

Fall 2015

# Children of the Crisis: Farm Youth in Troubled Times

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# Children of the Crisis: Farm Youth in Troubled Times

## Abstract

The farm crisis of the 1980s was one of the defining American moments of the late twentieth century. The Midwest's farmers, long revered as the protectors of America's agrarian heritage, saw economic reversals of a magnitude unseen since the Great Depression. Many had expanded their operations in the 1970s on the basis of rising land prices, only to see the value of their farms plummet in the early days of the 1980s. Farm income fell significantly, while the number of farm foreclosures skyrocketed. Families began to show signs of stress, as rates of spousal abuse, clinical depression and suicide rose.<sup>1</sup> In the face of palpable distress, government agencies and volunteer groups rushed support activities into place. Although it was largely a Midwestern event, the Farm Crisis pervaded the national consciousness, with stories in the *New York Times*, songs on the radio, and movies in the theaters. The stars of those movies testified to Congress about the passing of a way of life and the pain of the heartland's farmers. This domestic economic and social crisis captured the interest of the public like no other in the late 20th century. It also changed the rural Midwest, dramatically reducing the numbers of farmers and gutting many a small town. The Midwest that entered the crisis was not the one that emerged a decade later.

## Disciplines

Agricultural and Resource Economics | Demography, Population, and Ecology | Economic History | Family, Life Course, and Society | Other American Studies | Rural Sociology

## Comments

This submitted article is published as Riney-Kehrberg, P., *Children of the Crisis: Farm Youth in Troubled Times*. *Middle West Review*; Fall 2015, 2(1); 11-25. DOI: [10.1353/mwr.2015.0049](https://doi.org/10.1353/mwr.2015.0049). <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/596232> . Posted with permission.

## Children of the Crisis

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The farm crisis of the 1980s was one of the defining American moments of the late twentieth century. The Midwest's farmers, long revered as the protectors of America's agrarian heritage, saw economic reversals of a magnitude unseen since the Great Depression. Many had expanded their operations in the 1970s on the basis of rising land prices, only to see the value of their farms plummet in the early days of the 1980s. Farm income fell significantly, while the number of farm foreclosures skyrocketed. Families began to show signs of stress, as rates of spousal abuse, clinical depression and suicide rose.<sup>1</sup> In the face of palpable distress, government agencies and volunteer groups rushed support activities into place. Although it was largely a Midwestern event, the Farm Crisis pervaded the national consciousness, with stories in the *New York Times*, songs on the radio, and movies in the theaters. The stars of those movies testified to Congress about the passing of a way of life and the pain of the heartland's farmers. This domestic economic and social crisis captured the interest of the public like no other in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. It also changed the rural Midwest, dramatically reducing the numbers of farmers and gutting many a small town. The Midwest that entered the crisis was not the one that emerged a decade later.

The story, as we know it, is largely a journalistic one, told about the adults who lost – or nearly lost – their farms. The farmers hardest hit by the crisis tended to be young and heavily indebted, with children still at home.<sup>2</sup> History tells us little, however, about what this experience meant to those youngest farm residents. While the degree to which parents were able to successfully shield their children from the worst of the economic realities they were facing must

have varied, it undoubtedly was an emotionally difficult time for children, with lost income, lost farms and parental distress distorting children's lives. Undoubtedly, that experience affected their choices in the years that followed. Other adults, such as teachers and 4-H leaders, adopted new strategies in dealing with their young charges, some of whom were living in households facing acute economic distress. Unlike the problems of the 1930s, the troubles of the Farm Crisis were far less evenly distributed among the Midwest's families. The experience of the decade required young people to think long and hard about their lives and prospects, especially since this was a disaster that hit them far harder than their urban counterparts. Being the object of so much interest – and so much pity – had to have added insult to injury.<sup>3</sup> While it may not be possible to validate all of these suppositions with the evidence currently available, it is possible to begin the discussion, and to suggest why the Farm Crisis presented a particularly difficult set of circumstances for the Midwest's rural and farm children. In doing so, it is useful to compare the experience of the 1980s with that of the 1930s, in order to explain what may have been similar, and different, about the Farm Crisis. We know that the experience of the 1930s left an "invisible scar" on those who suffered its effects; the Farm Crisis, too, left a scar on its children.<sup>4</sup>

The Farm Crisis was not the first challenge the twentieth century presented to Midwestern farming families. The list of previous problems, in fact, was quite long. Farm incomes plummeted in the 1920s, and the situation went from bad to worse in the 1930s. There had been ups and downs in various communities throughout the century, often heralded by natural disasters, such as droughts, grasshopper plagues, and animal diseases such as hog cholera. In each of these cases, it was fairly easy to identify the problem that led to the crisis. In the 1920s, farmers suffered from the overexpansion of World War I. During the Great Depression, the nation as a whole experienced economic collapse, and farmers were not the only

