

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

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."¹

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.³

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.⁴ 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.⁵

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.⁶ 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.⁷ 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.⁸ 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 bread-basket. 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."⁹

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.¹¹ 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

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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 1985.¹³ 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."¹⁴ As such, Iowa's government and its people were in a state of reaction rather than preparedness.

WITH ECONOMIC STRESS affecting the food purchases of more than half of the state's farmers, something was going to have to give. As early as 1984, people in the state's agricultural extension service were beginning to think about ways to bridge the gap between income and needs. Extension home economists suggested creating emergency food pantries as a partial solution. A 1984 pamphlet from Extension's Take Charge in Changing Times series laid out the process, step by step. A food pantry could be a simple cupboard in a church basement or a clearing-house for information on federal and state programs as well as food. Extension emphasized the importance of building a volunteer base and establishing reliable sources of food within the community. "By involving as many community members and groups as possible," the pamphlet suggested, "you can ensure regular food contributions as well as a continuous source of volunteer help." It encouraged involving as many community organizations as possible in the publicity network: "A food pantry is worthless if the people who need it don't know about it."

In the early years of the Farm Crisis, a number of individuals and communities got into the business of distributing food to the needy. Loaves and Fishes of Story City, Iowa, was one such venture. In May 1985 Story City saw one of its banks close, yet another casualty of the Farm Crisis. A church project to provide food baskets to needy families blossomed into multichurch sponsorship of a food pantry to serve Story City, Roland, and Gilbert. In spite of church sponsorship, the founders located the pantry at the Lakes Machinery building in Story City rather than at a church so anyone in need would feel comfortable coming to the site.¹⁶ It was but one of many food pantry projects inspired by the tribulations of the 1980s. Another was in tiny Ledyard, Iowa. Reverend Victor Vriesen wrote to President Ronald Reagan about the food pantry he was developing in his community, and to plead for assistance. "Please help us. I never thought I would see the day when we would have to begin a food shelf for farmers. Our local food shelf opens next week and we're asking re-tired people who haven't gone down financially with their children to contribute to it. No one else can." A combination of practicality and humanitarian concern formed the foundation of Food for Life, another food charity with roots in the Farm Crisis. Paul Ehmcke, an O'Brien County pork producer, founded the program in 1981. One of his hogs had a separated shoulder, making it unfit for commercial slaughter, and he had already slaughtered his family's meat for the year. The animal needed to be processed quickly, and Ehmcke wanted to avoid waste. He offered the hog to a local minister who ran an after-school nutrition program for children. Out of that idea,

Food for Life was born. Farmers contributed animals, and donations collected by churches paid the costs of processing the meat in state-inspected facilities. Local committees, working through community groups, determined eligibility guidelines. A number of communities adopted the idea, and the results were significant. In Pocahontas County, for example, Food for Life distributed more than 4,000 pounds of meat to 572 families in 1985.¹⁸ It was a solution to hunger unique to farm country, one that continued into the twenty-first century.

Sometimes food charity arrived unexpectedly. In April 1986 a truckload of potatoes appeared at the Cargill elevator's parking lot in Fonda, free for the taking. As the local paper noted, "This is a Farm Crisis program and anyone who needs potatoes can get them." The paper offered no explanation for the origins of the gift and imposed no eligibility requirements. At other times, local organizations scrambled to take advantage of circumstances. In December 1986 a driver for the SuperValu grocery store in Mapleton missed a curve in the fog and early morning dark and rolled his truck into a ditch, "strewing groceries as it went." Volunteers scurried into action, picking up \$5,000 of salvageable food. Some of the food went to emergency pantries in northwestern Iowa; other items found their way to a Farm Crisis meeting in Moville. West Central Development in Mapleton also claimed some of the food for use in Christmas boxes for the needy. SuperValu, a company that already supported many Iowa food pantries, wrote off the truck and its contents. Monsignor A. W. Behrens, pastor of St. Mary's Church in Mapleton, extended warm thanks to area residents who helped with the salvage effort and offered reimbursement for the labor of all who volunteered for food recovery and distribution. Inter-Church Agency for Peace and Justice and the Iowa Inter-Church Forum sponsored the Iowa Rural Crisis Fund.²⁰ Contributions to this fund went directly to services and supplies for rural families. The fund financed the Farmer Health Project, which provided partial coverage for dental, eye, physical, and mental health care. It also provided money to rural food pantries to help them stock their shelves and provide grocery store vouchers to their clients. It also provided cash to a program called Neighbor Helping Neighbor. Iowans in need could receive financial help through their local United Methodist church pastor, who had funds to help pay for utility bills, food, medical care, clothing, and housing, regardless of the denominational affiliation of the needy person.

