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Family Farm Conversation between Sacks and Students

Howard Sacks

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FAMILY FARM INTERVIEW 3/29

[counter: 001]

Sacks:

Now most of you come from environments which are very different from this rural environment. Umm and I suspect that before you got into this course, you had a very different image of what farming was like, what this community was like, life in this community. See if you can go back, tell me before you came into this course how did you think about Knox County, what images if any did you have about farming in Knox County?... Don't all speak at once.

[counter: 008]

?:

I didn't have any images of farming in Knox County. I had no idea, and not only did I have no idea, I never thought about it. It never occurred to me as something to think about, because it was so foreign to what my experience had been.

[counter: 011]

Sacks:

What was your experience?

[counter: 012]

?:

You know basic umm, well I grew up in an urban environment so umm my experience was alot of stuff that has to do with the city and occasionally hearing about farm life. On the news, um particularly when there was a crisis of course and at no other time, and so umm I had this abstract sense that that's where my food came from, but other than that I knew nothing about it.

[counter: 018]

?:

You know I think alot of our image of farming for people who live in cities is driving, like when you drive across the country and you see farms and you get stuck behind farm machinery. So you just don't have any patience, you get annoyed with that and then seeing cornfield after cornfield.

[counter: 021]

Sacks:

And how do you relate to cornfield after cornfield?

[counter: 022]

?:

I just don't think I realize how much work went into it. I think that beforehand hand, I don't know, I don't know what I thought. I didn't think that the days were as long as they were or that as much work went into it as it does. I just thought: It's beautiful and it must be great to live on a farm. But I didn't realize that there are also alot of difficulties.

[counter: 028]

Sacks:

Is it still great in your opinion to live on a farm?

[counter: 029]

?:

Umm, I have mixed feelings about that. Umm, it's still beautiful. I mean there are still many, many, many things that I think are worthwhile and validating certain things. I mean it's still beautiful umm, you still can't set your own hours there is still some sense of freedom that goes along with it, but at the same time one environmental catastrophe could wipe out your lifestyle and I don't know if I could live with that, that type of threat.

[counter: 037]

Sacks:

What do you think about now when you drive through Knox County and see all those cornfields? Do you relate to it differently?

[counter: 039]

?:

Yeah, and even other places. I was driving on route 80 over spring break and driving thorough Pennsylvania and I saw these farms, and to me it was absolutely beautiful in a way that it hadn't been before. Like the farm aesthetic had grown on me and as I looked at that farms they looked, they were really different than they had been you know years before when I would drive and look at the country side.

[counter: 045]

Sacks:

What in particular was different?

[counter: 046]

?:

My appreciation for it and my, you know having gained a sense of the farm aesthetic because I really didn't have that before. I really didn't even look at the barn and look at the house and think you know that's beautiful.

[counter: 049]

?:

Even for first being in Knox County and seeing that there was farms here that there was really no way to distinguish one from the next. You know as far as, I didn't know that there individual small farms here. I thought they were just farms and they could have belonged to one person, they could have belonged to twenty people. And now driving around you can really see the individuality of each farm, and I can tell when one person's field ends and another person's begins, and that was something I never would even consider before.

[counter: 056]

?:

Yeah that's along the lines of what I was gonna say. Just the diversity of the farms and the farm-life. Umm, I think that at least when I didn't understand it I thought of farming as one thing, and farming

is so many things and farming is different things for every person who does it. So now driving along, I know longer put all of these fields and all of these houses and all of these barns in the same category. I might think of them as, you know separate entities and acknowledge that you know as you said different things go on in each place and people lead different kinds of lives in each place.

[counter: 064]

Sacks:

What about the lives of the farmers? You've talked about the operations and the way it looks from the outside, but what do you appreciate now about the people who are on those farms that you may not have felt about before?

