



The Brinkman farm, north side of Section 18, Garfield Township, 1989.

From the yet to be published book *The Road I Grew Up On: Requiem for a Vanishing Era*  
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# THE NEXT FARMS ALONG THE ROAD

## The Brinkman Farm

Albert and Hattie Peers and three daughters moved to Iowa from Kentucky in 1925. Albert was a hired hand first for Gus Brinkman then moved to Henry Brinkman's north farm in 1929 where a fourth daughter was born. In 1932, the Peers moved to town.

Wanda Peers Hodgell was one of Albert and Hattie's four daughters. As a young bride in the early 1940s, Wanda lived on my grandparents' farm where her husband Merle was a hired hand. Wanda says, "I have been in the position of being the hired man's daughter. I've been a tenant farmer's wife, and then we own a little land at this point, and [each role] has good points and disadvantages."



Wanda Peers Hodgell, circa 1993.

Wanda's parents were poor. She dropped out of school after eighth grade because she was embarrassed about her clothing. However, she is the one who introduced me to the poetry of James Hearst. She says, "I have been called a snob and arrogant, but I don't think I am. Really, I have been more shy . . . but I simply have no time for idle chitchat." She talks about her connection to the land and the religious perspectives she has learned from it.

I see spring as the Easter, the new life. Summer is the growing period. Fall is preparation for death. And then it comes around again. We revive in the spring. There is something stable about seeing a tree and seeing grass and knowing it will go dormant, but that it will come again.

She tells about losing a 19-year-old son in a car accident.

He left one night and never came back. And through the next spring and into the summer, there were times when I decided there was no God. But I have often thought about our burial plots in Gilmore, and had the thought that the three of us will be there, and ultimately, if we are nothing but this good black soil, that's not so bad.

I ask what season rural America is in. She responds, "I hate to believe that it is the fall, but I have an uneasy feeling it may very well be. Things have always changed, and people have always survived." She adds that some people are rigid like oak trees and others are flexible like willows and that they will adapt to change in differing ways.

I ask what her grandchildren will remember from her. She says, "It's hard to say because something you say that you think is really deep passes right over their heads. And something else you say as a side remark really impresses them. I don't know if it is so much what I say as what I do." Wanda loves Robert Frost's "Swinger of Birches" and says, "I never read that poem but that I see myself climbing up on the rocks and swinging out" over the cattle lot on the Brinkman farm.

Floyd and Naomi Page and their children moved to Rolfe in 1947 when he became a hired hand for Henry Brinkman. The Page family first lived on the Brinkman south farm, then moved to the Brinkman farm along my road until they moved away in the 1950s.

LaVonne Page Howland was the oldest of 10 children.

Father was only paid once every two weeks. So groceries were bought for two weeks at a time. I can remember my mother sitting down — she would spend the afternoon, making out the grocery list — knowing the amount of money and writing it down, so much went for this and so much for that. She knew the price of everything, figuring it out, "Oh, I can't spend that much. What do I have on here that we don't have to have?"

LaVonne didn't go to Webb's Drug Store very much.

Because if you spent a nickel there, you only got one thing, but if you went to McAnnich's, you got several things for the nickel. And they have all this penny candy. You could get five things, and you didn't eat them all at once. You would eat one now, and then you would have one for Sunday, Monday, Tuesday.

She said her father was a stubborn, independent man.

Anybody who hired him got their full money's worth. Whatever they paid him, he more than gave back to them. He was a very hard worker, and he didn't say, "Well, I hired only to work from 9 to 5" or whatever. He put in far more time and was conscientious about how he did his work.

She tells about a time when Henry Brinkman stopped at their place when her dad was taking a coffee break. Henry said, "We don't do this. You don't stop until it's time for lunch." But Floyd said he did and invited Henry to have a cup. And that's when the routine of Henry stopping for coffee began. LaVonne's mom would often have a cake.

One time, Henry had a team of horses the men couldn't handle, but that LaVonne could, and he told her the horses would be hers for doing chores. She also remembers helping animals when they delivered offspring when she was in sixth or seventh grade.

Sometimes when they're going to deliver, they get into complications, so you got to reach in and pull the pigs out. We had a calf born that I helped. It took two of us to pull. And when we got him here, he was blind, so I took him to the house and took care of him. And Henry said he was mine. I babied the calf and took the best care of him, but he couldn't make it.