Some of the money for these efforts came from the proceeds of the FarmAid concerts that began mid-decade. Led by country singer Willie Nelson, musicians came together to perform benefit concerts for beleaguered farmers. The 1985 concert raised \$900,000, with \$100,000 distributed for hunger relief. The Iowa Rural Crisis Fund received \$10,000, which it distributed to 33 food pantries throughout the state.

PRIVATE ORGANIZATIONS were not the only source of food aid in the 1980s, and they could not fill every need. Most pantry programs could only be accessed, at most, once a month or in case of emergency. That was not enough. By the middle of the decade, social services were beginning to feel the impact of hungry farm families. Many families took advantage of commodity distribution or the distribution of surplus foodstuffs by

From the federal government. Since the Great Depression, commodity distribution had been a part of food aid in the United States. Managed by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA), that food aid was designed primarily to relieve agricultural producers of unwanted surpluses rather than to feed the hungry. When first adopted, the USDA's goal was to drive down surpluses and drive up income for farmers. Feeding the hungry was merely a side benefit. Whatever was in excess might find its way into commodity distribution. During the Great Depression, that might have been prunes, oranges, lard, beans, or any number of agricultural products grown on U.S. farms. Political scientist Ardith Maney described USDA commodity distribution as an eclectic program whereby food found its way through many different channels into the hands and stomachs of the nation's poor people. Some of the commodities went to school lunch programs, some went to food programs for the elderly, such as congregate meals and Meals on Wheels, and some went to food pantries and soup kitchens.²³

In the 1980s a small range of surplus foods made up the commodity distribution program. One of the most common was what came to be known as "government cheese." Enormous blocks of cheddar cheese were, quite literally, carved up and given to agencies and organizations for distribution.²⁴ Families came to rely on it as a cheap form of protein. Edith Hunter's family struggled through the 1980s in central Iowa, her father a casualty of the unemployment wracking rural communities. One of her most persistent memories of the decade involved government cheese: "We weren't the only ones buying clothes at Goodwill or standing in line for—you saw everybody you knew standing in line waiting for commodities. You'd go to the fairgrounds and stand in line and get your commodities." In spite of the big garden and the chickens in her family's yard, the commodity program was a lifesaver. Life-saving though the cheese was, accepting it could be a difficult act. A farm woman wrote to Iowa Governor Terry Branstad, "It is humiliating after almost 24 years of marriage to accept charity after being able to depend on a living from the income from our land and livestock. We are clear out of raising livestock. I go stand in the free cheese line every month." At times, the USDA could not provide the distribution infrastructure for commodities and threatened to cut off the supply. The state faced the prospect of losing needed cheese, rice, honey, dry milk, cornmeal, and flour. Pressure from members of Congress and state agencies, combined with an extensive network of volunteers, meant that in 1983 and 1984 over \$33 million in surplus food flowed into Iowa. The state made use of an army of volunteers, 4,600 strong, for all stages of the distribution program. Carlos Palmer, deputy commissioner of Iowa's Department of Human Services, commented, "I don't claim the food distribution program has kept anyone from starving . . . but it does help thousands of Iowans to stretch their budgets and eat a little better than they could otherwise afford to.

As ubiquitous as government cheese was, other programs provided a more comprehensive range of foods. Some families with infants and small children turned to Women, Infants, and Children, or WIC, to provide a portion of their food needs. Created in the early 1970s under the auspices of the USDA, WIC is a food program specifically for low-income pregnant and nursing women and their young children. Children remain eligible until age 5. In the 1980s WIC benefits could be used to purchase the basics of small children's diets: dairy products, peanut butter, orange juice, and low-sugar cereals, such as Cheerios and Rice Krispies.

For young families, this type of food aid could mean the difference between having and not having. When the Farm Crisis hit, Leah Tookey was a young farm woman living on a rented farm in western Iowa. In the early 1980s she became mother to three children. She and her husband were also struggling with an operating loan carrying 23 percent interest. Paying for both the groceries and the loan was too much. Because of their young children, the family qualified for WIC payments, which could be used for various foods for the children—and for Tookey, who breastfed her babies. WIC became an important source of foods such as orange juice, cereal, and milk, which the family otherwise would not have been able to afford. As Tookey remembered it, “I wanted the WIC checks for the things I couldn’t afford to buy otherwise. Orange juice was the big thing. Orange juice was very expensive. And so we could have orange juice, and cereal. Cereal was something I never bought. I just never could afford it. . . . And I was always nursing, so I think I got WIC checks for myself. . . . [My husband] was very proud about that kind of thing. But I just thought that was not something that we would have otherwise. I felt like that justified it, I guess.”²⁸ The need to provide for their children pushed mothers to ask for aid that they would not have accepted in better days.