[counter: 067]

?:

Well like Larkin was saying, alot of the hard work that goes into it. You know you have to, you've appreciate that. Anybody who'd you know gets up before dawn and works till it's dark. From also just family farm. I mean think about the word. What does that mean? Family and farm are together and so that inherently changes the character of your life and so they're raising their kids where they're also running their business. Umm, and you know of course their children are exposed to so many things that you know people who don't grow up on farms aren't exposed to. Like the lifecycles, one that we've heard alot you know general life and death experience that happens daily that people who aren't from farms don't understand. They might understand the theory, but they don't really understand.

[counter: 080]

?:

The sense of commitment to working everyday, really regardless of the season and regardless of what things may come up. I mean, for me alot of times spending time with my family revolved around vacations. You know you'd take a week and that would be our family time together, whereas here it's on a daily basis and there are no vacations. I mean if you're on a dairy farm it's not an option to leave for a week or to escape to do some of the things that they do everyday.

[counter: 087]

Sacks:

Do you think farm families are different therefore from other families aren't involved in agriculture? How so?

[counter: 090]

?:

Well I think that have a sense of each other, not really as a sister or a brother or a mother or a father, but as a worker and as a provider and really more than in ways of like monetary resources. I don't know it's just different as far as, I mean the way that maybe people relate to their families who have jobs in town. You know they go away to work and they are identified in one segment of society as a doctor or a lawyer a clerk, whatever. But to really combine parenting and working and have it be sort of all of the same but not really, I mean most people have said that they're doing what they're doing in one in particular to be with their family and that they don't have to miss. You know that

they have three meals a day with their family and if they want their kids to come along and help them they can. So, I think that changes. Somehow it changes the sociology of it.

[counter: 105]

Sacks:

We hear a lot about family values today in the media. Do you think that family values are different or somehow stronger in farm families? Are there lessons to be learned from family farming in that respect?

[counter: 108]

?:

I think that, actually I was thinking about this the other day that the family unit, the responsibility to family members and the role playing that everybody has a job and we work together, I think enhances the community as well because you have that sense that you don't have in the city. In the city you know you're sort of fractioned off and this is my house and you know and someone may be on the other side of the wall and you don't even know who they are. But, you have the sense that there are people around you continually, you do have a responsibility to them and that widens your scope and makes you realize that you do have some responsibility.

[counter: 118]

?: I think also that values are more easily taught when you are with your parents all the time. It makes perfect sense--if the family is together all the time then you are going to learn every day the things that your parents, grandparents want to teach you. Whereas in the cities if you are not with your family all the time--both your parents work you see them at 8pm or later than a lot of what you are doing is teaching yourself. So in that sense some of the constants in terms of values will be taught over and over again because of the close contact on the family farm.

Howard: Now a lot of this makes it sound as if families in farming community are very different from other families and yet I remember Rachel your commenting one time on how you expected those people down the hill to be so very much different from you and yet you didn't really find that to be the case.

[counter: 133]

?: They have the same concerns. They aren't different in the sense that we are all people and on a very human level we have the same concerns or the same concerns about raising our children; about getting married (finding the right person); about making money; about how to balance family life with work life; you know, we are talking about family farms what some of these people have to work for economic reasons. So, it isn't always, in fact, more times than not these days, they aren't all working on the farms. How do you balance what you really want to be doing? Are you spending time with your family or in their case farming with working. Those are concerns that I think a lot of us think about all the time. So, you know, for a lot of those personal reasons--I think they are the same.

?: I don't think they are that much different than other families who are working together in addition to living together. It's something that we don't see as much any more--it's something that might

have been there more years ago when people had family owned businesses--when the children went into the same thing that the parents did instead of moving away. But they are the same concerns and the same problems that arise from working with your parents in the same area or trying to say run something with your brother or sister. Which can be very difficult because of the nature of family relationships.

[counter: 155]

Howard: Why is it important for people outside of farming to know something about this?

?: I think one of the best things that came up this year was that when somebody said at the farm dinner the nation is only as strong as the food they feed their country. I think it's really important for us to know about how we survive--it's kind of ridiculous that we don't.