Americans to suffer serious losses. Farm families in the 1930s could read the papers or listen to the radio and know that they were not alone in their struggles, even if the causes of that distress were perhaps not as clear as those caused by floods, fire and tornadoes.<sup>5</sup>

The 1980s presented a different kind of problem. A serious barrier to understanding the Farm Crisis was its amorphous nature. Unlike the problems of the 1920s or Great Depression, the Farm Crisis was far more geographically isolated, and far harder to define. Suffering people often struggled to understand and explain what was happening to them. Even the agricultural extension agents coping with the effects of the crisis commented that “the farm crisis of the 1980s is unique in a number of important ways that makes intervention difficult.” As they attempted to pool their resources and define the issues, they realized that the problem was big, bulky and amorphous. The larger public, which had since the Great Depression become even more urban, did not understand the problems of the countryside or necessarily sympathize with the rural Midwest’s suffering. An extension report summed up this problem of perception. “Unlike many disasters in farming where the consequences are readily visible and can often be objectively assessed, such as number of acres lost, number of diseased livestock, and so on, it is very difficult to obtain objective indicators of the extent of current difficulties.” Observers had a hard time isolating the causes of the crisis, and an even harder time identifying “the true victims of the crisis.” It was also a “rolling” disaster that threatened to become a chronic state of agricultural depression. As extension sociologists explained: “some farm families were adversely affected four or five years ago, while others are just now being impacted.” Perhaps worst of all from the point of view of sufferers, “there is a lack of consensus that there is a crisis. . . . In many areas some people still deny that a farm crisis exists.”<sup>6</sup> And yet, families were experiencing serious, and in some cases extreme, stress. For many, that stress lasted an entire

decade, from the falling land prices of the early 1980s through financial reverberations that lasted into the early 1990s and often reshaped family choices permanently.

The Farm Crisis presented a unique set of problems to the Midwest's agricultural experts, its extension personnel, as well. Paul Lasley was an Iowa State University extension sociologist at the height of the crisis, and at the center of forming the state's response. He spoke to the difficulty of tackling a new set of tasks.

It is both figuratively and literally true that extension field staff found themselves ill-prepared to respond to financial crisis that emerged. Most of the extension agricultural specialists while steeped in production and "how to grow two blades of grass where one grew before," had little to no experience in helping farm families adjust to tough economic times. Even among family life specialists, they were ill-equipped to help suicidal farmers, financially strapped farm families.<sup>7</sup>

Ill-prepared or not, extension employees would have to develop a whole range of skills in response to the needs of distressed farm families. An intense period of training, hiring and development would follow.

The bare bones of the Farm Crisis – the statistics and stories told by the Midwest's agricultural extension agents -- illustrate the depth of the problems, and point to the pain that the situation inflicted upon parents and children. In Iowa, the farmers with the worst debt-to-asset ratio were young, averaging 45 years of age. Most of them had three or more dependents and children at home under the age of 18. These families reported high levels of stress on a daily basis. Between July of 1984 and March of 1986, the number of Iowa farm families receiving food stamps soared from 500 to more than 2,000. Others who desperately needed the help were

not eligible, “due to financial guidelines which are restrictive for self-employed persons.”<sup>8</sup> The pain of hunger might be one result of the crisis; emotional pain also washed into the lives of children and young people. Extension personnel in the state noted that “Young people are exhibiting many signs of stress, ranging from atypical behavior in school to troublesome relationships in the home.”<sup>9</sup> What “atypical behavior in school” and “troublesome relationships in the home” meant, the author did not explain. Failure, truancy, fighting and delinquency certainly come to mind. Nevertheless, the situation was of enough concern that Iowa’s cooperative extension began training teachers for that moment when “Rural Crisis Comes to School,” and working with 4-H leaders who needed to help youngsters enhance their “self-esteem and personal decision-making,” or to help them find alternative, low cost options when developing their 4-H projects.<sup>10</sup> The previously unthinkable had happened: some Iowa farm families were too severely stressed to afford to give a child a pig or a calf for a 4-H project.

