

# Leaving Home – Three Farm Memoirs from the Midwest: A Review Essay

PAMELA RINEY-KEHRBERG

*Time's Shadow: Remembering a Family Farm in Kansas*, by Arnold J. Bauer. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2012. xviii, 156 pp. Photographs, notes, bibliography. \$25.95 hardcover.

*The Farm at Holstein Dip: An Iowa Boyhood*, by Carroll Engelhardt. Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2012. xii, 229 pp. Photographs, notes, appendix, bibliography, index. \$22.00 paper.

*A Family Farm: Life on an Illinois Dairy Farm*, by Robert L. Switzer. Chicago: Center for American Places at Columbia College Chicago Press; distributed by University of Chicago Press, 2012. 254 pp. Map, photographs, illustrations, notes, appendix, bibliography. \$35.00 hardcover.

*TIME'S SHADOW*, *The Farm at Holstein Dip*, and *A Family Farm* bear a strong resemblance to each other. Each is written by a farm-son-turned-professor who chronicles the end, or the beginning of the end, of each family's farm. Each author is acutely aware that with the passing of his family farm, an era in his family's life, as well as an era in the life of the nation, is also passing. None of them apologizes for making the life choice that he made, but each memorializes the family's agricultural enterprise, making sure that it will not be forgotten, even if his parents had sold the land in the absence of a child who was willing to remain in the family business.

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Arnold Bauer, who taught Latin American studies at the University of California–Davis, is the author of *Time's Shadow*, the story of a small, eastern Kansas farm. It passed out of the Bauer family in the 1970s, when the author's mother died and his father could no longer work the land or live on it alone. *Time's Shadow* is the least "academic" of the books, with few footnotes and short, topical chapters. Bauer discusses a number of ways American customs and ways have changed in the past 50 years and in the transition from rural to urban. Especially interesting are "Food and Drink," "Diversions," and "Dying at Home."

Bauer's work is distinguished by his discussion of the rural-urban divide in his community. His family's farm was 15 miles from Clay Center, and he attended a small, rural school as a child. Until he attended a consolidated high school, his visits to town were few and far between. The family certainly did not go to town on a weekly basis. When Bauer began high school, he felt entirely out of place, a piece of "rustic fauna" (121). He wore the wrong clothes and knew nothing of the latest slang or the sports that the other boys played. It took three years for him to begin to feel less like an outsider. When he left home in the early 1950s, it was to join the air force. Following his stint in the armed services, he decided to use his GI Bill benefits to go to college in Mexico City, a decision that took him away permanently from his family's farm.

*The Farm at Holstein Dip* is a somewhat different story, although this is more a matter of style than substance. Carroll Engelhardt, a retired history professor who spent his academic career at Concordia College in Moorhead, Minnesota, tells the story of his family's farm in eastern Iowa. The book is a combination of memoir and social history. Engelhardt interweaves his memories with recent historical scholarship on childhood, adolescence, and rural outmigration, among other topics. Unlike Bauer, he divides his work into larger, thematic chapters, titled "Home," "Town," "Farm," "Church," and "School." Interestingly enough, because of the proximity of the Engelhardt farm to the town of Elkader and the presence of a large, consolidated school, the author never felt the kind of alienation from town that Bauer describes. Because of regular Saturday night visits to town and the homogenizing effects of radio first and television

later, Engelhardt's memoir of farm life in that era in the 1940s and 1950s could almost as easily be read as the story of small-town life during that same era. The pipeline out of Elkader, and off to the larger world, seemed somewhat better established than in Bauer's world; even in the 1950s, more than a quarter of Elkader's graduating high school class was heading off to college. No one was surprised when Engelhardt left home to attend Iowa State Teachers College.