[counter: 166]

?: It's ridiculous that kids go to school and grow up and not knowing where our food comes from--not being able to do anything for ourselves if we had to. Most of us don't even garden--we can't grow anything.

?: Also farming is the history of our country--to be ignorant to agriculture and to the farming way of life--which has been here for longer than city life has been--is ridiculous.

[counter: 173]

?: I think also there's something inherently wrong with not understanding part of your own country. And not, I mean, really not understanding it. I think, it's not just that people should know about it--it's that right now there exists such a profound ignorance about it. As far as I've seen people generally don't even have a basic knowledge of what the farm community is; what the farm community does.

?: How are people going to vote on issues that are so important to continuing our country?

?: Right. They don't understand the importance of it--they don't understand what it does for them or for the country. As I said I think just having an ignorance about any part--especially such a huge part of your own country--you know, is ridiculous.

[counter: 187]

?: Another thing we were talking about was how many people, myself included, have gone aboard to gain some sort of cultural experience some sort of foreign experience when really the farming culture is in some ways that we have talked about so different but in some ways so similar. And yet there is still such a gap between ignorance and understanding of that community.

[counter: 192]

Howard: Are you changed by that experience in some way? by knowing about farming?

?: I feel like I'll be able to take part in--I feel more as part of a member of the United States than I ever have before. I felt like a New Yorker and especially New York there is such a patriotism for

New York in general but I feel more like an American than a New Yorker now than I did.

Howard: Courtney you had said if I recall once you felt that you could be a part of a community no matter where you go now.

Courtney: Yes. I think some people were asking me well you might not ever live in a rural area again after you leave Kenyon. So what good does it do you to understand this community and what good does it do you to know anything about farming--you are not going to be a farmer. My response to that was, like you said, that no matter where I am--if I'm in a big city or in another country. No matter where I am that the idea that I can reach out into a wider community than whatever my own sphere is--is really important. I think the way it has enriched my Kenyon experience can also enrich my life.

?: That's deep.

[counter: 221]

?: In your visits to farms what is the most farm-like duty that you have been called on to assist or participate in? Rachel talked about witnessing the birth of that calf that dead calf recently. How did you get your hands dirty--were you asked to participate in farming?

?: I cleaned stalls for one woman who lives at the bottom of the hill. I went in one morning and helped her--my job, she would shovel all the manure into a wheelbarrow and my job was to wheel it out and dump it and bring it back and then later I shovelled hay. (I guess, it wasn't hay--I want to say it was something closer to saw dust. I'm displaying my ignorance because I have no idea what it was, but I shovelled that back into the wheelbarrow and took it back into the stalls. I did that and I'm going to do it again.

Howard: Why are you going to do it again?

?: Well, for a couple of reasons, first of all at this point I have a real sense of loyalty toward her. I know that she needs help and I know that I can provide it and so I want to do that. Also when you are doing something like this and it sort of goes to a certain extent into the heart of the matter--when you are doing something like that--two things happen: first of all you are doing pure physical work and it frees up your mind; secondly, if you are doing it with someone else you get real conversation when you are doing that so it is a very interesting experience. I mean doing sort of raw physical work as I said frees up everything else. Including your mind--including your speech (in some instances that's not true) so it can be a very social experience. So it's hard work but it can also be very enjoyable and it's a far cry from writing papers. So.

Howard: Do you want to tell about your cow experience--your loose bull experience?

?: Well, I wasn't helping as much--I wasn't really a participate--there wasn't much I could do. But they were giving lice treatments to all the cows and giving them worm pills. The way they had to feed these huge beasts pills just freaked me out--just shoving these things down their throats and making sure their tongues don't get in the way. And what happened was one of the big steers they

had (that had always sort of been wild) was really hard to get into the particular area they needed to put them into to give them the treatment. And one of the steers knocked over the person that was holding the gate to keep them in and sort of just ran and got out of the contained area and it was really scary because this was such a huge uncontrollable animal and it was, for me, I was petrified. I never thought anything could scare me like it did. It was so--I was like in awe of this animal--in some ways--here I was with all these people and like I actually felt like my life was in danger. I could have been trampled by them--I could lost a limb or something. My fear was probably a little out of whack--just because I don't know that much about it. I always thought that animals were cute--especially farm animals. I never really understood the danger involved and they were skilled in knowing how to deal with such a thing and they were able to get the animal back. But even though I wasn't actually doing the work just watching it made me realize that it wasn't as simple as it looks. Just the physical labor is alot more than I could ever really do--I think, on my own.

