



The last buildings at the farm where the Jordan family lived on the south side of Section 10, Roosevelt Township, 1994. Both buildings have been razed, and the land is used to grow corn and soybeans.

From the yet to be published book
The Road I Grew Up On: Requiem for a Vanishing Era
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THE WEST FARMS

The Farm Where the Jordans Lived



Russel and Mary Jane Jordan, circa 1945. From the Russel and Mary Jane Jordan collection.

Russel and Mary Jane Jordan and their children moved to Pocahontas County in 1951. At first they rented 280 acres along the road but eventually contracted 560 acres, which was most of the section, and moved to a building site a mile north of the road. Their children were of an age range similar to our family, resulting in some close friendships. The Jordan driveway was across the road from the lane that led to the Otto farm. At one time, at least eight children would get on the school bus when it stopped at the rise in the road between the two farms to pick up the Ottos from the south side of the road and the Jordans from the north. In 1975, the Jordans moved back to rural Atlantic in southwest Iowa where Russel farmed his family's homeplace farm.

One of the Jordan daughters, Jeanne, is a film editor in the Boston area, working on PBS-style programs. She and her cinematographer husband, Steve Ascher, produced a docu-

mentary about her father's homeplace that had been in the family since the Civil War. Russel and Mary Jane nearly lost it to the bank in the early 1990s. The program, titled *Troublesome Creek: A Midwestern*, won the Grand Jury Prize and the Audience Award at the Sundance Film Festival and was nominated for an Academy Award in 1996. It was shown in theaters across the nation and around the world. It also became part of the public television series, *The American Experience*.

On a Sunday afternoon in 1995, the Shared Ministry of Rolfe (a union of the town's Methodists and Presbyterians) held a worship service to commemorate the closing of the Presbyterian church and deconsecrate the building. Following the events, I headed back to Pocahontas where I was staying with friends. However, as I drove west along my road, I got a jolt. The last buildings on the Jordan farm had been torn down. I pulled to the side of the road and cried, then continued toward Pocahontas, but the hymn tune "We Gather Together to Ask the Lord's Blessing" kept circulating in my head and a deep poignancy reverberated through my whole system. I knew my reactions went deeper than mere nostalgia for a lost set of buildings. I thought about Russel and Mary Jane who had lived on that farm — and another farm a mile north in the same section — for 24 years before returning to Atlantic. I had some good conversations with them as part of my project. I knew she was dealing with Lou Gehrig's disease and related health problems. However, I had not been in touch with the family for several months. I was so disturbed by the image of the cleared buildings that I called their daughter Pam on Monday and left a message on her machine saying I was interested in knowing how her mom was doing. Pam called back Thursday morning to say her mom had died the night before.

As a youngster, I loved to go to the Jordan farm and tag after Mary Jane while she worked in her garden. She seemed like a second mom even though she had six children of her own. The pastor at her funeral service spoke often about her unconditional love. There was probably not a person at the chapel or cemetery who would disagree. When I think of Mary Jane, it is her love that first comes to my mind. I miss her.

Going back to 1992, on the day after Thanksgiving, I had the opportunity to visit Russel and Mary Jane in their home in Atlantic. Among other things, I asked them how they had met.

Russel: Well, Mary Jane was going to college at Maryville, Missouri. There were a couple of guys from Wiota who went to school there, and she was dating one of them.