Robert L. Switzer's *A Family Farm* also falls into the more academic vein of Engelhardt's work. Switzer, professor emeritus of biochemistry at the University of Illinois, made his first foray into nonscientific writing in telling the story of his family's farm in northern Illinois. He places his story in context relative to the ups and downs of American agriculture and small farms in the past hundred years. Relative to the other two, he spends more time on the story of his parents and grandparents, only getting to his own memories (which begin in 1946) on page 83. The long back story is essential to understanding the underlying sadness in the story. Switzer's father, Stephen, came to farming enthusiastically, when many other avenues failed to take him where he wanted to go. Switzer's mother, Elva, was unable to pursue her dream of becoming a scientist, even when Cornell University offered her a partial scholarship to study biology at the graduate level. She lived a lifetime on a farm where she did not want to be and in her old age suffered deepening depression and even attempted suicide. She encouraged her son's interest in science and his eventual departure from the family farm to go to college to study chemistry. Switzer organizes his story around the different parental stories and the different stages of the farm's life, including his parents' ongoing work on the farm following their sons' departure. He interweaves some of his father's and children's writings about their lives and the farm into the book and also includes his wife's and son's art featuring the family farm.

An interesting point of comparison between the three books is their treatment of the issue of child labor on farms. That issue can be a point of bitterness in some memoirs and is sometimes cited as the reason why individuals left the farm and chose to raise their own families elsewhere. In these three books, though,

it is only part of the story. Bauer, in particular, muses on the subject of work. He worked a great deal but seemingly without resentment. Work was simply what farm children did. When his sisters left the farm, he writes, "I became a full-time farmhand at age ten or eleven, working long summer hours in the fields and doing chores year-round" (49). As an adult, he remembers that arrangement as one that was, in fact, empowering, because children felt a sense of ownership within the family enterprise. "We took pride in *our* farm, compared favorably *our* stand of wheat, *our* cattle with the neighbor's fields and herds. In fact, we willingly contributed to the family's income rather than subtract from it" (46). Engelhardt, too, is remarkably benign in his discussions of work. He cites regular afternoon chores, consisting of shelling corn for the chickens, gathering eggs, caring for livestock, and, eventually, milking. He saw this as little different from the way the owners of small businesses in town put their own children to work to avoid the cost of hired labor. Although he claims that he was raised with a "belief in toil," he counters his own claim with the comment: "in the natural order of things parents toiled and children played" (56). He devotes far more of his discussion to play of various sorts than to labor. Apparently, work did not hang too heavily over children in the Engelhardt household. Neither Engelhardt nor Bauer seems to have taken anything negative away from his working experiences as a child. Or, if either did, he chose not to include it in his memoir.

Switzer, too, spends time on the issue of labor but with a rather different tone than Engelhardt or Bauer. In his memoir, we see a more critical discussion of early labor and the development of an adversarial relationship between children and parents, particularly their fathers. Switzer learned to drive tractors and trucks early and was doing both by the age of 12 or 13, something he remembers with a degree of pride and pleasure. He gathered eggs and fed chickens while quite young; by the time he was 12, he was also out of bed by 6 a.m. to help his father in the barn. More work awaited after school. In the summers in particular, he helped with the field work. He remarked that neither he nor his brother was "a very willing chore boy" (98). If he resented his work, it was because his father was a difficult man to work for. His father "failed to make either Steve

[his brother] or me feel as though we were partners in a shared, mutually beneficial enterprise. Little wonder that both of us left home as soon as we finished high school" (100). Farm work was a push factor and education a pull, leading to Switzer's departure from agriculture.

Read together, these three books provide an interesting commentary on children's lives on family farms in the middle of the twentieth century and on the passing of the era of the small farm by the end of the century. Together, the three books illuminate the interplay among the many forces leading individuals away from farms and toward cities. Both Bauer and Switzer grew up with parents who wished they had different choices; had the parents been born a generation later, they probably would have pursued other lives. All three grew up as working children, although with very different interpretations of that experience. Bauer, Engelhardt, and Switzer tell of the growing relationship between farm youth and small-town high schools, institutions that might have seemed alien at first (as in Bauer's case) but eventually convinced each young man of the wide range of possibilities existing off the farm, sometimes in faraway places. What they have told is the story of the majority of farm youth in the last half of the twentieth century. It is a story in which farm sons and daughters gain education and perspective and then choose to leave the family farm behind, sometimes fulfilling the dream of an older generation that lacked the opportunities provided by prosperity in the post-World War II era.