

Excerpts from "Picket Lines, Picket Fences: How Feminism Saved Iowa's Family Farms During the Farm Crisis of the 1980s," 2014

...However, this surge in new American family farms proved short-lived as the economic and political future of the United States became uncertain. The family farms of Iowa faced a potential downfall with the increase in interest rates, the evaporation of foreign markets for crops and livestock, the increase of rural Iowans migrating to urban areas in order to secure financial stability, and the government policies that favored large-scale agrarian operations for greater efficiency. With these perceived violations of justice for the common farmer, feminists who previously supported the women's liberation movement later served in positions of responsibility that later affected the political and socio economic landscape of Iowa.

The sociological aftermath of the farm crisis in Iowa affected farm families in various degrees, ranging from minor acts of depression to domestic violence. In one extreme case, the loss of farmland and livelihood led Dale Burr of Lone Tree, Iowa, to murder his wife, a banker, and a neighbor before committing suicide. This sense of hopelessness spread throughout the state of Iowa with increasing farm foreclosures, crime rates, and suicides, leading to a rise in the interest of the mental health of rural farmers in Iowa. These issues existed during a time of social conservatism and reaffirmation of "family values" of the Reagan administration. Despite this family-based orientation, rural activists created the belief that "Reaganomics," the reduction of government spending and taxes, was the primary factor of the devastation of the farm crisis in Iowa.

Activists displayed their disgust with the economic failure of Iowa's family farms through the methods that feminists consistently used in the women's liberation movement in the 1970s, such as the protests against failed farm policies in Des Moines and Washington, D.C., and white crosses planted to signify the loss of each farm during the crisis. Social workers concluded that "women rural activists have been found to be more effective" because their traditional "roles as mothers and female farmers" allowed them to display a first-hand narrative of the hardship that they experienced in the 1980s. The exposure of the sociological devastation of Iowa farmers allowed feminist activists to direct the public attention to the difficulties that laid ahead for the family farms.

The importance of social effects from the farm crisis highlighted the actions of both rural feminists from the farms of Iowa and urban feminists with an East Coast background and education that is often associated with second wave feminism. Joan Blundall, a native of Philadelphia and an alumna of Temple University, furthered the work of the Northwest Iowa Mental Health Center in Sioux City by focusing on families affected by the farm crisis. She concluded that "voices, particularly those of women," helped publicize "the chronic economic, social, and emotional decline that exists in many parts of rural America" and assisted farmers with the treatment of the depression and anger they faced. Blundall's feminist promotion of rural women supported her social work and theories in northwest Iowa with the belief that "political solutions tend to divide people, shared sorrow brings people together." Her creation of support groups in the local communities scattered across the rugged landscape of Iowa inspired women to take action and support activities that were "bigger and more important" than themselves. Iowa farmers typically adopted the masculine attitude of not sharing emotional issues with anyone, especially outsiders to rural Iowa. In spite of the initial hesitation, Blundall achieved success in curbing depression and anger in farmers who felt lost in a time of despair, a service that she continues into the 21st century....

...Feminists who achieved success in the women's liberation movement in the Midwest not only embodied the ideal of community in their rural activism, but also confronted economic problems and created solutions to benefit family farms all across Iowa. Iowa's economic recession foreshadowed the farm crisis in the 1980s, which resulted in families losing their farms, crop prices falling to all-time lows, and businesses in small towns closing their doors. As the Iowa General Assembly and the U.S. Congress created committees to investigate the causes and effects of the farm crisis, feminists inspired a large number of rural women to be active in community and political activism. Dorothy Wurster of Ringgold County described her own experiences on her cattle farm to the Senate Agricultural Committee, painting a picture of pessimism for small businesses and rural farms in southwest Iowa. Wurster believed that if "every five or six farmers...go out of business, one store on Main Street folds." Many towns that were a great distance from the urban centers of Iowa, such as Des Moines, Davenport, and Sioux City, relied heavily on the local businesses that supplied necessities for both the home and the fields of family farmers. These rural towns and businesses sought the help of feminists like Wurster by continuing their involvement with the local farms and businesses that she testified about and maintaining visibility on the difficulties experienced in rural Iowa....

...The increase in women serving in Des Moines and local offices in Iowa's counties confirmed the impact of second-wave feminism in a progressively agrarian state like Iowa. The overall despair of the farm crisis in Iowa captured the attention of politicians, community leaders, and activists to re-evaluate the control of agriculture on the local, state, and federal government levels. In Washington, D.C., Congress investigated the legal practices of agencies like the Farm Credit System and Farmers Home Administration as the increase of foreclosed family farms created a panic among Iowa's farmers. On the state and local levels of Iowa's government, rural feminists like Josephine Gruhn of Dickinson County brought first-hand experience and knowledge to the political arena in order to translate effectively with the disenfranchised farmers.

Gruhn's election to the Iowa House of Representatives in 1982 signaled the acceptance of feminism on a political level, especially in light of her status as a Democrat in a predominantly Republican region of Iowa. As vice-chair of the Agriculture Committee in the Iowa House, Gruhn furthered the agenda of relief of "the plight of the financially strapped farmer" by using her previous experience as a county treasurer and involvement in the American Association of University Women and the Northwest Iowa Farm Business Association. In addition, her support of agricultural legislation from both the Iowa House and Senate funded programs to assist farmers in obtaining low-interest farm loans and expanding markets for Iowa's crops and livestock. After her retirement in 1992, her impact on rural Iowa was summarized in a simple statement when she started her legislative career, stating that "a woman...can do just as good a job as a man." Her quiet, low-key nature resonated feminist ideals through her work of promoting equal rights for women in male-dominated institutions and setting the example for future rural feminists to work in roles of government and community activism.

The political ramifications of second-wave feminism in Iowa existed not only in the chambers of the Iowa General Assembly, but through grassroots organizations that sought to change the government's agricultural policies. One such organization, the North American Farm Alliance (NAFA), was co-founded by Carol Hodne in 1983, who experienced activism from an early age through her parents. Hodne participated in protests against the Vietnam War and supported the women's liberation movement during her education at Iowa State University. Her interest in feminism allowed her to help establish the women's studies program at Iowa State and later supported the Ames Feminist Women's Health Center to assist women in need. After the farm crisis began to take effect in Iowa, Hodne, who previously worked with the U.S. Farmers Association and the Farmers' Union, relied on her experience and her "socialist, feminist rhetoric and analysis" to support Congressional legislation that centered on Iowa farmers. The NAFA also continued their populist message under Hodne's leadership through their publication *North American Farmer*, a periodical that supported the "women's strategic role in the farm movement." The NAFA's popularity with Iowa rural farmers was the passage of the Save the Family Farm Act in 1985, which was written in part by Senator Tom Harkin in the U.S. Congress. Carol Hodne's background differed from many Iowans raised on the family farm tradition, yet her support of feminist and socialist ideals supported Iowa farmers in their fight against the causes of the farm crisis.