honey, cheese, and potatoes from the Western Iowa Farm Crisis Network. The directors of the Mid-Sioux network made decisions about who would receive the food. The article concluded, "Any farm family in need of food should contact their nearest Mid-Sioux office."

Although it was a tiny article, its import was large. The agricultural economy was in crisis, and people who supported themselves by growing food were, paradoxically, hungry. People who were surrounded by rich land and owned enormously expensive agricultural tools were unable to feed themselves. Adequately addressing the problem of hunger in rural Iowa would require many different elements to fall into place. The state limped by with a combination of activism and the use of local, state and federal measures to ameliorate hunger. It was a piecemeal approach that relied on voluntarism and the willingness of suffering people to ask for help. As a result, many of those who needed that help may not have gotten it, due to a combination of pride and shame. The state's response to hunger in the Farm Crisis was, at best, a partial success.

The agricultural economy of the 1970s had paved the way for the next decade's problems. During the 1970s, despite rising costs for inputs such as fuel, farmers had seen rising incomes. The price of soybeans, for example, was the highest it had ever been before or since. Foreign markets for American agricultural goods boomed, and the United States began selling large amounts of grain to the Soviet Union. As a result of rising prices, agricultural land increased in value as well. For farm families, this was a pleasant change of fortune. Throughout Iowa's history, to be a farmer had been to be poor or, at best, land rich and cash poor. The grain sales and soaring land values of the 1970s offered farm families new possibilities. The average acre of Iowa land had been worth \$419 in 1970; by 1979, it was worth a whopping \$1,958. Farmers could, and many did, borrow against the value of their land in order to buy more land and update their equipment. They could send their children to college and expand their operations so those same children would have a place when they returned to the family farm. For some, these conditions presented an opportunity to join the American middle class: build a new home, buy a new car, and enjoy a bit of the good life. Many Iowa farmers, particularly those who were young and college educated, looked to the future with hope, and made investments.

Then, in the late 1970s, things began to fall apart. After the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan, President Jimmy Carter decided to punish the Soviets by imposing a grain embargo. That was a hard blow, but other government actions were even more damaging. Federal Reserve Chair Paul Volcker sought to tame inflation by raising interest rates to staggering heights. The move did dramatically reduce inflation, but it also posed nearly insurmountable problems for farmers who had taken out large loans for improvements or who relied on loans for day-to-day operations. As the farm economy slid into the doldrums, the bottom dropped out of land prices. The price per acre of Iowa farmland fell by more than 70 percent in the first half of the 1980s. Many farm families held high-interest loans that far exceeded the value of their acres, making them vulnerable to forced sales.

Over the course of the decade, the number of farms in Iowa would fall by roughly 25 percent. The ripples would spread from farms to towns, and the residents of those towns would suffer unemployment, business losses, school consolidations, and population loss. Times were undeniably hard. Many stories could be told about Iowa during the Farm Crisis, but the story about Iowa's farmers and food insecurity, the subject of this article, is an unexpected one.

THE CRISIS forced farm families to reevaluate their spending. By the early to mid-1980s, many were reducing their purchases, scrambling to keep their budgets in line. A survey taken by the Iowa Cooperative Extension Service in the spring of 1985 showed just how deeply the Farm Crisis was cutting into the cash flow of farmers. While only 10 percent of responding farmers had been unable to pay their property taxes, more than 70 percent had postponed major farm purchases. When it came to purchases associated with family living, the reductions were also significant. More than 70 percent had cut back on entertainment and social activities, and 65 percent had postponed major household purchases. Nearly 60 percent had dipped into their savings to meet day-to-day expenses, and 56 percent had changed their food shopping or eating habits in an attempt to save money. Families were struggling to maintain some types of spending, however. They were far less likely to have cashed in their insurance, postponed medical care, or let their life insurance lapse. Choices were being made, and families were still hoping to sacrifice in the short term in favor of longer-term goals. Not surprisingly, the same poll found that stress levels among farmers had grown over the previous three years: 71 percent indicated that their stress levels had increased; 32 percent said that they had not just increased, but increased significantly.