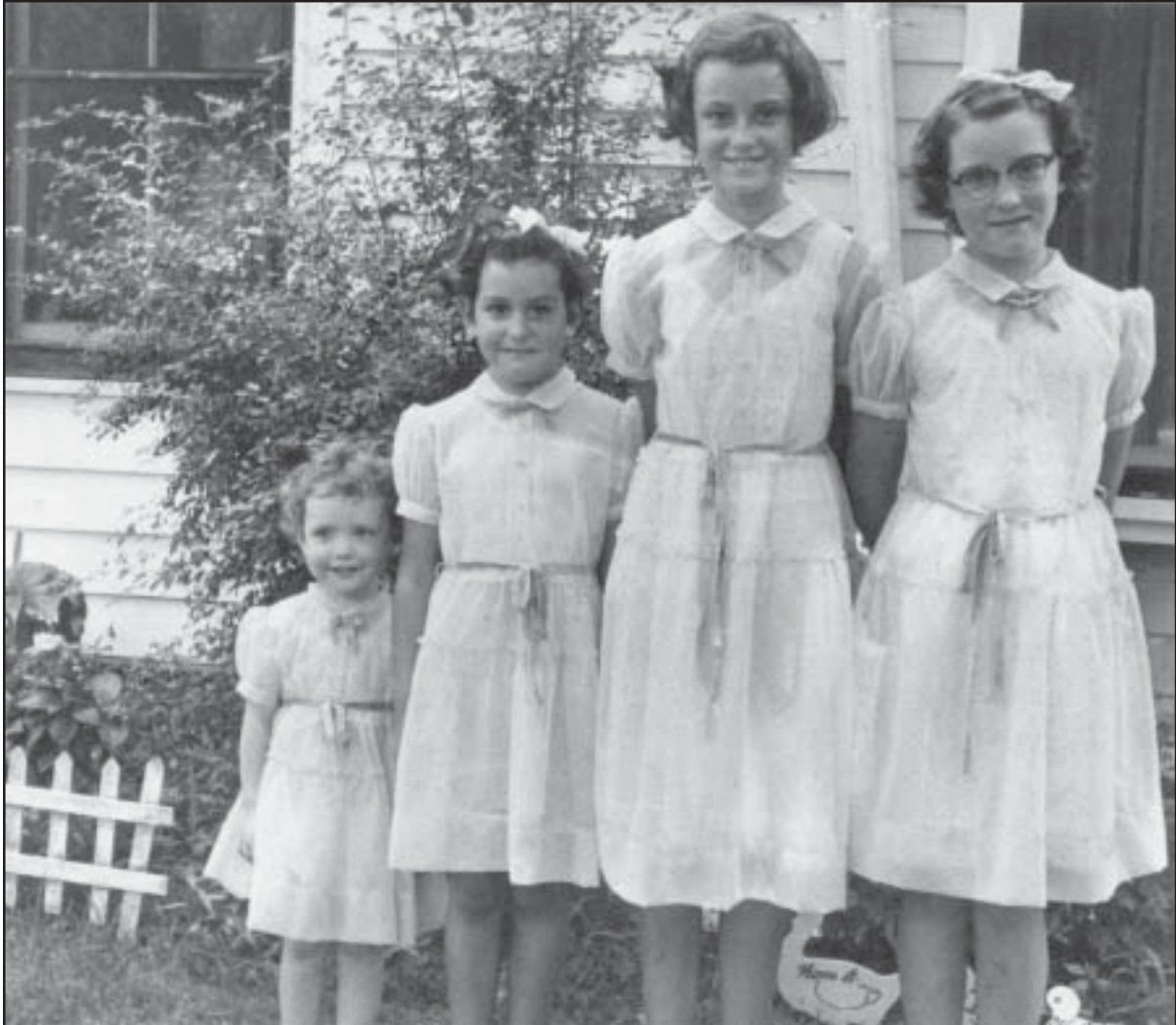
Mary Jane: I had a car, they didn't. So I would bring them home for weekends.

Russel: There was always a celebration in Wiota in August, and [the fellows] were home from summer school. Her date brought Mary Jane over to this homecoming celebration. But he had to work in a booth, so he left her with the other guy, and the other guy introduced Mary Jane and me. We spent a couple hours dancing through the evening, and we got some things going there that lasted over 50 years.

Mary Jane: (giggles) It will be 52 years next year. I've always appreciated the fact that I could stay home and take care of my six kids. I did substitute teach in later years in Pocahontas and Rolfe. They've been wonderful years, and our family — as I discovered after my heart attack — was all together and such a support for me that I am very thankful this Thanksgiving to be here because it was pretty touchy several times.

I told Russel and Mary Jane about seeing Jeanne's video clip of their sale and asked what it was that sustained them in difficult times.

Mary Jane: We're still dealing with farm credit and the bank, which was very hard on us. But our love for each other, to begin with, and for our family. And then faith — but our faith is a quiet, supporting faith. It's not extreme but it's always there. And we never feel that things are hopeless. We feel that there is an answer, and we will discover it eventually, and things will work out. Especially Russ. He is an optimist. He was an optimist while I was in the hospital. He held the kids all up, and they have told me how optimistic he was. It's just that we have been happy together, and we depend on each other. And it will sustain you through anything — if you have that special kind of love and faith.



Left to right: Jeanne Jordan (producer of the film *Troublesome Creek*), Janet Jordan Sharpe, Pam Jordan Wolfe, and Judy Jordan Marnin. In 1952, Russel suggested Mary Jane buy herself a new Easter dress. Instead, she bought fabric and made new Easter dresses for each of her daughters. From the Russel and Mary Jane Jordan collection.

Helen: What was it like to get the kids ready on a school morning?

Mary Jane: As of this day, I wonder — and I wonder how your mother — how we got all you kids all ready. But it was hectic every morning, getting all those kids ready.

Russel: One of the big things — the older ones kind of help take care of the little ones.

Mary Jane: I insisted they eat breakfast, and I always have. And I think when they went to college, they forgot all about it. As Russ said, since there was so much difference in age. Pam was 13 when Jon was born. The older girls would help the younger ones get ready. It was as if I had two families, the three older girls then Jeanne and the two boys.

