Agrarian Ideals and Rural Realities in *When a Dream Dies*: *Agriculture, Iowa, and the Farm Crisis of the 1980s*

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FINALLY, THERE IS A MAJOR NEW STUDY on the Farm Crisis of the 1980s in Iowa. Pamela Riney-Kehrberg's *When a Dream Dies: Agriculture, Iowa, and the Farm Crisis of the 1980s* is the first monograph published on the subject since Mark Friedberger's *Shake Out: Iowa Farm Families in the 1980s*, published in 1989. Friedberger, a social scientist (and one of the featured participants in this section of the journal), conducted his research in real time as the Crisis unfolded. He drew heavily on extended and repeated interviews with 135 farmers in four counties and found a number of issues contributing to the Crisis, not least of which was reckless lending (and borrowing). Ultimately, Friedberger concluded that for most Iowa farmers, farming would likely continue on much as before, despite the economic shock. One reviewer, while favorably impressed by Friedberger's book, noted that the study of the Farm Crisis was still awaiting treatment by a historian.[1]

Thirty years later, Pamela Riney-Kehrberg answered the call with an appropriate and extended follow up to Friedberger. Riney-Kehrberg comes to the task well-prepared. She is the

1. Thomas D. Isern, "Review of Shake-Out: Iowa Farm Families in the 1980s," *Journal of American History* 77.3 (March 1990), 1435–36.

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author of numerous other works in rural and agricultural history and is a Distinguished Professor of History at Iowa State University, a Fellow of the Agricultural History Society, and a past president of that organization.[2] Anyone familiar with her work will expect and see a strong connection to the sources that demonstrate the vibrancy of the rural experience. *When a Dream Dies*, then, is the product of a mature historian who is fully versed in regional and rural history, the experiences of living on the land, as well as the broader currents of twentieth-century American life.

Riney-Kehrberg guides the reader through the Farm Crisis chronologically, beginning with the "go-go" 1970s and continuing through the early 1990s, with an extended epilogue that deals with economic and demographic conditions up to the present. Readers who come to the book with some personal experience with the Farm Crisis need to remember that *When a Dream Dies* is not about all Iowa farmers. Rather, it is about the two-thirds of farm families that experienced varying degrees of distress during the period. The author utilized traditional sources long available to historians such as newspapers and the farm press, explored new sources in the archives (such as the papers of Governor Terry Branstad), and conducted new oral histories with key participants to tell the story of those who lived through this watershed event in Iowa history. This is a thorough and well-written treatment of the struggles farm families endured in a time period that is very different from our own, yet one that shares many characteristics with our present condition, such as volatility in commodity prices. While all the parties involved in the story get a share of attention in the book (bankers, extension professionals, activists, and politicians), the majority of the book focuses on the experiences of farm families.

So, what are Riney-Kehrberg's contributions and what will readers learn?

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2. In the interest of full disclosure, Riney-Kehrberg was co-director of my 2005 Ph.D. dissertation, completed in Iowa State University's Agricultural History and Rural Studies program (now the Rural, Agricultural, Technological, and Environmental History program). As of this writing, the senior leadership team at ISU has planned to eliminate this program.

One of the greatest contributions of the book is that it exposes much of the emotional and inner lives of rural people. Without neglecting the stories of politics, policy, and farming, the author takes us into the personal and family spaces that are otherwise invisible in most historical accounts. Agricultural and rural historians are proficient in dealing with the routines and seasonal rounds of physical labor involved in livestock and crop production, household work, and the ways in which family members played, but very few historians have been able to depict the inner lives of rural Americans as skillfully as Riney-Kehrberg. This aspect of the rural experience has often been the most difficult part of agricultural and rural history to document. It is true that we know a great deal about the motives and policy proposals of farmers in crisis throughout American history, from the demands of Grangers in the 1870s to the Farm Holiday movement of the 1930s to name just two examples. In *When a Dream Dies*, we gain a deep understanding of rural people, in part due to the availability of evidence, but in larger measure because of the author's focus on the dream itself.