Hard times also meant hungry times. Understandably, people in small towns, reliant on the farm economy for their sustenance, found it hard to put food on their tables. But hunger also extended onto Iowa's farms. These were not the farms of the early twentieth century, when a primary goal of farm families was to feed themselves in addition to producing for the market. At that time Iowa's farms still produced a broad range of crops on an annual basis, ranging from the standard corn and hogs to apples, potatoes, turkeys, watermelons, and honey. A farm woman's work during that era centered on raising and preserving food, and farm life was organized around putting food on the table. During the Great Depression, Iowa's farm women had exerted extraordinary effort, and their home production had fed their families and provided a significant source of barter to meet other expenses. In the 1980s that was not the case. Farm families now produced primarily, if not entirely, for the market. That is not to say that Iowa's farm families completely avoided home production of food. Some still slaughtered pigs and chickens, hunted, and raised large gardens, but most no longer provided the majority of their food for themselves.

There was something shocking about the idea of Iowa's farm people going hungry. At a fundamental level, it was something that people believed could not, and should not, happen in America's agricultural heartland. Farmers were supposed to grow food, not lack food. They were supposed to be independent, resilient, and self-sufficient, or at least that is what the mythology surrounding agriculture proclaimed. A 1985 report on hunger in the United States commented on this strange reality: "One cannot help but appreciate the special irony of hunger in America's breadbasket. The prolific crops which spring from the fertile land produce hundreds of thousands of tons of grains and other food products. . . . Yet American citizens living within a short distance of this productive system are hungry." Some reactions to the thought of hunger in the countryside were even more vehement. Ginny Spielberg, an aide to Senator Tom Harkin, expressed her outrage: "People are going hungry in Iowa. In a state with some of the richest soil in the entire world, it is tragic/disgusting/horrifying/unbelievable that many farmers cannot get enough food for themselves and their families."

On the other hand, there were those who rejected and were, seemingly, offended by the idea that Iowa's farmers could be suffering from food insecurity. In the early 1980s, Paul Lasley, who taught rural sociology at Iowa State University in addition to working for Iowa's Cooperative Extension Service, presented to the Iowa Institute of Cooperatives findings about economic decline in rural communities and the need to be prepared to respond to hungry people. He told his audience that the time had come to think about food pantries and other emergency measures to combat hunger in the countryside. The response to his presentation ranged from cool to downright hostile. At the end of his talk, Lasley remembered, "Two people in the audience came up to me and one started thumping me on the chest with his pointed finger, saying, 'We're going to have your goddamned job over this.'"

Not everyone wanted to hear about hard times in the countryside and what they might mean for Iowa in the 1980s. Hunger on farms happened in other places, like the Mississippi Delta or Appalachia. Hunger was not supposed to happen on farms growing corn and raising hogs on some of the best soil in the country.

A poem written in the wake of the suicide of 56-year-old Iowa farmer Kenneth Meisgeier reflected the terrible irony surrounding farmers and food in the 1980s

I didn't know they had no cash in their billfold or pocket with which to buy groceries.

I didn't know their gasoline and fuel tanks were empty because of the required cash to fill them.

I didn't know that their chores consisted of feeding spoiled frozen corn to starving livestock because they had no credit to buy feed.

I didn't know they exchanged our Christmas present for cash and tearfully, regretfully, bought groceries.

I didn't know all this because you didn't want us to know.

The system led you to believe you were a failure. . . .

Hasn't the system failed you, the proud American farmer?

The family lacked the wherewithal to feed themselves or their animals or to buy fuel for the tractor. Meisgeier and his family were facing hunger and, with it, shame.

It is perhaps unsurprising that a suicide crisis accompanied the Farm Crisis. The shame of being unable to feed one's family, or to hold onto the family farm, could be devastating. At least 281 Iowa farmers killed themselves from 1981 through 1985. The state's Department of Human Services, as well as other social service agencies, was caught unaware by situations such as that facing the Meisgeier family. As Patrick McClintock, an administrator for Legal Services Corporation of Iowa commented about the food situation, "Never in our wildest dreams did we think that we would have to deal with the problems of farmers." As such, Iowa's government and its people were in a state of reaction rather than preparedness.