The most comprehensive of food aid measures was the food stamp program managed by the USDA. It began as an experiment in the late 1930s and grew in importance through the middle years of the 1980s. Most Americans thought of it as a program to benefit the urban poor. The first news stories about farmers qualifying for food stamps began appearing in newspapers in 1980, when an astonished writer for the Des Moines Register reported on the phenomenon. Dave Gergen, who farmed near Orange City, had seen his net worth fall from around \$120,000 to just over \$18,000 due to “disastrous” cattle and hog prices. As he commented, “It doesn’t make sense. . . . I’m getting food stamps and I’ve got all that livestock out there.” He was one of 14 farmers in Sioux County who had qualified for food stamps that year, and it hurt. Said Gergen, “I’m losing everything else; now I’m losing my pride.”²⁹ Gergen might have felt alone in his predicament, but the number of farmers qualifying for food stamps would multiply rapidly in the first half of the decade.

Between 1984 and 1985 the number of Iowa farm families receiving food stamps grew from 493 to 1,557. Those 1,557 families represented approximately 4,000 individuals in need of food assistance. The Sindt family of Everly, Iowa, was one of those receiving aid. Norman Sindt, the father, reacted to his predicament with anger and sorrow, commenting that farmers “didn’t want to go out of the house, things are so bleak.” The Sindts had lost more than \$40,000 in the previous three years and were doing everything they could to make their money stretch, which included growing a garden full of potatoes, sweet corn, onions, beans, cauliflower, lettuce, tomatoes, cabbage, and squash. They bought generic brands and day-old bread and chopped wood to keep themselves warm. Beyond the vegetables, however, nothing else they raised could be eaten, since it had to be sold in order to pay lenders.

As Linda Sindt commented, "Nothing on this farm goes back into this house at all." The situation forced them to apply for food stamps, although the process was long, arduous, and full of frustrations.³⁰

In 1985 the Iowa Bureau of Economic Assistance prepared a guide for farm families applying for food stamps. The formula was deceptively simple: gross annual farm income, minus the cost of producing the income, plus capital gains, plus depreciation, divided by 12 yielded the monthly income used to determine eligibility. But it took more than three pages of explanation to define what farm income was, what costs were allowable, and what allowable and disallowed resources the family owned. And because family circumstances could change radically from month to month and year to year, a family could change from ineligible to eligible quickly.³¹ The Sindts persisted and eventually received aid, but Norman Sindt commented of the process, "I know two or three other farmers who have just thrown up their hands and said to heck with it."³²

THE SINDT FAMILY'S STORY appeared on the front page of the Des Moines Register as part of an August 1985 article titled "Food Stamps Becoming Part of Iowa Farm Life." The article set off a three-week-long avalanche of comments illustrating how deeply felt the emotions surrounding the issue were. One of the first letters came from Karen Peters, a resident of rural Clear Lake. Her response was a strong endorsement of farmers doing whatever they needed to do in order to survive. She commented, "Farmers are very independent and most refuse to admit to trouble they can't work their way out of unless it has really become unbearable. Many have gone without medical help, dropped insurance, cashed in life-insurance policies. . . . I'm glad to know the Department of Human Services is responding to this need of recognizing a rural crisis here in Iowa. Now if we can just get through to President Reagan."³³

Others, however, were not so understanding. Susan Erickson, a Des Moines resident, wrote that she "truly sympathize[d] with farm families who earn so little money that they must apply to food stamps," but she qualified her sympathy with a long statement about what farmers should be able to do for themselves. "It seems to me that a farmer should be able to grow just about all the food that his or her family would need. A large garden, a milk cow, a few pigs and a couple head of cattle (which could feed on last year's corn) should supply most of the food an average family would need in a year. A large dose of self-sufficiency would solve a lot of our problems in today's world." Wynn Phipps, who had farmed with her husband near Pleasantville, declined to express any sympathy at all. She and her husband had ridden out the hard times of the 1930s, when they had a farm and three children as well as "dry weather, grasshoppers and chinch bugs that took our crops." They had suffered through the economic stringencies imposed by hogs sold at two dollars per hundredweight and corn sold at 8 to 20 cents per bushel. Phipps commented, "How did we manage? We milked cows, and always had cream, milk and butter. We had hogs for meat that we fed corn to. Also, chickens for eggs. We would butcher a fat calf and I would can the meat. . . . Food stamps? Pah! You should have lived from 1929 to 1938."³⁴