?: I think alot of us certainly offered to do farm work--but the fact is that alot of it requires knowledge that we don't have and in many ways physical strength that we don't have because we aren't use to doing that kind of work and so, of course, we would offer to do it but, I think, sometimes we would be getting in the way more than actually helping.

[counter: 303]

Howard: Were any of you involved in the maple sugar (?)

?: Yes, I tapped a maple tree--I did. It was exciting.

Howard: You got down in the dirt with the (?) at least once.

?: Yes, and I also got to run a grain cleaner--it's this huge, huge, huge fantastic barn that makes a lot of noise with tons of shuts--it was fun. I don't know exactly what everything was and did--but I ran it.

?: I was able to help a little bit inside when the family made dinner for me. She was rolling out pie crust and things like that. I don't have much culinary skills but I could at least clean up and help and do some of those things. I think some of the inside work is as much farm labor as the outside work.

Howard: Good point.

?: I got to drive a tractor. Yes--I did that too. It was so exciting.

Howard: What does it feel like to drive a tractor?

?: It was a big thrill for me--I thought it was so great. I was kind of afraid we were going to get stuck in the mud, but...I think they have eight gears going forward and eight going backward.

?: Why would you need eight in reverse?

Howard: So you don't get stuck in the mud. Did you get a new visual sense of the lay-of-the-land

from the driver's seat of a tractor?

?: It's neat to feel it--you know, you're actually driving up things and down. It's funny, it gives you a different sense of moving across the land--because for us to move across the land in a vehicle means you drive on a paved road. I remember the first time I went to visit a farm we got in a pickup truck and he just drove across the field. I went, "you can't do that." You know, you can't just drive across the grass and the field. And so in the tractor it was the same kind of experience but with more--that's what the tractor is for and not necessarily what the pickup truck is for.

?: I had that same feeling with traversing a field and I was thinking, "I can't do this." He kept on asking me so have you ever been up here--and I was like, "no, I've never been up here and never thought about driving any sort of vehicle up and trying to parallel this field. But he was real surprised that it was--it was just down on 229--he was like, what do you mean you've never been up here? Unless I was going for a hike I'd never think about coming up here.

[counter: 357]

Howard: So you experienced the place in a different way and you get a different sense of the place too. One can imagine that if you go up and down that field that you know every dip, every rise, where the water is--where it flows when it rains hard. That's that sense of place that Wes Jackson was talking about--knowing one small place very well.

?: I also helped corner that cow when it was pregnant as I spoke about in class. The calf was coming out backwards and so they had to corner it and bring it down to the barn. So, there was two of them and there was me that helped corner it. It was kind of scary and at times I'd get right in front of the thing to try and stop it and think "do I really want to be here?" It was come charging for me and take a quick left before it got to me but anyway.

?: Actually it's interesting because when I was driving around with Mr. Spray--he was showing me all the sort of landmarks of the land. This is where the house burned down a long time ago and this is where... he told me you can tell where there use to be separation between farms. Because there are stands of trees because the fences--the birds use to sit on them and put the seeds back into the soil from the fence and so there was a tree line. They may have taken the fence out but there is still a tree line between the fields. So that's how you can tell where there use to be different farms--it's really interesting. There are a lot of things like that that you can tell from the land itself that I would never notice or think about.

Howard: Family farm merit badges--it sounds like. I pinned a cow. Does that do it for for you?

[end counter: 399]