Iowa was not the only Midwestern state suffering: the situation in Kansas was also grim. Economists at Kansas State University estimated that 12.5 percent of the state’s farms were in “critical financial distress,” and that a quarter of the state’s rural population might be displaced by 1991.<sup>11</sup> Extension home economists were training concerned individuals in deeply depressed communities to be “Friends in Deed.” Although the level of suffering between farms and families was highly uneven, people needed to be ready to meet the needs of friends, family and acquaintances who were in crisis. Lending an ear, however, was not enough. A real safety net was yet to be put into place. As extension leaders noted, there was a crying need for more “effective caring and response networks.”<sup>12</sup> What was available was inadequate to the scope of the problem.

Rural Minnesotans were also dealing with economic disaster. The state's farm families were deeply in debt, and led the nation in the number of farms lost between June of 1984 and July of 1985. At the same time as farms were folding, debt was mushrooming and banks were failing. Six of the state's rural banks failed in 1985, and another 42 were on a list of troubled institutions.<sup>13</sup> Concerns about high levels of farm failures led researchers to examine the problems within families, and particularly among teenaged children. Fears about the mental health of teenagers prompted a statewide study by the extension service, and the development of materials for teachers, clergy, nurses and other adults in contact with "high risk" teens, with the goal of reducing levels of self-destructive behavior. Minnesota's 4-H leaders sponsored a teleconference on the topic of "Teens in Distress."<sup>14</sup> This teleconference had the specific goal of addressing the problems of youth and adolescent stress, depression and suicide, and was a collaborative program between child psychiatrists, psychologists, and 4-H youth development.<sup>15</sup> In Minnesota, mental health programming to meet the needs of children and youth was one of the main foci of relief efforts.

The concern for children and youth was certainly warranted. Farms were unlike other businesses; they were homes as well as places where children worked side by side with their parents. A lost farm was a lost home, and a lost opportunity to interact with parents in ways unfamiliar to most modern, American youth whose fathers, and often mothers, left the home every day to work. Farm families, too, tended to invest enormous meaning in their land. For them, land was not just dirt in which to grow crops, but a measure of social status, family pride, and often an inheritance passed down through generations. Land ownership took on a semi-sacred status.<sup>16</sup> As a result, the loss of a farm, or the threat of its loss, tended to be highly traumatic not just to the adults, but to all family members.

The level of distress caused by the loss of a farm could be overwhelming. Social scientists setting out to measure the degree of tension within Missouri families leaving farms discovered that the husbands and wives they interviewed had experienced extremely high levels of distressing mental and physical health problems due to stress. Among women, one hundred percent had become depressed, while 97% of the men had. More than fifty percent of both men and women had become withdrawn, sleepless, restless, experienced mood swings and had gone silent for long periods of time. Significant numbers had also lost their appetite, increased their smoking and drinking, and become aggressive, illogical or confused. Some reactions to stress were even more extreme. The researchers noted “During the interview process, a number of the men gave both subtle and not-so-subtle indications that they had seriously considered taking their own lives. One man told of taking his gun to the field and sitting there for hours before deciding not to pull the trigger.”<sup>17</sup> Professionals who worked with farmers and their offspring were well aware of the turmoil hard times caused within the household. Extension personnel throughout the Midwest turned from producing “booklets on combating soil erosion and insect infestations,” to literature on “stress management, with detailed advice to wives on signs of impending suicide in husbands.” They knew the need for children’s programming as well. Anecdotal evidence indicated that youngsters were not oblivious to the pressures affecting their parents. Children were feeling the reverberations of problems well beyond their control. Adult quarrels had children hiding in their rooms, and threatened repossession had them running for cover when there were “unexpected knocks on the farmhouse door.”<sup>18</sup>

Most of the decade’s horror stories recounted the murder-suicides perpetrated by adult men facing the loss of their property. The decade’s best known instance of this was the case of Dale Burr, of Lone Tree, Iowa, who on December 9, 1985, killed bank president John Hughes,

neighbor Richard Goody, and wife Emily Burr, before killing himself. Burr also shot at Goody's wife and six year old son. He was distraught over financial difficulties with Goody and the Hills Bank and Trust Company.<sup>19</sup> Like Richard Goody's young son, most children were bystanders, rather than perpetrators of the decade's stress-related violence. This, however, was not always the case. Some young people felt their family's pain so acutely that they took equally drastic actions. In the fall of 1983, eighteen year old Steven Todd Jenkins of rural Ruthton, Minnesota, lured two bank employees to his father's vacant farm, repossessed in 1980. There, he shot and killed Rudy H. Blythe, Jr., president of the Buffalo Ridge State Bank, and Dennis Thulin, the bank's chief loan officer. He blamed them for the repossession, and for his father's subsequent inability to obtain credit and return to farming. Jenkins and his father then fled to Texas, setting off a cross-country manhunt. At about the time that Steven Jenkins surrendered to authorities, his father committed suicide along a country road.<sup>20</sup> The story was sensational enough to merit multiple features in the *New York Times*. In part, it was sensational because such a young person was responsible for these premeditated murders. It was also sensational because of the location of the crimes, in a small, rural community. The result was the first homicide trial in Lincoln County, Minnesota in seventy-five years. Steven Jenkins would be convicted, and sentenced to a life term.<sup>21</sup>