Russel: It does seem like it would be almost an impossibility to get them all ready.

Mary Jane: I know.

Russel: I don't really know how we did do that. Mary Jane did it, I didn't.

Mary Jane: (giggles) But everything was a mess when they left, and I would have to go around and pick up everything.

Russel: I think the kids pretty much went out at the same time to the bus.

Mary Jane: I have a picture of all of them ready to take off on the bus. (Sighs) I don't know how I every got that picture taken before the bus came. And some of them like Judy were always ready — she was so organized. She would never be late, and Pam was usually busy getting some of the littler ones ready.

Helen: Roles have shifted these days for what men and women do in families. How would you describe your roles then?

Russel: I was kind of the breadwinner and so forth, and Mary Jane took care of the kids and getting them ready.

Mary Jane: (chuckles)

Russel: I just gave her support. We never disagreed about how to discipline any kid — at least not in front of the kids. If she said something, I gave her support.

Mary Jane: The same if he reprimanded [someone], because that was very important. And we never quarreled in front of our kids.

Russel: She pretty well took care of getting them ready for school, and I was out feeding the cattle and waved at them as they went out the driveway.

Mary Jane: And now with our boys, especially with Jon, it's so different. And Jim, too. Jim will cook when he has to, and they have a different role than Russ had.

Russel: Of course, Jim's wife, she teaches school. She has to get ready, too.

Mary Jane: They have three children.

Russel: They ride to school with her, so Jim doesn't go out of the house much until he gets them all squared away and gets them off.

The Jordans were strong Democrats, and even though my parents were Republicans, I had a secret admiration for Russel and Mary Jane, who were the only liberals I knew in the township. In 1992, we also discussed politics.

Mary Jane: I don't like the way they use the labels "liberal and conservative." People have misconstrued the whole meaning of either one. Some people call liberals a bad name, and some call conservatives a bad name.

Russel: Don't you think the Republicans and the Democrats really want the same thing for the country, but they think we ought to go about it in a different way? I think we put a little too much emphasis on Republicans and Democrats. It seems to me that after a guy gets elected to office, he ought to be working for the good of the state or the nation or the people and not be so doggone worried about whether his party is going to reelect him or not.

Helen: What I see as a difference — and of course, you can't generalize — is that the Democrats have had a bit more empathy for the underdog.

Mary Jane: Yes, I think so. They're more down to earth.

Russel: If wanting the kids to have a good hot lunch at school and wanting a young mother that some guy went off and left with a couple of kids to get a little help, if wanting all that to take place is being a liberal, well, I'm glad to admit I'm a liberal because that's what I think we ought to be doing.

I've never been much of a supporter of Ronald Reagan. I thought he was a poor actor and an even poorer president. But when he was running for his second term, I heard a farmer in Texas describing what he thought ought to be done for the farm situation. And he almost word for word said what I would probably had said if someone had asked me the same question. And here he was, supporting Ronald Reagan, thinking Reagan would do that for him. Of course, I thought Reagan would be the last guy that would do it. So that made me wonder if we aren't trying to achieve the same thing and spinning our wheels in both directions, trying to get it done.

Helen: Have you ever been a Republican?

Russel: Not really. My father was a Democrat and my grandfather was a Republican clear back in Civil War times, but he switched over to being a Democrat. And the story is that people asked him why he switched, and he said, "I didn't change. I'm the same as I have always been. It's the party that changed." My dad was always a Democrat, but I really never voted a straight ticket until just this November. I got kind of fed up with George Bush, and I thought he was saying some things that weren't accurate. I kind of got fed up with him and some of the Republican tricks that they tried to pull and so I decided, "Well, I'll vote a straight ticket, and I know there are some Republicans on [the ballot] that deserve my vote, but tough luck, you aren't goin to get it."

Helen: So how did you vote on the Equal Rights Amendment in Iowa [in the 1992 election]?

Russel: I voted for it.

Mary Jane: We both voted for it, and all of our family voted for it. And we were very disappointed.

Russel: I was dumbfounded that it didn't pass. I can't imagine why anyone would vote against it, but I guess ...

Mary Jane: Well, the opponents brought in so many weird arguments against it that had nothing to do with it, and some people must have been impressed.

Russel: Would you have supported it?

Helen: Absolutely, I would have.

Russel: I thought you would.

Mary Jane: Oh, I thought you would, too.

Russel: I don't see any reason to not ...

Mary Jane: Russ has always been in favor of women anyway. He had four sisters and four daughters, and I guess he couldn't afford to do anything else but support women.