Erickson and Phipps had apparently failed to notice the time and effort the Sindts put into self-sufficiency and the restrictions

restrictions imposed by lenders could not be ignored. Livestock were routinely mortgaged, and payments to farmers often came in the form of checks made out to both the farmer and the farmer's lender. The loan requirements facing farmers were a significant stumbling block to self-sufficiency

If Phipps was asserting that all Iowa farm families had made it through the 1930s without needing food aid, she was wrong. Although the problems in that decade had been somewhat different, Iowa's farm families had faced hunger then, too. The state's farmers had suffered from catastrophically low prices for corn and hogs, and then two major droughts struck, one in 1934 and another in 1936. Grasshopper plagues rounded out the tale of woe. It was hard to keep a family fed when field crops and gardens were first baked, then eaten by insects. Many of Iowa's poorest farm families turned to the Farm Security Administration (FSA), which focused in particular on low-income and tenant farming families and provided what were called rehabilitation loans, which could be used for family living expenses, such as food.³⁶ Additionally, farmers made use of federal work programs such as the Civil Works Administration and the Works Progress Administration, which provided a plethora of minimum-wage jobs. The level of poverty facing Iowa's farm families had surprised even seasoned Extension personnel. Louise Rosenfeld, who worked in the 1930s for both Iowa's Extension Service and the FSA, recalled the conditions she saw on farms: "Whatever the drought didn't take, the grasshoppers did. I never thought I'd ever see that a farm family wouldn't have food. It never occurred to me that that could happen. . . . But there were people that if there hadn't been rehabilitation grants they would have had no food. It just wasn't there."³⁷ The 1930s drought years, in particular, robbed many families of their ability to be self-sufficient. Farmers in that era did not turn to food stamps but instead to work relief programs and the FSA. The letters flooded in over the next week, criticizing both Erickson and Phipps, under the banner "Farmers Tired of Hearing about the Bad Old Days." The theme of the letters was not that the hunger of the 1980s bore no resemblance to that of the 1930s, but that farming had changed, and farmers in the 1980s faced a new set of challenges. The writers "knew very well about the dry weather, grasshoppers and low prices of the 1930s." What was different was the incredible cost of running an agricultural business in the 1980s. The farmers of the 1980s faced far more expenses, in the form of "repairs and maintenance, seed, fertilizer, fuel, rent, insurance, veterinary and medicine, equipment, conservation, supplies, etc." This was also a new world, where young farmers were having to do more than farm to survive. As one commenter wrote, "After being taught for generations that a successful farmer has his wife working by his side, many of our busy, young farmers' wives (and also even our farmers) have had to take on extra jobs to survive. Drive out into the country sometime, and see all the empty cattle-yards that have turned to weeds because of sick farm prices." One writer addressed the tug-of-war between these jobs and the ideal of self-sufficiency: "Many farmers, as well as many town dwellers, have gardens, of course. Many farmers and their spouses also have full- or part-time non-farm jobs along with their farming operation. This leaves precious little time for the weeding, watering, and later, food preservation, necessary to maintain a garden." A farm wife from Boyden commented, "Do those who recommend farmers raise a few chickens, a milk cow, and a hog or two realize these creatures need care every day?" A letter that came in a week later from a farm woman from Inwood took issue with the idea that farm families should accept a lower standard of living than urban Iowans in order to survive: "It seems the farmer's problems started when he wanted electricity, indoor plumbing, and all the other things our town and city friends took for granted.

Even when farm families needed aid and understood that they were doing all they could to keep afloat, taking the next step to apply for food aid was a difficult one. Accepting help in the form of food stamps or other food programs such as WIC was fraught with feelings of shame. It violated many people's most fundamental beliefs about who they were and what they should be able to do for themselves. Sister Margaret Mary O'Gorman, who worked with Catholic Rural Life, commented, "In most cases it is only when farm families are desperate that they will turn to food stamps. For anyone this can be a humiliating experience, but for someone who is newly poor, it is even more difficult." Historian Mark Friedberger, in his analysis of farmers' responses to the Farm Crisis, termed this a desire "to be independent even in adversity." Acknowledging the stigma of asking for aid, he believed that a tiny fraction of the total number of farmers who might have qualified for food stamps actually applied.⁴⁰