The interpretation of events that the *Times* reporter chose to emphasize indicated that he believed that the larger problems of the farm crisis were to blame. The place in which the tragedy took place was a depressed rural community, far from the bustle of modern, urban America. The reporter's description of the town was bleak: "Ruthton's Doc White, the dentist, has moved away, like half of Ruthton's population. Red Laursen's lumberyard is gone, as are all but one of the groceries, the Allis-Chalmers farm-implements dealer, the movie house and drug

store, the creamery and skating rink. Their customers have gone to the cities for work. In 1950, there were 23 million Americans living on farms. Today, nearly four out of five have moved away.” In the reporter’s interpretation of events, a direct line of causation proceeded from the sad state of rural America to the violence in Ruthton, Minnesota. He wrote “the two murders and subsequent suicide were not the result of criminal greed or unreasoned malice, but of a waning way of life, where old solutions can no longer guarantee success, and where, increasingly, the price of adjustment can be tragic.”<sup>22</sup> The Farm Crisis story took precedence over any other possible precipitating factors, such as mental illness or difficulties within the family not necessarily related to the larger economic disaster affecting the region.

While young people’s stories of these years were usually less horrific than Steven Jenkins’, they were still often quite sad, fueled by many of the same problems. Aleta Kuhlman grew up on an Iowa farm, raising corn, cows and sheep. In 1984, the farm, however, fell into financial difficulty, with the bank threatening to foreclose and pushing the family to sell off ever more of its sheep. This led to quarrels between her parents and her father’s deepening depression. Feeling hopeless, Aleta picked up her father’s shotgun, and took it outside with her, intending to commit suicide. Although she turned back from the deed, her actions seemed unsurprising in the context of the decade. Adult men succumbed to fear; why not teenaged girls? As Kristy Miller, another Iowa high school girl commented, “It’s scary to see your folks scared.” School nurses, social workers, ministers and others reported an increase in depression, abuse, and stress-related conditions such as headaches, stomachaches, and bedwetting.<sup>23</sup> Doctors encountered one case of a small child who ceased to grow for more than a year. Their diagnosis was stress; “Sensing the family as a whole under pressure, the child had become an ‘emotional caretaker’ to the parents.”<sup>24</sup> As family pressures grew, the child failed to do so.

Children whose families were caught in the crisis had to adjust to a vastly altered family landscape. Some had to learn to deal with the loss of farms and homes. Rural homelessness, previously somewhat rare, was on the rise, and many communities lacked even the most basic of resources to aid newly impoverished families.<sup>25</sup> But even those youngsters whose losses were less overwhelming had to learn new ways of life. In the face of economic uncertainty, many farm women took off-farm jobs for the first time, leaving elementary school-aged children alone after school or in the care of older children. This could be hard on the children, and the changing roles of parents who had previously worked together, rather than apart, could lead to even more quarreling and dissention. The transition was not easy.<sup>26</sup> Economic depression in the farm belt appeared to be leading to emotional depression among the area's elders. Children could not help but absorb some of the gloom pervading their homes, communities and region.<sup>27</sup>

While this interpretation of events seems logical, drawn from both extension and media reports of Midwestern farm life at the height of the Farm Crisis, one account by a historian, written and published in the thick of the decade's events, takes a remarkably different tone. In the farm homes described in Mark Friedberger's 1989 book, *Shake-Out: Iowa Farm Families in the 1980s*, family life continued on in a remarkably pleasant, almost benign fashion. Basing his analysis on interviews conducted during the mid-1980s with two-generation farm families in four Iowa counties, Friedberger found that "those in trouble were remarkably free of family trouble." He elaborated "Whatever differences they [family members] had seem to have been forgotten under the stress of lender pressure." In the face of financial disaster, families bonded together, sacrificed for their children, and even formed country bands, in order to provide themselves an outlet for their emotional stress. They shielded their high school and college age children from the reality of their family position.<sup>28</sup> Friedberger cited farm families' refusal to take advantage

of food stamps as a particular sign of strength. He wrote, “those who got into trouble . . . were skeptical of outside assistance. Whether by using the law to secure a measure of their rights, by seeking an off-farm job, or by using some other aspect of the mobilization effort, they determined to remain as independent as possible.” These conclusions provide an interesting, and perhaps useful, framework for studying the era. Friedberger may have studied four counties where the situation was less dire and the family relationships were unusually hardy relative to the rest of the state. The numbers of farm failures he cited, however, would seem to argue otherwise. Family relationships behind closed doors may – or may not – have been significantly different from those that individuals were willing to reveal to a visiting historian asking personal questions. Friedberger’s findings suggest that it is important to understand the place family resilience played in the face of economic turmoil, a possibility suggested by other research as well.