Russel: I'm very supportive of women because I think a lot of women are real sharp and have abilities to see things that men don't really have. I think I got the point driven home when I was on the school board up at Rolfe. Sometimes we got complaints from people in the district, and it seemed to me that when the women would have anything to say, they would always have some substance and know what they were talking about; whereas the men would more or less be mad at some teacher or mad at the superintendent ...

Mary Jane: For no good reason.

Russel: But the ladies, when they came, they had a real legitimate reason to be complaining. And I thought, "Why aren't these gals on the school board instead of some of the men

who are picking over whether the kid is going to start on the football team or whether he isn't?"

Helen: Do you consider yourself to be a farmer?

Mary Jane: Yes. I was happiest on the farm. When I was growing up, I never thought I would marry a farmer.

Russel: Oh, didn't you?

Mary Jane: I became a schoolteacher, but [farming] appealed to me, and I always loved living on the farm. And so, yes. Because I love to garden and always had big gardens, and I do all the bookkeeping. So it's been interesting being a farmer's wife. And I don't think Russ ever wanted to do anything else. When he was in high school, his superintendent thought he would have made a good lawyer, which he would have.



Mary Jane and Russel Jordan at their home in Atlantic, Iowa, 1992.

Russel: You know, Rolfe was a real unusual place. The first time I went to the Rolfe area, Nels Pedersen took to us the farm, and we looked the farm over, and we decided to rent it. I didn't get into Rolfe. But then we had to do some fall plowing, and Ezra Tebbin who lived on the farm — he and Charlton [the landlord] were having a dispute. Ezra didn't want to give up part of the land, and Charlton wanted him to. So Ezra didn't want to do the plowing. So Nels said to me, "I'll go up with you, and we'll find somebody to do the plowing." Then we got into Rolfe, and there were a half a dozen old guys, sitting on benches around Main Street. Some of them didn't look too clean, and I thought, "By gosh, I think maybe we should make

Pocahontas our headquarters. This doesn't look too good." So we went into Freeman's Restaurant, and there was a big crowd of people. So Bennie Allen — he was kind of a big operator and had three or four guys working for him — and they all came into the café to eat. Nels Pedersen knew Bennie and went over and got him and introduced me to him. And Nels told Bennie, "Russel is moving down on the Charlton farm, and he wants some fall plowing done. Would you be interested in plowing it?" "Yeah, probably," Bennie said. He always smoked a pipe and was kind of a big feeler sort of a guy. "Yeah," he said, "If we didn't have to do it this week — if you give me a little time." I said, "Just so you get it plowed before the ground freezes is all I care about." He said, "Well, I've got these guys over combining beans and as soon as we get the beans combined, I'll meet you over there at the farm at 2:30, and we'll see what's got to be done." So we went over and figured out how much to plow, and he told me how much he wanted, and it was reasonable. So I said, "Fine, you go ahead and do it." So then we did other things in Rolfe, and gradually, I got to thinking, "Well, Rolfe isn't too bad a town." Then when we got moved up there, we had a Rolfe telephone, and the kids went to school at Rolfe — hardly ever did go to Pocahontas. We did practically everything in Rolfe. I wanted to buy cattle and went into the bank before I moved, and Guy Butler [the bank president] was there. So I searched him out and said, "I understand you're the banker." "Ya, sort of," he said. His hair was disheveled and I thought, "He doesn't really look like a banker." But he said, "I won't be able to deal with you, but I've got a guy in here that is moving into town, and he's going to be the banker, and you'll have to get acquainted with him." So it was Bob Dixon. Actually, I was Bob Dixon's first customer. So I went in and told him we were moving onto a farm and wanted to buy some cattle and to borrow some money. He said, "Well, you come in and we'll take care of you." So there, we had the bank lined up. And then I found Spike Robinson, the John Deere dealer, and Rickard's Hardware, and I thought, "This is all we need. We don't need anything from Pocahontas. It wasn't long until I didn't even notice the guys sitting on the bench. They all turned out to be pretty nice guys anyway. I kind of hate to go back and see the place. The buildings — a lot of them are gone, and there are no implement stores anymore. It's just kind of a grain elevator place. I don't have anything against an elevator, but towns can't survive with just an elevator. The town doesn't seem the same. I feel bad about it.

Helen: I never thought that farming wouldn't be valued.

Russel: It shouldn't be that way. The loss of the family farm and family farmers will be a real loss to the nation because it's an efficient way of producing food and it's a way of life. I don't say we ought to all have just 80 or 160 acres. We need more land to utilize modern concepts, but we still should have ...

Mary Jane: More young farmers.

Russel: And we're coming into a real critical area where the average age of the farmers in Iowa is getting pretty close to 60 years old. If we don't get something going to get this in the hands of younger people, I'm afraid that corporations like Cargill and the Japanese conglomerates will be taking over the farming situation. That will be real bad. But the price of land has gotten higher and with the economics of the farming situation, it's going to be pretty hard to get these young guys to [take it over] on a large scale unless they get a little help.