When it came to the shame associated with poverty, circumstances had remained unchanged since the 1930s. During the Great Depression, many families had suffered almost to the point of starvation because of the deep shame associated with admitting their poverty and asking for help.⁴¹ Their children and grand-children, facing yet another agricultural depression 50 years later, suffered from the same shame. One farm woman commented that, in spite of four years of hard times, she and her husband could not bring themselves to apply for aid: "The pride that he holds and that I share have kept us from signing up for the food stamp program."⁴²

That pride could even cause farm couples to weigh forms of aid against each other and to decide that while some kinds of aid were acceptable, others were not. Leah Tookey was willing to accept the temporary aid of WIC for her children's sake, but she was not willing to accept food stamps, even when social service providers encouraged her to apply. Taking food stamps represented a step too far, even though the family was in the process of losing the farm and her husband would soon be earning just three dollars per hour pumping gas.⁴³ In some cases, husbands refused to allow their wives to apply for food stamps or other government programs, so the women were left to frequent food pantries without their husbands' knowledge. A letter exchanged between farm women addressed the complexities of the issue of poverty and food insecurity on the farm and the role that food stamps played in many farm families' lives. A conversation in the grocery store led farm woman Lois (no last name provided) to write to her friend and fellow farmer Denise O'Brien. Lois wrote, "It was very comforting to hear that other people face many of the same day-to-day struggles that we face—Loren [her husband] & I have a strong tendency [sic] to think that we're the only ones in the whole world who are having such difficult times." Pride and shame kept people from sharing their pain. One of the dirty secrets of difficult times was accepting government aid in the form of food stamps. Lois continued, "I don't know if you could tell by my attitude, but we are also receiving food stamps. I didn't come right out and say it because my mom was with me, and Loren & I decided we didn't want to cause our folks extra worry by telling them. A part of Loren feels ashamed for needing help to feed our family and so he would feel embarrassed if our folks knew." Accepting food aid was, in the case of this couple, something that could not be discussed, even with extended family.

The decision to apply for and accept food stamps set off a whole round of thinking and deliberation. In her letter, Lois made it clear that accepting food stamps was not done without careful thought and deep emotion. She wrote, "Mostly I feel like screaming to the gov't, 'Look, you guys are making us pay for all your mistakes . . . so you can just darn well buy our groceries so we don't starve to death while working our 18–20 hour days!'" She made deliberate choices about what products to purchase with food stamps: "I make the gov't support the dairy industry

by buying all the dairy products we need with food stamps, instead of using our own precious milk for our family.” The decision to use food stamps meant that Lois had more time and energy to devote to income-generating tasks on the family’s dairy farm. She commented, “Actually, I’m very thankful for the food stamps because we need all our money to help pay bills, plus it freed me from having to garden so much this summer and I was able to put my time into calf & cow care and to do all those ‘detail jobs’ that Loren would always just as soon leave to me anyway.”⁴⁶ The difficult choice to accept help came with the added bonus of being able to exchange the time that might have been spent on gardening on more lucrative work on the family dairy farm.

Denise O’Brien, the letter’s recipient, was an Iowa farmer and farm activist who worked extensively with the Iowa Farm Unity Coalition, one of the first protest groups to arise out of the crisis.⁴⁷ Over time, she came to believe that accepting food stamps was an integral part of survival for her own farm and many others. Families facing stubborn farm debts often weighed multiple options while formulating their survival strategies. One approach to relieving the debt burden was for women to take off-farm jobs. In fact, some lenders advised the farmers with whom they worked that their wives needed to find jobs. But, as O’Brien argued, a wife working off the farm did not necessarily solve a family’s money woes. Small businesses across rural Iowa were failing just as large numbers of women began looking for work.⁴⁸ Finding employment often involved driving 40 to 50 miles and then working at minimum wage. As O’Brien commented, “By the time they take out money for gas and child care, there isn’t going to be hardly enough left to buy groceries”; they would be “better off quitting that job and getting food stamps or using the pantries.”⁴⁹ That realization, however, did not make accepting food aid easy or comfortable. In the early days of the Farm Crisis, and the early days of receiving food stamps, O’Brien had done her grocery shopping at midnight, hoping that nobody she knew would see her. While shopping at midnight eventually went by the way-side, the feelings of shame surrounding the need to use food stamps remained. In a 1985 interview, she reflected on the dis-comfort of accepting aid from the government: “I still feel guilty about wearing decent clothes and driving a car, although I had the clothes already and don’t know how else I could get around. . . . Being on food stamps, I feel I ought to be in rags.” Feelings of shame had the potential to keep farm families from getting the help they needed and for which they qualified. Understanding that, farm groups sought to minimize the pain by encouraging joint action.⁵¹ One of the first food stamp drives for farmers happened in Union and Taylor Counties in 1984, just before Christmas. Hundreds of farmers arrived at courthouses in both counties to pick up the 16-page applications. Church bells tolled as farmers wearing black armbands streamed into the courthouse in Creston. Chuck Ryan, a spokesperson for Catholic Rural Life, commented, “We have the start of an agricultural funeral in Iowa.” It was also an opportunity to explain to the gathered press that times had changed: public actions by hungry farm families had to take a different form than they had in the past. As Phil Britten, a local farmer, stated, “We can’t kill our livestock as in the old days because it’s written down on an inventory note for the bank.” The idea spread. In March 1985, at the height of the Farm Crisis, the Iowa Farm Unity Coalition, in cooperation with the Agency for Peace & Justice, Legal Services Corporation of Iowa, and other farm groups, held its first food stamp drive. They held a second one in March 1986. The purpose of the drives was multifaceted. On the one hand, many hungry people in Iowa needed the resources food stamps could provide. On the other hand, many of those hungry people may have been too embarrassed to take advantage of the aid or were unsure how to fill out the long and complicated forms. A food stamp drive, which brought together large numbers of needy people and connected them with trained individuals who could help them with the complicated forms