In the midst of the crisis, social scientists sprang into action, hoping to understand what this experience meant, and would continue to mean for the region. One of the most prolific writers of the crisis was sociologist Glenn Elder. In 1974, he had published *Children of the Great Depression: Social Change in Life Experience*. A generation had passed since the travails of the Great Depression, and Elder, looking at the experiences of a group of individuals who had lived through the Great Depression in Oakland, California, examined the ways in which that crisis had molded children’s lives and shaped their expectations and courses of action as adults. Sure enough, deprivation had produced results, although not always in the ways researchers had anticipated. What emerged was a picture of strength deriving from hardship. These children of the Great Depression were a relatively high achieving group, although their achievements generally derived from “effort and accomplishments” gained outside of formal education. Their

childhood deprivation also encouraged the depression's children to place a high value on "things that matter," such as family. The women in the study, in particular, valued their roles as wives and mothers; they tended to be traditionalists. Those who grew up in "relatively nondeprived" families, whose fathers remained employed and families remained stable throughout the depression, should have had much better life chances, "And yet from the evidence at hand, this promise does not appear to be fulfilled in their adult lives, at least when compared to the adult experience of children from deprived homes."<sup>29</sup> Hard times experienced in childhood did not necessarily lead to a difficult adult life, but the times in which they were raised did shape individuals' adult experiences in significant ways.

For Elder and other social scientists, the Farm Crisis offered an unparalleled opportunity to study the impact of another, similar economic disaster as it happened to a new generation of children. Glenn Elder and co-author Rand Conger authored two books on family and the Farm Crisis, and their work pointed to the variable effects of hard times on the children who experienced them. In both cases, they fixed their sights on Iowa, and in particular the results of the Iowa Youth and Families Project out of Iowa State University. The study involved over 400 of the state's families, all with 14-year old children in their households. The massive disruptions of the 1980s triggered the research. Among Midwestern states, Iowa suffered the greatest outmigration during a decade of hard times.<sup>30</sup>

While studying the entirety of the family experience in the Farm Crisis, the researchers found a number of adaptations to hard times. Like the families of the Great Depression, farm families affected by the Farm Crisis eliminated a number of expenditures, but they also put their members to work. Men took on extra jobs, women went out to work, sometimes for the first time since their children were born, and adolescents took jobs. Youth contributed to their

families through both paid and unpaid employment, largely before and after school and during weekends and summers. In many ways, the children's work habits harkened back to the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, when farm families relied heavily on the labors of the young. In the midst of the farm crisis, more than 90% of the boys and girls surveyed by the Iowa Youth and Families Project worked for wages, and much of that money went for family needs, or personal needs that might under other circumstances have been paid for by the family, such as funds used for school fees or clothing. Youngsters also found themselves taking over more of the work of the household, in order to compensate for needs created by mothers taking jobs outside the home.<sup>31</sup> Hard times on the farm demanded that children put the needs of the family ahead of their own desires, much as farm children of previous generations, and in contrast to the family expectations of children growing up in less distressed circumstances.

Family experience of the Farm Crisis had an emotional impact as well. Families that lost farms experienced stress and grief, and sometimes looked back on what they had previously had with longing. Economic stress could also trigger significant marital conflict. When parents were unable to shield their children from this stress, it had adverse consequences for those children's lives. Sibling relationships might suffer. Girls might experience a loss of self-confidence, while boys might exhibit more antisocial and hostile behavior. Even families that survived the downturn in relatively good shape economically might experience the emotional stresses imposed by the crisis. A large number of families emerged from the decade without significant losses, and were able to increase the size of their holdings from the bits and pieces of the farms of those who failed. This, however, did not guarantee happiness. Those who were doing fairly well also experienced a "depressed mood" throughout much of the decade, and many mothers in those families also went out to work, another family stressor.<sup>32</sup> Their children, too, may have

absorbed their parents' moods. The hardships experienced by even the economically healthy reflected the stress created by an economic downturn affecting a whole region. It also may have reflected a certain amount of survivor's guilt.