When I got ready to leave Rolfe — we lived in the area for 24 years — I could stand out back of the house and count 15 farms where the buildings were either abandoned or gone completely, but where people had actually been living when I moved there. The theory is that every time seven farm families go out of business, a business in town goes. So you can see, this was just one neighborhood, but it was happening all around there.

The Shimon Farm

Only a set of steel grain bins stands on the site that Marshall and Marjorie Otto rented and farmed from 1948 to 1963. While living there, the family consisted of eight children. Several of them were close in age to the kids in my family. Marshall and Marjorie had two more children after they moved from the neighborhood.

Shirley and Judy were the oldest siblings and two of my better friends. I would often walk or ride my bicycle to their place to play with them or the Jordan girls who lived across the road. One time, I tried riding a calf in the Otto feedlot but fell off in the soupy manure. Both girls were smart and diligent about their homework. In fact, Shirley was the salutatorian of the class of 1962, and Judy was the valedictorian when she and I graduated in 1963. Fortunately, I was able to sit next to Judy on the school bus and smooth out my homework.

Judy was also a speedy runner. I recall in elementary school, when our class dashed out of the building for recess, that she was one of the first students to get to the other end of the playground. Although the school started girls' basketball when Judy and I were freshmen, she and Shirley did not participate. They had chores, such as milking the cows, that needed to be done morning and night, and could not stay in town after school. Two years later the school began a girls' track and field program. Because it was a springtime sport and the cows didn't have to be milked until a later hour, Shirley and Judy were allowed to join the squad. I never realized that when practice was over, they still had chores to do at home.

Judy claims that her family never thought they were poor even though they realized their clothing was second rate and they were allowed to purchase new shoes only once a year. She



Grain bins at the Marge Shimon farm, northeast quarter, Section 15, Roosevelt Township, 1989.

also says that there were classmates at school who more photogenic and affluent than her and her siblings, but the gap in wealth didn't bother her.

I didn't think of the Ottos as being poor. I realized when I visited their home that they had only two small bedrooms for all their children. In contrast, my family had more bedrooms that were larger and, at most, two children shared a room. I also realized when I visited the Otto home that they did not have a dishwasher. We did at our house. However, when I visited the Ottos, I was mesmerized and impressed with the swishing of water when they washed their drinking glasses. I am happy to say that I do not have a dishwasher, that I enjoy washing dishes by hand, and that when I rinse my drinking glasses, I think of the Otto family and some fun times at their farm. To me, the Ottos led a simple life centered on basic conservative beliefs. I did not view them as being poor. Instead, I thought they were affable, intelligent, hard working, resourceful, and indifferent to popular social trends.

A couple of years ago, Marjorie loaned me a reel of home movies that she had taken of the farm in the 1950s. It was intriguing to see the farm operations and fun to watch the girls, wearing dresses and walking on stilts. Judy says one of her fondest memories of the farm is that of long summer days and writing poetry while shepherding their sheep as they grazed on grass in the road ditch.

When the Ottos traveled, they never stayed in a motel or ate in a restaurant. In the 1950s, a trip meant that five girls would be seated across the back seat of the family's small, two-door car. They leaned on each other's shoulders while their two young brothers, one an infant, sat in front between their parents. In the early 1960s, the Ottos had a red Rambler station wagon.

The Ottos butchered meat from livestock they raised on their farm and had plenty of it stored in their freezer. Marjorie took out packages of frozen ground beef and wrapped them in several layers of newspaper to take on trips. She also packed a camp stove. When it was meal-time, the family stopped at roadside parks, cooked the meat, and served it with homemade bread and vegetables from their garden. On rare occasions, the family stopped at grocery stores to purchase a loaf of bread or other essential items.

On the days when they planned to visit relatives in Minnesota, Marshall and Marjorie loaded their sleeping children into the car at 4 o'clock in the morning. When the family arrived at their destination, it was time for breakfast. A reciprocal event happened when their Minnesota relatives came to Iowa. The Otto children would wake up in the morning and discover all sorts of cousins sleeping at their home who would soon join them for breakfast. Judy says the families were both equally poor.

Judy says that they never stopped for soda pop. Instead, she imagines that they drank water. She says that the only time she recalls having soda pop as a child was when she was nearly four years old. It was on the day her younger sister, Kathleen, was born and Shirley was in kindergarten. Judy's dad took her to the City Service gas station in Rolfe and bought her an Orange Crush soda for five cents. Judy calls the outing a "memory of indulgence."