might provide the encouragement people needed to take care of themselves and their families. The organizers asked everyone, not just the needy, to take part in the drive: "Farmers, clergy, and community leaders are being asked to participate in the March 3rd Food Stamp Drive in order to bring relief and dignity to those who are without adequate resources to meet their own family needs." Maybe if the mayor, the minister, and the president of the Kiwanis Club all applied for food stamps, more people would feel comfortable asking for the help that they needed.

The food stamp drive was an opportunity to "dramatize the plight of Iowa's farmers and rural unemployed," and the situations uncovered by the drives could be dire. An older farm woman participating in the food stamp action in March 1986 admitted to an organizer that she had no money in the bank and no food in her home. Her application had yet to be processed, and she was already destitute of food. The shocking reality of farm family situations such as hers had the potential to bring home to the larger public, if they had failed to notice, the painful realities of the Farm Crisis.

THE IOWA FARM UNITY COALITION was not alone in understanding the potential political punch of hunger in the heart-land. In the face of the food crisis that accompanied the Farm Crisis, Iowa's Democratic Senator Tom Harkin launched a multi-purpose food appeal. Early in 1985 his office announced the Iowans C.A.N. appeal, or Iowans Care About their Neighbors. Senator Harkin and his staff identified a number of food security problems that needed to be addressed. Iowa Department of Human Services staff had identified hunger as a problem in 93 per-cent of the state's counties. People were making more demands on the state's food pantries. Staff at the food banks wanted to help more people, but food was in short supply. Many self-employed people, such as farmers, did not qualify for food stamps, and "many more people fail to even try to receive help because of pride or fear of rejection." Given that situation, Senator Harkin proposed a statewide food drive meant to replenish the food banks throughout the state.⁵⁵

Harkin and his staff were looking for the right way to approach the problem. The food situation was grim, but through Iowans C.A.N. Harkin wanted to promote an "upbeat theme as well as a fresh approach to deal with both the emotional and financial depression Iowa farm families are suffering." Downbeat might not get the job done, and they did not wish to reinforce anyone's feelings of shame about their condition. Harkin's office also wanted the food drive to be a "pragmatic solution to a real problem"—one that fit with Iowa's image. As one of his aides wrote, "It appeals to those qualities which are best in Iowans; the can-do spirit and neighborliness. And it affirms our state as one which possesses a particular quality of life, which, indeed, does make it a worthwhile place to grow."

The Iowans C.A.N. approach may also have been making an unconscious (or perhaps conscious) nod to a program carried out by the state's popular Republican former governor, Robert Ray. In 1979 Ray had created and promoted the Iowa SHARES program (Iowa Sends Help to Aid Refugees and End Starvation). Iowa SHARES sent food, medicine, and medical personnel from Iowa to refugees in Cambodia. Some Iowans lauded his efforts; others criticized the emphasis on poverty abroad while there were hungry people at home. This time, Iowans would be encouraged to do their sharing with each other. Senator Harkin's office mobilized forces throughout the state. They gathered religious leaders and civic leaders to support the project. The Campfire Girls held a massive overnight event for 500 girls, and each had to donate a can of food for admission. Members of 4-H joined the drive, and churches asked their parishioners to bring donations for a "food pantry Sunday." The program "left the 'how to' up to the creativity of the local groups." The plan was for two months of sustained attention "focused on hunger, the need to respond, and Iowans C.A.N. as the vehicle through which a response can be made."