Elder and Conger followed their study of farm families with a study of farm youth, published as *Children of the Land: Adversity and Success in Rural America*. They focused on the children identified by the Iowa Youth and Families Project, and followed them into the decade after the Farm Crisis. Looking back at the experiences of youth in that decade, Elder and Conger reaffirmed that the farm crisis had the potential to seriously affect children whose families suffered through the decade: "Objective family deprivations did, in fact, increase the risk of a depressed mood among parents through felt economic pressures. Depressed feelings also significantly heightened the likelihood of marital strife, and consequently the risk of harsh behavior by both parents. These behaviors, in turn, undermined the boys' self-confidence, peer acceptance, and school performance. Similar results have been reported for girls." The crisis encouraged moodiness, irritability and anger in all parents, no matter how stable they had been in previous years, and their children, both boys and girls, were vulnerable to their parents' stress.<sup>33</sup> That was the finding when the research subjects were fourteen year-olds, in the midst of the crisis.

The news, however, was not as bad as this would imply; the news, in fact, was good. As the authors emphasized, "*life trajectories are by no means solely determined by socioeconomic disadvantage and subsequent misfortune.*"<sup>34</sup> When the researchers followed the 14-year olds whose farm families experienced significant upheaval into their high school years, they found that those youngsters were not seriously disadvantaged. They concluded that children from farm families had suffered less than might have been expected, because of the social capital within

farming communities. They wrote, “young people with ties of the land are more successful across all domains than other adolescents. They tend to rank higher on academic performance, social prominence, self-confidence, and the avoidance of problem behavior, other factors being equal. This level of accomplishment has much to do with the social resources of their families.”<sup>35</sup> The children’s work, their families’ ties to community and their involvement in positive peer experiences tempered the pain of family dislocation, and led to better outcomes. Having a strong network of caring adults also improved the odds of achievement by farm youth, since many had two parents, two or more grandparents, as well as aunts and uncles living nearby. Family support and guidance led to success. Many affected youth followed high school with college, in fact, far more than non-farm youth.<sup>36</sup> Like the Great Depression cohort Elder previously studied, these young people had not been beaten by their families’ trials.

The authors presented their vision of a rural world ideally suited to nurturing youth, no matter what the economic circumstances were. Because Iowa farms were, in their view, ideal places to raise children, the damage done by adverse circumstances was limited and turned into further social capital, in the form of resilient children who could thrive in the face of adversity. Elder and Conger ended their analysis with crisis-affected youngsters off to college, throwing aside the hardships endured in their teenaged years. They had done more than simply survive. This outcome led Elder and Conger to ruminate about the long-term effects to the United States of low numbers of American children growing up on farms. If family farms were an ideal place to raise children, and cultivated resiliency and other positive characteristics in the nation’s young, then a nation without a large number of youth on farms would be poorer, indeed. They argued, “The maintenance of healthy agricultural communities requires a policy that enables farming families to remain on the land, particularly those of mid-size and above. With the high

costs of rural depopulation at issue, wisdom demands more effective coordination of agriculture *and* social policies. Family-based farms serve a larger purpose than agricultural production in the Midwest; they are the core foundation of community life.” They commented further, “The same cannot be said of factory farms.”<sup>37</sup> The story of children’s experiences in the Farm Crisis served a purpose, highlighting the need for a certain type of farm, a certain configuration of the countryside, and a resulting family structure.

Thirty years have passed since the height of the Farm Crisis. The children who witnessed their parents’ struggles as farms faltered, and often failed, are now grown. Some took over the farm, and are working there today. Many more moved on to other places and other occupations, now that the farm was unable to support them – or they were unwilling to stake their futures on the farm. In late twentieth century Iowa, for example, the farm population fell precipitously, while the state as a whole either held its ground, or even grew slightly in some decades. The Des Moines metropolitan area grew, and grew considerably, while the open country became ever more open.<sup>38</sup> The exact relationship between this set of facts and the Farm Crisis of the 1980s, we do not know. How much of that new, urban population was composed of young refugees from hard times in rural America, we also do not know. This, however, is the perfect time to examine this phenomenon, and ask former farm children, now grown, what affect the events of the 1980s had on their lives. Was it relatively benign, as Friedberger would suggest, because their parents successfully shielded them from the worst of the crisis? Did it foster resiliency, as Elder and Conger have argued? Were parents, grandparents, 4-H leaders and teachers able to keep children’s lives on an even keel, even though many families’ farms were on the brink of extinction? Were families able to see their changed circumstances in a positive light? Did the stresses, strains and pains of the decade thoroughly permeate the lives of the young, and have an