Central to this treatment of emotion and ideals is the farm as a physical manifestation of a dream, one shared by thousands of Iowans. It was an agrarian dream of intertwined economic and social aspects; one in which widespread farm ownership is central to human society and stable political culture. Economic gain was a critical part of the dream insofar as it sustained the farm as a place for social reproduction. Those who shared this dream prized close contact with nature and the seasonal rhythms of the farm over indoor labor and working by the clock. Farm work was largely independent, but community was important, too, with reliance on kin and neighbors for labor, leisure, and worship. Farm families wanted to raise their children to share specific religious and cultural values. Most importantly, in the agrarian dream the farm was a source of continuity, with each generation poised to pass the farm to future generations.

This ideal of family farming, with its attendant agrarian dogmatism was (and remains) a touchstone for many Iowans. While Riney-Kehrberg does not spend much time developing or defining agrarianism, it is present in at least two ways. The first can be seen as farmers adapted to conditions during the 1970s (chapter 1)

and the second as farmers dealt with the fallout (chapters 2–5). During the 1970s, farmers increased production to offset stagnant commodity prices, invested in land even as prices per acre were rising, and expanded or modernized operations. It was not the first time that farmers had engaged in any of these management tactics, all of which were consistent with the agrarian view securing the future of the farm. In 1979, the Federal Reserve raised interest rates, increasing the costs of borrowing. Farmers felt betrayed when commodity prices collapsed and the value of the land that they had used as collateral crashed too, threatening their agrarian dream. These farmers felt abandoned by their leaders at the state and federal levels, who did little to ease their pain. The frustration over this powerlessness came out in the many letters sent to Governors Ray and Branstad and other political leaders. The combination of financial stress and lack of political support not only threatened that ideal, but exposed much of the farmers' world as a dream.

Readers also see the ways in which the countryside was a place of power relationships, starting with the family. Women who kept the books for the farm knew the extent of financial difficulties earlier than their husbands. In some cases, extension professionals working through the state Farm AID program were asked to the farm by a farm woman to help break the news to her husband. As Riney-Kehrberg suggests, "Taking care of the mental health of families was as much a woman's job as cooking the meals and caring for the children" (53). Feelings of utter hopelessness in the face of debt and public humiliation most certainly played a part in Dale Burt's murder of his wife Emily Burt, a neighbor, and a local banker before he killed himself near rural Lone Tree in 1985. While only a few people resorted to such extreme acts, thousands of Iowa farm families shared a sense of powerlessness.

Even the experts who had been traditional sources of aid were comparatively powerless. Cooperative Extension expertise was a valuable factor in productivity gains on the farm, but there was little that extension professionals could do to address the fundamentals of the farm economy, despite their technical knowledge. Much of their work involved listening, supporting, and providing counsel about farm finances and home life, tasks

which they were not fully prepared to undertake. Even bankers found themselves powerless to aid many of their customers.

The lack of consensus over how much trouble farmers were really experiencing compounded the problem. It must have been galling for many farmers to read the letters-to-the-editor in the *Des Moines Register* regarding the role of food aid for struggling families. Farm families found themselves without food, relying on government assistance or community-based and church food pantries. Still, some letter writers indicted farm people for failing to feed themselves. These letters often came from urban or suburban areas, where people were disconnected from farm conditions to varying degrees. In some cases, even those with farm roots who survived the Great Depression could not reconcile present-day realities with their idealized notions of farm life or memories of their youth on the farm.

What these people failed to see were the tremendous changes in the nature of the midwestern farm economy. As a growing number of families relied on the off-farm employment income of one or both of the adults and, critically, for employer-sponsored insurance, there was less time for the labor to raise the food for the table. The large farm gardens were gone, industrial chicken had supplanted home flocks, and raising livestock for home-use was less common than it had been, in part due to conditions of farm operating loans. As a result, some farm families that would have never considered accepting aid under other circumstances turned to government nutrition programs or church-sponsored pantries during the Farm Crisis. They did not want a handout, but they had no cash and their children were hungry. Indeed, this was a difficult concept for many Iowans to grasp, contributing to that pervasive sense of powerlessness and hopelessness among the portion of the farm population contending with hunger, fear, and the death of a dream.