LaVonne Page Howland, 2003.

I loved farming, I enjoyed being out there, even when it was cold. To this day, I love the horses. I will take the horses over a tractor any day. I would fit well with the Amish people. I hated chickens — the worst animal God ever created was a chicken on a farm.

LaVonne had to feed the chickens, gather the eggs, and hope they didn't peck her. The chickens belonged to her family, and if there were extra eggs, they would sell them.

Henry gave us a cow, and the milk was ours. And we got a hog and half a beef a year. And we always had a big garden. Our life was not perfect by any means. It was hard, very hard at times.

As brothers and sisters, they had to work together as a family. She says there was no choice. They still have a deep-seated connection. She also says that because of some circumstances in her family, she was never allowed to show any feelings.

I never could give a viewpoint if I didn't agree or didn't whatever. That was just out. The farm was my outlet. The out and wide open. Nothing could find me. I wasn't

penned in. If I could get off by myself, I could say what I felt, I could do what I wanted, I could let it go because the birds weren't going to say anything. If it was garden time, I would go work in the garden. I knew I couldn't undo or change anything, but it was a way of feeling better. Or maybe the barn would need cleaning or I would just go out with the livestock.

LaVonne says her attachment to farm life "is not so much to the building or the place but to the farming experience. The relationship between a human being and the farm. The raising of livestock, the raising of crops. You found your contentment in getting an apple off the tree. The meadowlarks singing. Watching the clouds and seeing things in them."

The first paid work LaVonne did was detassling. Next she worked for Merrit Bailey at the Cozy Corner Cafe, located in Rolfe on the corner where the Pronto Store now stands. She had to walk two and a half miles to work.

I loved it then. It was so busy. We would be open every night until ten, and Wednesday, Friday, and Saturday nights were just terrific. On Friday nights, there were all the hamburgers and the malts after basketball and football games. And I liked it, and that helped me overcome some of my bashfulness because you got to talk to people if you're going to wait on them. And it was the beginning of my finding out I enjoyed people.

Rolfe had several restaurants. There were four grocery stores. We had Ferkin's, which was kind of a hardware-type of store, and the dime store. There was the bakery, Whitmore's. There were four or five barbers. The jewelry store. Several service stations, and the theater. Saturday nights were lots of fun. People parked all up and down the streets, and when it was warm weather, the streets were full. You could hardly get by, there was all the talking, and you could smell popcorn a-poppin'. And all the stores would be full of people. Maybe some were sitting in the car, others were out in the street, and you would hear the laughing and the calling out to one another, greeting one another. It was a fun experience.

I was fortunate in meeting Roger when I did and getting into this family because this family had love. They had their priorities straight. Love came first with material things second. They care for one another in a genuine way. When I came into the family, they accepted me for me, not what they could get out of me. But for me as a person.

Roger and LaVonne are married and live in Rolfe. He is an electrician, and she does freelance sewing and cake baking. In fact, she made the cakes for my 50th birthday party that I held at the Rolfe school home economics room and gym. LaVonne loves making cakes. "A wedding cake especially. I can put so much into it. Be creative. Feel good. And it's quiet time. There is nothing in the world but me and the cake. Sewing. I enjoy sewing. I can't do it for as long a period of time now as I used to."

She has served as an Elder of the Shared Ministry of Rolfe, a combination of the former Methodist and Presbyterian congregations. LaVonne describes the contrast between when our grandfathers were on the farms and the way things are now.

When they were on the farm, the church was first. When you went to town, you went to the church. The church was the hub. Today, the church is last. Socially — because of

modern things and transportation, and the new lifestyles — the church has become last in our calendar of importance.

Asked if she misses the farm, LaVonne quickly responds,

Oh yes, I would have been happy on the farm. I love the outdoors. I love being in God's world. You can find a quietness. The planting of a little seed that grows into such an enormous thing and the livestock. Animals can be great friends. They rely on you but they're good friends. Looking back for me, sure it wasn't easy, the type of farming then, but I liked it. I enjoyed it, except I wouldn't have chickens again.



During the 1990s, the barn that was between the windmill and granary was cleared, and a few years later the rest of the structures were razed so the site could be tilled for a two-year rotation of corn and soybeans. Fortunately, Robert Brinkman, the farmer-owner, gave Helen a portion of the windmill ladder to use in exhibits.