indelible effect on the choices they made as adults? Now is the time to ask the questions, while memories are reasonably fresh, and people have had time to process their experiences. If the experience of the 1930s is any predictor of results, what historians will find is that the Farm Crisis of the 1980s had a significant impact on the lives of children experiencing it, and some of that impact will have been positive, leading to the development of strength and ingenuity on the part of those people who were most seriously affected. And as in the 1930s, a heavy burden fell on parents to respond constructive ways, in order to keep their children's lives stable as possible.<sup>39</sup> What form did the scar of the Farm Crisis take? It is highly likely that the response of the parents shaped the effect on the child, and the outcomes for children were as diverse as their parents' personalities and experiences. Further study will tell the long-term impact of the Farm Crisis of the 1980s on individual lives, and will help us to understand the formative impact of economic crisis on children when changes in the circumstances of a group force their elders to rethink the very foundations of their lives.

## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> For a description of the magnitude of the crisis in rural Iowa, see Glenn H. Elder, Jr., and Rand D. Conger, *Children of the Land: Adversity and Success in Rural America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 3-5.

<sup>2</sup> Kathleen Beery and Robert W. Jolly, “Extension and Research Programs on Rural Financial Stress in Iowa,” in Paul Lasley, Rand Conger and Curtis Stofferahn, *Farm Crisis Response: Extension and Research Activities in the North Central Region* (Ames, IA: North Central Regional Center for Rural Development, 1986), 5.

<sup>3</sup> See Rand D. Conger and Glen H. Elder, *Families in Troubled Times: Adapting to Change in Rural America*, for a description of the economic contours of the situation. Rand D. Conger and Glen H. Elder, *Families in Troubled Times: Adapting to Change in Rural America* (New York: Aldine De Gruyter, 1994), 57-78.

<sup>4</sup> See Caroline Bird, *The Invisible Scar: The Great Depression, and What it Did to American Life, from Then Until Now* (Philadelphia: D. McKay Co., 1966).

<sup>5</sup> For a description of the economic troubles of the twenties and thirties, see R. Douglas Hurt, *American Agriculture: A Brief History* (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1994), 263-330.

<sup>6</sup> Lasley, Conger and Stofferahn, 1.

<sup>7</sup> Paul Lasley, e-mail communication with author, June 8, 2015.

<sup>8</sup> Kathleen Beery and Robert W. Jolly, “Extension and Research Programs on Rural Financial Stress in Iowa,” in Lasley, Conger and Stofferahn, 5- 6. Undoubtedly, the problems of poverty and hunger on farms were made worse by the abandonment over time of a number of strategies for “making do or doing without.” The families of the 1930s knew these techniques well; by the 1980s, much of this knowledge was lost or disused. For a discussion of the knowledge that made

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survival in hard times less dire, see Dorothy Schwieder and Deborah Fink, “Plains Women: Rural Life in the 1930s,” *Great Plains Quarterly* 8 (Spring 1988): 79-88.

<sup>9</sup> Beery and Jolly, 10.

<sup>10</sup> Beery and Jolly, 10-11. While Beery and Jolly did not indicate what these “alternative options” for 4-H projects were, it is likely they were projects such as cooking, baking, room remodeling and furniture refinishing, which required considerably smaller infusions of capital.

<sup>11</sup> William M. Eberle and S.L. Ward, “Farm Crisis Response in Kansas,” in Lasley, Conger and Stofferahn, 22.

<sup>12</sup> Eberle and Ward, 24-25.

<sup>13</sup> Kathy Mangum, “Problem Support Tackles Rural Problems in Minnesota,” in Lasley, Conger and Stofferahn, 32.

<sup>14</sup> Magnum, 34.

<sup>15</sup> Joyce A. Walker, “Often Difficult – But Worth It,” *Journal of Extension* 26, 4 (Winter 1988): 4FEA1; <http://www.joe.org/joe/1988winter/a1.php>, accessed June 9, 2015.

<sup>16</sup> Sonya Salamon, “Changing Family Farms and Rural Community Relationships,” in 99<sup>th</sup> Congress, 2d Session, Joint Economic Committee, Congress of the United States, *New Dimensions in Rural Policy: Building Upon Our Heritage* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1986), 246-247.

<sup>17</sup> William D. Heffernan and Judith B. Heffernan, “The Farm Crisis and the Rural Community,” in *New Dimensions in Rural Policy*, 276-277.

<sup>18</sup> Andrew H. Malcolm, “Problems on Farms Take Toll on Family Life,” *New York Times*, November 20, 1984, A1, ProQuest, accessed January 22, 2015.