Judy also recalls when she was around 13 years old and ate in a restaurant for the first time. It was Mother's Day. The Ottos were friends of a Polish couple who lived in Pocahontas. Mrs. Moskalski worked at the Town Pump café on the southwest edge of town. She made special arrangements for the Ottos to have their own table and a family-style meal with lots of good food. Judy says, "It was the first time I remember that my mother did not cook a meal, and it was grand theater, a real experience."

The Ottos were Baptists, belonging to independent congregations that were a part of the General Association of Regular Baptists. When the family moved to the Rolfe area, they drove

to Algona some 30 miles away for Sunday worship. Later, a mission pastor began a Baptist church in Pocahontas, and the Ottos joined the congregation. One time they invited me to a wiener roast. It was fun until I realized there was an agenda and that the evening would end around the bonfire with testimonials. Everyone was encouraged to come forward and be saved. I did not rise to the occasion, but my younger sister, Peggy, with the encouragement of some of the younger Otto girls, met with the pastor after the bonfire rally and was saved.

Judy and I had an interesting experience on our senior class trip. The all-day outing started early in the morning with our class of 36 students and a couple of advisers all traveling by school bus to Omaha. We saw the sites of the city. For sure, we toured Boys Town, and we probably also went to the Joslyn Art Museum. I recall little else of the day until the evening when we were scheduled to go to an amusement park across the Missouri River in Council Bluffs. When we got there, the place was closed. The class chose instead to go to a grade B movie at a theater in a run-down part of town. However, I knew that Judy and her family, as strong Baptists, did not believe in going to movies. I chose to not go to the show. Instead, Judy and I went to a shabby restaurant on a dimly lit street. We sat in a booth, ordered something simple, perhaps some pop, because we had already eaten dinner and Judy had little spending money. We talked, did some homework, and went back and sat on the bus. Finally, the show was over, and the rest of the class loaded onto the bus for the four-hour drive back to Rolfe. In some ways, my choice to be with Judy instead of going to the movie was unusual. I can't recall any prior experience of standing by someone who was in the minority. On one hand, I had no other option. She was my friend, and I knew her family's beliefs about movies. On the other hand, I was miffed that the amusement park was closed and that the title of the movie was so unappealing. It seemed foolish for the class to go to the show simply because there was nothing else to do. Indeed, I think I had a more interesting time being with Judy at the restaurant than the class had at the movie. Besides, the class advisers went to the show with the other students, and Judy and I were trusted to be on our own. I don't know about her, but I appreciated that trust and felt pretty grown up.

I recently asked Judy if her attitudes toward attending movies had changed during her adult years. She responded by saying that the General Association of Regular Baptists was very strict. When she was young, she and her family assumed the rules against smoking, drinking, dancing, card playing, and going to movies — what she calls a whole package of “don't do” rules — were the norm. However, over the years, even though they are still conservative Christians, she and her family have adopted a much different attitude. For instance, they occasionally go to movies or play goofy card games.

After high school, Judy attended Cedarville College, a liberal arts school in Ohio where Shirley was a sophomore. After a year, Judy transferred to Omaha Baptist College. In 1967, the Baptists moved their campus to Ankeny, Iowa, where Judy got her undergraduate degree. She says that she worked almost full time while she was a student. She was a psychiatric technician at a psychiatric hospital, worked in sales for the J.C. Penny Company, and later took a job with a loan company. After graduating from college, Judy moved to the suburbs of Chicago and worked for the Baptist Publishing Company where she wrote, edited, and typed materials for publication. Eventually she worked in the development office and as a reference librarian at her alma mater in Ankeny. The school is now known as Faith Baptist Bible College and Theological Seminary. When Judy was in her mid-30s, she married and focused on being a homemaker. She and her husband live in northern California. The youngest of their three children, twin girls, graduated from high school in 2003 — 40 years after Judy and I graduated from Rolfe.

Shirley got a double degree at Cedarville, majoring in both math and physical science. After graduation, she took a job as a computer programmer for two years at Northwestern Bell in Omaha. Next she moved to the San Francisco Bay area to work as a programmer for the Missiles and Space Division of the Lockheed Corporation located in Sunnyvale. She then married and says that she retired to be a mother. However, she took university classes and obtained an accounting certificate. Eventually she worked as an accountant for a large San Jose school district. She and her husband retired in 2002, sold their house, and moved to northern Arkansas after being in the bay area for 34 years. None of the Otto siblings live in Iowa. Two of the ten live in California, and the rest live in the Midwest.

Marjorie Joens had grown up near Plover a few miles northwest of Rolfe. Marshall Otto was raised in South Dakota. They met each other through family connections, and prior to their marriage, her older sister had married his brother. Marjorie and Marshall were aware of the Shimon farm because her parents, Henry and Esther Joens, moved to the neighborhood and had been farming the nearby Grant farm for five years. Marjorie and Marshall ended up renting the Shimon land and living there from 1948 to 1963.