## The Reigelsberger Farm

Joe and Norine Reigelsberger lived on this farm until 1992, when they moved to a new house in town. Their son, Mick, and his wife Sue then moved out to the farm with their four-year-old twins, Kaitlin and Joseph. Prior to the twins arrival on the road, there had been no children or school bus on it for over ten years.

Joe's parents, Eva and Lee, bought the place in 1929. Their parents had owned land in Indiana and Missouri, but this was the first property the young couple owned. They moved here in 1930, when Joe was five. His two sisters were born on the farm that originally belonged to David and Rosa Dady, who used it as pasture. There were no row crops until after 1916. The house had been a harness shop in Rolfe and pulled out to the farm. Joe said,

During the Depression of the 1930s, we almost lost this place. We made no interest payment, paid no taxes or principal on it for about 2½ years. We didn't have the money. One of my worst fears was that the sheriff would set us out on the road — and I would hear my folks talk about the possibility — and for a little kid to think about losing his home, it's kind of traumatic.

However, lenders did not take back the Reigelsberger farm because they could not turn around and sell it for as much as Joe's parents owed. Land was priced at \$65 per acre, but Eva and Lee had borrowed \$95 per acre. Joe has never forgotten his early fear of losing his home. He says, "Since then, there have been ups and downs, of course, but they haven't been nearly as traumatic as that."

Joe's family had been Republicans until they switched to the Democratic party in 1932 when Roosevelt promised a farm program. Corn had been selling at 8 to 12 cents a bushel, but the first time they sealed their corn (i.e., obtained a government loan against the corn while storing it on the farm) under the new program, the price per bushel went up to 33 cents.



The Reigelsberger farm, south side, Section 12, Roosevelt Township, 1990. The corncrib in the center has been razed, and a new pole building for machine storage has been built at the right behind the small tree.

As a youngster, I used to walk a quarter mile to visit the Reigelsberger family, especially Joe's sisters, Helen and Mary Therese, who let me ride their horse. Later, Dad informed us that Joe, a bachelor living with his folks, was going to get married and admonished us that we shouldn't tease him. Joe had been a Marine, serving in China during World War II. When he came back, he went to G.I. farm classes at Havelock where he met Wayne Arnold from Plover who introduced Joe to his sister, Norine, at a dance at the Ridotto Ballroom just east of Havelock.



Norine and Joe Reigelberger, 1953 and 1996.

After Joe and Norine married, they moved to the farm. I recall visiting them at their old, two-story, white house and Norine confiding in me that they were going to build a ranch-style house on the farm. Joe had given her the parameters of what they could have, then she drew up the plans and had blueprints made. She showed them to me, but said not to tell anyone. Norine was also the assistant 4-H leader and helped me clean chickens, even though she had never done it before. We learned by reading a book and asking advice from John Tiernan, a handyman from town, who was painting the corncrib at my folks farm. He loaned us his hatchet, but Norine and I were not adept at using it and ended up with a mess.

I also remember living at home for several months during the early 1970s and playing touch football, golfing, and fishing for bullheads with Mick and his brother Greg.

Joe's parents subscribed to *The Wallace's Farmer* and *Iowa Homestead* magazines during the Depression. He had long been impressed with the Wallace people and the history of the Pioneer Seed Company. "Everything they said or did was to aid the farmer." Joe used their seed and figured if an opening ever came up to have a dealership, he "would leave no clod unturned" to get it. The opportunity presented itself in the early 1980s, and since then, the Reigelsbergers have had a Pioneer seed business in addition to their farming operation. Norine learned to use a computer to run the Pioneer software and to do the bookkeeping. She also does the cleaning and plans their annual Pioneer pig roast.

I asked Norine if she considered herself a farmer. She said, "No, not really." She added that she does make farm decisions now, managing land she inherited near Plover. Joe added that there was one time when Norine nearly fired him as her tenant and hired Mick. Norine teasingly responded, "I threaten a lot."

After high school, Mick took a winter farm operations course at Iowa State, then he went to Iowa Lakes College where he took electrical courses and met Sue. Mick has taken over the farming operation that includes land in Roosevelt Township and Norine's property near Plover. Sue is a clerk in the county assessor's office at the courthouse in Pocahontas but arranges

her schedule so she can help Mick with farming during the busy planting and harvest seasons.