The Iowa-positive aspects of the food drive existed side-by-side with a critique of President Ronald Reagan's administration. During the 1980s, in the tug-of-war between funding for guns or butter, butter usually lost.⁵⁹ Aides encouraged Harkin, as he promoted the food drive, to "always contrast . . . with examples of real waste at the pentagon [sic] such as the cut rate meals served in the Pentagon dining room subsidized by taxpayers at a cost of over 1 million dollars a year."⁶⁰ While spending for the military soared, spending on food programs was either stagnant or being cut. The school lunch program suffered cuts, and WIC funding was stagnant, covering only a third of the state's eligible population. The Reagan Administration cut the USDA's allocation for food stamps early in the decade. Iowa was facing challenges maintaining both food stamps and job training for displaced farmers, and its cheese allocation was under threat. Senator Harkin's March 1985 statement launching the Iowans C.A.N. initiative drew a political line in the sand: "Unfortunately, we can not expect the Reagan administration to reach out a compassionate hand to hungry Iowans. The administration's latest budget makes further cuts in the very programs we need to alleviate hunger—school lunch programs, food stamps, emergency food distribution, infant and child nutrition programs, congregate meals and meals-on-wheels." Harkin contrasted these cuts with the seemingly endless supply of money available for military spending. "Why, I ask, is there money for \$7,000 coffee makers and \$400 hammers when there isn't a dime to spare on an elderly grandmother for a nourishing congregate meal? Why, I ask, do we spend money year after year on destabilizing nuclear weapons which bring us closer to the brink of atomic disaster when there are Americans who cry out in need?"⁶² Iowans C.A.N. was, in part, an opportunity to shame Washington for its lack of attention to the most basic needs of ordinary Americans.

In spite of the fiery rhetoric, the impact of Iowans C.A.N. remains unclear. There was no flourish at the end of the food drive. There was no triumphant statement from the senator's office highlighting the hundreds or thousands of pounds of food gathered. There was, however, increased attention at the state level to issues of poverty and hunger. In fall 1985, in the week before Thanksgiving, Des Moines lawyer John Roehrick, a Democrat who intended to challenge Republican Senator Charles Grassley, used his own campaign to lobby for the hungry in Iowa. Responding to the sight of farmers applying for food stamps, he challenged the state's citizens to fast for 24 hours, estimate how much they saved on food, double the amount, and send a check to "I Fast For Iowa." The money gathered would be donated to the Food Bank of Iowa. Some called it a political stunt, but columnist David Yepsen of the Des Moines Register asserted, "If there's a political benefit that accrues to Roehrick, let him have it. Even if he gets creamed by Grassley next year, he can go to his political grave knowing he helped to feed some hungry people, which is more than many politicians have to show for their efforts." Yepsen also gave credit to Governor Terry Branstad for using proceeds from fundraising at his inaugural ball to insulate the homes of Iowa's needy, and to eastern Iowa Democrats who donated extra meals from the annual Jefferson-Jackson dinner to a soup kitchen. In September 1986 Catholic Rural Life, the Catholic church's magazine for farm families, ran a special issue with the front-page title of "Hunger: Why Are Our Food Producers Going Hungry?" The Catholic church had been particularly vocal throughout the crisis, encouraging greater attention to the food needs of those who fed the nation.