After they left Rolfe, the Ottos moved to Carroll, Iowa. They were there six years and managed a motel. Marshall also got supplemental work at a seed corn company and selling appliances at a hardware store. Later the family moved to a farm near Cresco in northeast Iowa. In the 1980s, they moved to Arkansas where Marshall and Marjorie lived in semiretirement. Marshall died of a massive heart attack in 1994. Marjorie continues to live in Arkansas. She is related to several people in the township between Rolfe and Pocahontas who are connected to the Joens family. Robert Joens, until he began a phased retirement in 2002, farmed the Grant property. He lives a mile from where the Ottos resided on the Shimon farm.

The farm along the road where the Ottos lived belongs to Margaret Shimon and her family of Pocahontas. Her husband Bernie died in 1994. He was a retired pharmacist who had inherited the land. His grandfather, Albert Shimon, bought the place in 1892 for one of his sons to live on and farm. That means that in 1992, the place qualified as the first Century Farm along



The gate and lane at the Shimon farm with grain bins in the distance, 1994.



the road. Marjorie and Bernie's former son-in-law, Bruce Wheatley from south of Pocahontas, farms the land now.

One person who has particularly impressed me in my road project is Agnes Sefcik who once lived on the Shimon farm. I met her and her son, Dennis, in 1992 when I was 47 years old. At the time, I had my share of frustrations with my brother Charles who was managing not only his own land but also the land that my sisters and I owned. At least once or twice a year, some communication from Charles about my farm would pique my anger, and I would stew for several days, thinking I would never have the knowledge nor courage to manage my own land. One of the fortunate aspects of this documentary project is to be able to be close to the culture that I grew up in but be able to step outside the mind-set of my family and learn about other people and their perspectives.

Agnes had been gracious early on in my project and loaned me photographs to copy. We also had a fine telephone conversation, and I looked forward to interviewing her. But when I met with her at her farm in 1992, she said very little in response to my questions. I couldn't tell if she was shy, didn't like me, or simply had not had the time to build trust in me. My interview that same year with her son, Dennis, who is a Roman Catholic priest and was serving a parish in Laurens at the time, made up in length and detail for the sparsity of remarks from his mother. When I asked about his mother, he said,

She was one of the unusually lucky girls because her dad permitted her to go to high school, and she graduated in 1929. She and Dad married in 1933 and lived on what we referred to as the Shimon place. That's where the two oldest boys were born, Albert in 35 and me in 37. Then we moved in March of 1940 to the place southwest of Pocahontas where Mother still resides to this day. Mom and Dad started as tenants on the Shimon place, then when they moved onto [their new] place, they purchased it, and it was the homeplace for us, the Adolph Sefcik family.

According to Dennis, his mother was a very conventional farm homemaker. She took care of the housework, the raising of the kids, the garden, and the chickens and didn't want to be bothered with any of the details of the farm business. Her husband took care of that. She was aware that various papers such as those for the payment of income and property taxes would arrive at their home, but she didn't know what they were about. Dennis went on to say,

Dad just wrote out the check and that was the end of that. And borrowing money, he would go to the bank; of course, he had such a relationship with the bank that he could go to the bank and borrow just on his name. When the loan was due, he would pay it, and that was the end of that.

My dad died in 1966 at the age of 57. Now at that time, my mother had just learned how to drive a car and got a driver's license at the age of 56; and the only reason she did that is because Dad insisted she do it. Now she knew hardly anything of the farm operation. She knew she had to sign her name when they were buying farms, and she knew she had to sign her name on mortgages, and she knew what she was signing, but for the rest of the operation, she didn't know zip about it.

She often says there were two people who helped her learn about agriculture. One was the attorney that Dad had for many years. His name was Frank Shaw. Now there are pros and cons of who liked him and didn't like him, but that's a separate story. Dad had excellent trust in him, and Frank always dealt fairly with Dad and gave him excellent advice. So when Dad died, Mom went to Frank, and he steered her in the right direction to make the decisions that had to be made; and of course, she did very well with it. The second man, believe it or not, was the man at the grain elevator whose name was Eldon Anderson. Now Eldon guided her through some of those decisions because he knew that she had a tendency to not trust someone until she knew him very well. So he would just present her options and say, "Now you just think about it. Many of these options are going to be all right, but I want you to think about it, then in a week, give me a call on the phone, and I'll do it however you want it." And she learned to trust him. So dealing with elevator procedures — the payment of bills and reading a bill — she learned all that. And now she can pick up the computer sheet and tell you the bushels and the foreign matter in there, the moisture content and the dockage, shipping and storage, whatever it is. But you see, two critical people helped her learn all that.



Left photo: Agnes Sefcik, 1940. From her collection. Right photo: Agnes and son, Dennis Sefcik, 1993.