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<sup>19</sup>“4 Dead in Rampage in an Iowa Town,” *New York Times*, December 10, 1985, A18. For a general discussion of suicides among Midwestern farmers during the 1980s, see Mark Friedberger, *Shake-Out: Iowa Farm Families in the 1980s* (Lexington: University of Kentucky, 1989), 73-74.

<sup>20</sup> Andrew H. Malcolm, “Son of Farmer Who Failed Goes on Trial in Killing of Two Bankers,” *New York Times*, April 11, 1984, A14, ProQuest, accessed February 26, 2015; Andrew H. Malcolm, “Murder on the Family Farm,” *New York Times*, March 23, 1986, SM40, ProQuest, accessed January 22, 2015; *State v. Anderson*, No. C4-84-964, State of Minnesota, Respondent, v. Steven Todd ANDERSON, f.k.a. Steven Todd Jenkins, Appellant, Supreme Court of Minnesota, December 13, 1985, accessed from Leagle.com, March 3, 2015.

<sup>21</sup> Andrew H. Malcolm, “Son of Farmer Who Failed Goes on Trial in Killing of 2 Bankers,” *New York Times*, April 11, 1984, A14, ProQuest, Accessed January 22, 2015; Andrew H. Malcolm, “Murder on the Family Farm,” *New York Times*, March 23, 1986, SM 40, ProQuest, accessed January 22, 2015. Steven Jenkins, now named Steven Anderson, could be released from prison in 2015. In 2000, after years of denying his guilt, Anderson finally confessed to the murders, and expressed remorse for depriving “four kids of their fathers and other people of their brothers, sons and husbands. And I had not just deeply affected the families, but also colleagues and entire communities.” “Man Convicted in ’83 Killings Says He’s Remorseful,” *TwinCities.com News*, September 28, 2013, [http://www.twincities.com/news/ci\\_24197200/man-accused-1983-killings-says-hes-remorseful](http://www.twincities.com/news/ci_24197200/man-accused-1983-killings-says-hes-remorseful), accessed March 3, 2015.

<sup>22</sup> Andrew H. Malcolm, “Murder on the Family Farm,” *New York Times*, March 23, 1986, SM 40, Proquest, accessed January 22, 2015.

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- <sup>23</sup> “Growing Up Afraid: Farm Crisis is Taking Subtle Toll on Children in Distressed Families,” *Wall Street Journal*, November 7, 1985, ProQuest, accessed January 22, 2015.
- <sup>24</sup> Dennis Farney, “In Iowa, Mental Anguish Still Racks Families, Taxes Social Workers, Even as Farm Crisis Abates,” *Wall Street Journal*, May 18, 1988, ProQuest, accessed January 22, 2015.
- <sup>25</sup> Isabel Wilkerson, “As Farms Falter, Rural Homelessness Grows,” *New York Times*, May 2, 1989, A1, ProQuest, accessed January 22, 2015.
- <sup>26</sup> Janet Elder, “Women’s Jobs Help Save Many Farms,” *New York Times*, December 11, 1886, C1, ProQuest, accessed January 22, 2015.
- <sup>27</sup> Andrew H. Malcolm, “Deepening Financial Troubles Taking Emotional Toll on Midwest’s Farmers,” *New York Times*, June 15, 1983, A14, ProQuest, accessed January 22, 2015; William Robbins, “Farm Belt Suicides Reflect Greater Hardship and Deepening Despondency,” *New York Times*, January 14, 1986, A11, ProQuest, accessed January 22, 2015.
- <sup>28</sup> Mark Friedberger, *Shake-Out: Iowa Farm Families in the 1980s* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1989), 105-109.
- <sup>29</sup> Glen H. Elder, Jr., *Children of the Great Depression* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974), 281-283.
- <sup>30</sup> Glenn H. Elder, Jr., and Rand D. Conger, *Children of the Land*, 3.
- <sup>31</sup> Glenn H. Elder, Jr., E. Michael Foster and Monika Ardel, “Children in the Household Economy,” in Conger and Elder, *Families in Troubled Times*, 143-146.
- <sup>32</sup> Conger and Elder, *Families in Troubled Times*, 257, 261-262.
- <sup>33</sup> Elder and Conger, *Children of the Land*, 229-230.
- <sup>34</sup> Elder and Conger, *Children of the Land*, 230.
- <sup>35</sup> Elder and Conger, *Children of the Land*, 232.

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<sup>36</sup> Elder and Conger, *Children of the Land*, 232-233, 244-245.

<sup>37</sup> Elder and Conger, *Children of the Land*, 248.

<sup>38</sup> Elder and Conger, *Children of the Land*, 8-9.

<sup>39</sup> Conger and Elder, *Families in Troubled Times*, 262.