There were, however, opportunities to change the direction of the Farm Crisis. Riney-Kehrberg shows that deteriorating agricultural conditions were not just a matter of control by "market forces," distant policy makers such as Federal Reserve Chairman Paul Volker and Budget Director David Stockman, or long term economic and demographic trends. The Reagan administration could have acted quickly. Governor Branstad's appeal for swift

action to an unreceptive Reagan administration failed. The state legislature could have enacted stay legislation that provided protection for borrowers, just as the Minnesota legislature had done. Initially, such moves were not welcome by policy makers and many farm leaders. Everyone knew that the farm economy had experienced many ups and downs in the past and some predicted that conditions would improve quickly. For their part, leaders were conditioned to hold still, lest they overreact and miss the mark on their response. The conservative Republican ideology of state and federal leaders further discouraged prompt policy change. But the rationale for inaction, perhaps justifiable for a year or two, faded. When action came, as Riney-Kehrberg shows, it was often too little, too late, too complicated, or involved declaring bankruptcy, which was a tacit admission of defeat. Many leaders, most of whom were more attentive to urban and suburban constituencies than rural America, let farmers down.

Even so, the self-help efforts of farmers and activists were examples of people attempting to exert control over their destiny. Much of that grassroots effort aligned closely with agrarian tradition and values. Many of those efforts were largely symbolic. Farmers hoped to communicate a sense of urgency to the urban and suburban population through penny auctions and demonstrations. They organized to apply direct and indirect pressure on policy makers. They gathered to discuss their problems, support each other, and to propose solutions. They wrote letters to political leaders, expressing their concern over the sluggish response and their despair over losing their farms and the death of their dreams.

Students of Iowa history will appreciate the fact that Riney-Kehrberg has moved the state's history into the recent past. For many of us who lived in the 1980s and either experienced the Crisis firsthand or read the headlines and followed the news coverage, watched *Country*, and praised Willie Nelson and John Mellencamp for their 1985 Farm Aid concert, the Farm Crisis feels too recent to be history. For all that, it has been almost 40 years since 1984, the year Riney-Kehrberg labelled the "year of realization," when Iowans knew that hard times were here to stay.

Finally, a few words are in order about the ending of *When a Dream Dies*. Riney-Kehrberg's conclusion evokes the verse of T. S. Eliot, with the Farm Crisis concluding "not with a bang but a whimper." The author notes that the Crisis ended around 1992, with the last chapter ("From Crisis to Chronic: 1987–1993") detailing some of the aftershocks endured by Iowa's rural society and economy. The last chapter and the epilogue, which carries the story forward to the present, comprise over a quarter of the entire text, suggesting the long-term continuation of volatile agricultural conditions over subsequent decades. Riney-Kehrberg demonstrates that many of those who remained on the farm by the 1990s faced an uncertain future, with no convenient or satisfying end to the Crisis: no declaration of a return to prosperity, no victorious tractorcade, no collective sigh of relief for farmers. The very length of the book's concluding chapter and epilogue further suggests the difficulty in ending a book about a crisis that, in some ways, never ended.

By depicting the pain and powerlessness of rural Iowans, Riney-Kehrberg faithfully represents the experiences of those who left the farm and those who remained. The ability of many farmers to carry on, as Friedberger suggested at the height of the Crisis, is noteworthy and is indirectly echoed by Riney-Kehrberg. Since the 1980s, however, there has been significantly less attention paid to the ongoing difficulties on the farm and the rural economy, no doubt contributing to a sense of isolation and neglect on the part of many farm families. By describing and analyzing the Farm Crisis and its aftermath, Riney-Kehrberg has told a story that reflects the stubborn reality of American agriculture with honesty and respect.