THE INTENSITY of the Farm Crisis and its accompanying food crisis began to wane in the late 1980s. By 1988, the worst of the food crisis seemed to be over, and the number of Iowans using food stamps was falling. Food stamp usage had begun to climb steeply in 1980, increasing every year through 1984. Although the Reagan Administration had cut the USDA's allocation for food stamps, the recession forced the administration to backfill with temporary funding. After a slight decline in usage in 1985, and a high of 221,946 Iowans receiving food stamps in 1986, the numbers began to fall, and fall quickly. The Des Moines Register reported that the number of Iowans enrolled in the program declined 12 percent between April 1987 and April 1988. That, state officials announced, reflected a better job market and increases in farm income. The number of farm families receiving food stamps was also declining, from 1,909 in 1987 to 1,202 in 1988. The official peak of food stamp use by farm families had come in 1986, with 2,316 families receiving aid. The decline in the number of farmers on food stamp rolls had many possible meanings. Improvements in income might have taken some families off the rolls, but it might also have indicated that families with marginal operations had left agriculture for other occupations. The growing number of families combining on- and off-farm employment also may have eased the strain. Some worried, however, that these improvements were temporary. As the situation shaped up in 1988, Gene Maahs, a spokesperson for the Iowa Farm Bureau Federation, warned that many farm families still had significant debts and that everything rested on the weather. If Iowa experienced a summer drought, the number of farm families receiving food stamps could rebound. Others pointed to continuing feelings of shame as a possible cause for the decline. David Ostendorf, director of PrairieFire, a farm advocacy group, suggested that the decline in the number of farmers applying for food stamps might be related to the failure of activists to continue with food stamp drives. "The primary problem is always the stigma of going in for food stamps," he commented. Kathy Bicking, welfare specialist for Legal Services Corp of Iowa in Sioux City, saw many farm families who remained eligible for food stamps refusing to take them. They told her, "We're really grateful for the help, but we'll see how we can do without them."⁶⁵ Other reflections on the food stamp experience helped to explain this desire to avoid their use, even when needed. Despite the large number of Iowans who had received food aid throughout the 1980s, rural Iowans remained ashamed of their poverty, and their neighbors continued to react unfavorably to families using food stamps. Jane Sellers and Kim Gilliland of Bagley, Iowa, in rural Guthrie County, ran the gauntlet when using food stamps to purchase food for themselves and Sellers's four children. Sellers commented, "I would have been better off having a sack over my head. You know, just the people staring at me." Gilliland elaborated, "It makes you feel like, 'Well, they're nothing but scum, because they need help.'"⁶⁶ Improving times might have reduced the number of rural and farm families making use of the food stamp program, but there was little evidence that a decade of troubles had significantly shifted attitudes about taking food aid, even when it was desperately needed.

THERE WAS NO CLEAR END to the Farm Crisis. A combination of factors, such as falling interest rates, lower inflation, and increased support payments for agriculture led to a reduction of economic distress among farmers. Additionally, large numbers of farm women and men had decided to supplement their family incomes with off-farm work. But the economic situation certainly had not returned to that of the pre-crisis 1970s.

Some scholars have argued that rural Iowa had moved from a crisis to a chronic condition, with farmers and rural communities facing recurrent cycles of economic and environmental distress.⁶⁷

Once the 1980s passed, however, the story shifted away from farmers' need for food stamps to a more general economic malaise in the Iowa countryside. Large farms and off-farm income could cushion somewhat the ups and downs for some farm families. Rural people who depended on the service economy and industrial employment, however, faced increased economic challenges. Iowans who had once earned a good living in industries such as meatpacking saw those jobs deskilled and their pay slashed as a result of industry restructuring.⁶⁸ The rural hunger of the 1990s and early 2000s would belong to these people more often than farmers.

One of the most important legacies of the Farm Crisis years was the volunteer infrastructure that developed to meet the needs of hungry people. Loaves and Fishes continues to serve individuals and families facing food insecurity in Story County. Food for Life expanded, and even more people are making use of its "meat pantry." Its program has developed beyond donations of surplus farm animals, and the organization solicits local meat processors for contributions. In 2018 Tyson Foods in Storm Lake donated 1,000 pounds of meat to Clay County's Food for Life program. Also in 2018, Creston's program distributed 2,000 pounds of meat to the needy in the surrounding area.⁶⁹

Iowa communities also continue to cobble together various programs to meet the food needs of their residents. The Monte-zuma Food Pantry, for instance, provides assistance to nearly 450 local residents, most of whom come from rural communities. They are the elderly, the disabled, and the working poor. Most are just outside of food stamp (now called SNAP) eligibility; just over a third of their clients receive SNAP benefits. Like an earlier generation's aid recipients, they remain embarrassed by their plight. Said the director, "We understand that often times asking for help is hard, especially when it is for something as basic and personal as feeding oneself or one's family." A 2015 newspaper article about the food pantry's good fortune in snagging a substantial grant from Monsanto fell just below another headline that explained the conditions placing growing demands on the pantry: "Kinze Announces Layoff of 215 Employees." Kinze Manufacturing, which made grain carts and augers in Williamsburg, was suffering from the downturn in agricultural prices.⁷⁰ Layoffs and increased food pantry use went hand in hand.

Unfortunately, what was happening in that corner of Iowa County was happening all over the state. As in previous eras, the health of the rural economy continued to be tightly tied to the health of the agricultural sector; when farms suffer, rural communities require greater supports. When farm incomes declined steeply in the mid-2010s, the job prospects and incomes of other workers in rural Iowa also dropped sharply.⁷¹ Thankfully, the local responses to hunger in the heartland established during the Farm Crisis years remain.