Joe and my dad have been known to collaborate on many ventures. There was the time that Joe and Norine and Dad and Mother rented a plane and flew to the World Series in Saint Louis. During one era, Joe was the Roosevelt Township Democratic committee man, Norine was the township Democratic committee woman, Dad was the township Republican committee man, and Mother was the township Republican committee woman. Before Dad retired at the age of 57 in 1976, he and Joe worked together to plant their crops. In 1990, Joe wanted to plant his Pioneer demonstration plot on land directly across the road from his building site, on land that was part of Mother's and Dad's farm. Dad and Joe made the deal, and my parents' renters, Dan and Roger Allen from town, did the work. All parties involved seemed to be proud of the plot and thought it nearly a work of art. Currently, the Reigelbergers have their demonstration plot on their own land.



Reigelberger crop demonstration plot, 2001.

In September 1992, two months before they moved to town, I interviewed Joe and Norine at their farm. We talked briefly about the church. I asked Joe about the connections he saw between the Sacrament of Mass and his everyday work. I also asked what kinds of things he thought about when he was planting and harvesting, whether he reflected on spiritual issues or had common, ordinary thoughts. He side-stepped the question about the relationship of church and work but talked about what went on in his mind when he drove the combine.

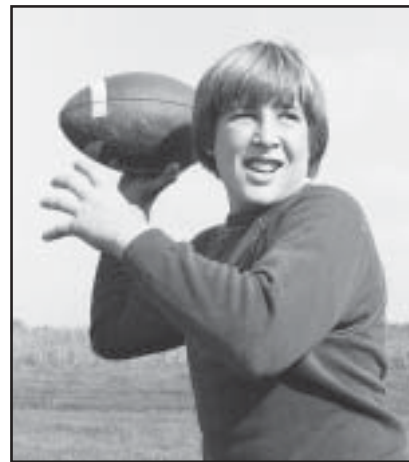
Oh, just common, ordinary thinking. There's enough noise and rattles. It's about like driving in the city on a thoroughfare that's got about five lanes of traffic, and you have never been on that stretch of road before, and you're looking for road signs. You're pretty fully occupied. So you really don't get much of a chance to lay back and relax and just drift in thought. You've got to stay on the ball the whole time and think about what you're doing, or the first thing you're going to do is pick up a small rock, or be off the row, or something of the like.

I also asked Joe and Norine about their decision to move to town. Norine said,

I guess we felt that Mick and Sue needed to be out here since he is doing the farming, and as we get older, I don't really care to be stuck out here in the country. We felt we needed a house that was all on one floor in case one of us became disabled or something — and we would still be able to live in the house — maybe keep us from the nursing

home a year or two longer. (Chuckle) Not a very pleasant thought, but those are all things you have to think of when you get to be our age. Mainly, we felt that Mick and Sue needed to be out here — and that they wanted to be out here — and they should be. Just like when Joe and I got married, his folks left the farm, and we moved out here. It's kind of a cycle that you go through, and this is the time for us to move on.

The best news about the Reigelsbergers, as far as I am concerned, is twofold. One is a profound sense of observing cycles and watching Mick, the lithe kid I played football with, now in his late 30s, meeting the challenges of farming and being a parent. The other is that Kaitlin and Joseph are new faces on the road, and it is fun to watch them grow and get to know them. Norine says, "If now is any indication, little 'Joe' is going to be a farmer because he is out with Mick working all the time."



Above: Mick Reigelsberger on left and Greg Reigelsberger on right playing football at Helen's parents' farm in early 1970s. Below: Kaitlin and Joseph Reigelsberger in the Reigelsberger warehouse, 1994.





Photos, opposite, top left: Sign for Reigelsberger seed business, circa 2000. Opposite, top right: Kaitlin and Joseph wait for the school bus, 1994. Opposite, middle, left: Kaitlin and Joseph dressed for snow, 1996. Opposite, middle, right: Kaitlin and Joseph on the combine, 1998. Opposite, bottom: The school bus arrives, 1994. This page, top left: A rural street sign with fallow Reigelsberger field in the background. This page, top right: Norine and Joe's mailbox when they lived on the farm, 1992. This page, bottom: The mailbox that Dan Allen made for Mick and Sue, 1994.

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