Dennis also described all the various details of farm business, from seed selection to choice of fertilizer to shipping arrangements to bookkeeping, that his mother was still doing the year of our interview (1992) when she was in her mid-eighties. I left the interview inspired and thought, “By Jove, I should set a goal of managing my own land by the time I am 56,” the age Agnes was when she began making decisions about her farm. The timing would work out that I began managing my land when I was 52. Fortunately, both my father and brother have been extremely cooperative. But without Agnes as an inspiration, perhaps I would still be stewing twice a year about how unfair it was that only my brother, and none of the girls in my family, was groomed to make decisions about our land.



Adolph Sefcik and his sons Dennis (left) and Albert (right) at the Shimon farm, 1939.
The Agnes Sefcik collection.

The Grant Farm

Don Grant and his brother Duncan grew up with their parents, Cap and Addie, on an 80-acre farm that the family bought in 1920. Don was gifted at telling stories about rural life and willing to reflect on the vast changes.

One of his reminiscences is about the plowed field on the north side of Lizard Creek where there was a pasture that his dad rented in the 1920s and 30s and where Duncan and Don played baseball. Don said farm teams from various towns would play there regularly. Some of his teammates lived downstream a few miles and would walk up Lizard Creek, pick up my dad at his farm, get Bob Sernett, then make their way up the creek to Cap's pasture/baseball field. The boys used planter disks for bases and had to be careful where they placed "home plate." If the catcher stood with his back to the ditch, a wild pitch or foul ball could end up in the creek. And if the diamond were turned the other direction, with "home plate" away from the creek and the outfielders standing with their backs to creek, they had to be careful that line drives and home runs didn't also end up in the ditch. It had a steep incline and tall grasses and was a treacherous place to go to find a lost ball.

Don's parents, Cap and Addie, died in the early 50s, then various members of the Joens' family lived on the farm. The place has been abandoned since the 1960s. The last buildings were torn down in the early 1980s. Don sold his share of the family's 80 acres to his brother, but Duncan died and the land was inherited by Duncan's wife, Lois Grant.

Don affectionately and proudly called his dad a *dirt farmer*. By that, Don meant Cap lived a simple life, had little money, and relied on hard work, knowledge of the land, and weather patterns rather than capital resources to survive. Don also meant that his dad was comfortable with having dirt under his fingernails and that Cap loved the soil and figured if he was good to it, the soil would be good to him. Don remembers watching his folks struggle, his dad's heartache at the age of 41, and looking west for rain in the drought of 1936 when the farm was in jeopardy of being lost.



Top photo: Don Grant on left and Duncan Grant on right with their collie dog, Scottie, circa 1925. The Don and Rosie Grant collection. Bottom photo: Lizard Creek. The plowed field is where Cap Grant rented pastureland, and his boys and their friends played baseball in the 1930s. Field photo taken in 1994.

Don was just as affectionate and proud when he talked about his mom. He often claimed that she was a master gardener and cook. Addie also had an accredited flock of white leghorn chickens and got a premium price when she sold eggs to the hatcheries in town. The extra income helped the family make it through the Depression. Don said that they ate the leghorn roosters.

My mother canned them, boiled them, pressure-cooked them. She had two-quart jars of chicken in the basement, and so we would eat chicken and we'd eat eggs. And occasionally a hog, maybe a steer, and those were really a highlight. That's why I couldn't stand eggs or chickens for years.

The Grant family also shipped eggs in a six-dozen case by train to Don's uncle in Chicago. He sold the eggs for 50 cents a dozen, whereas locally Addie was getting only a dime in the store and 20 cents at the hatchery. His uncle sent the check and case back by train.

Addie had at least one goose, maybe a couple that were butchered for Thanksgiving, or maybe a duck, but never a turkey. They would have Thanksgiving meal at their house, including lots of pies.

She had apple trees, cherry trees, a strawberry bed, and raspberry bushes. She also had a big grape arbor and made grape juice. Don said, "Anything you could grow in a garden, she



The Grant farm, north side, Section 15, Roosevelt Township, circa 1938. From the Don and Rosie Grant collection.

grew. Tomatoes, lots of tomatoes ..." And he added, "There was something good to eat in that garden at any time of summer."

Addie was a master pickle maker, but Don got tired of helping her by carrying water and changing the brine. They also had a tin canner for canning sweet corn. His grandma and aunt would come to the farm and get 50 or 100 cans. Then the family would prepare another 100 cans to keep and another 100 cans for giving away. Don said,

Mother was always taking a basket of something into town. When we went to town, she knew somebody that needed something to eat. She would take a few jars of this and a few cans of that in and give it to somebody. She had enough in the storm cellar when she died to last an entire family of four for over two years.



Cap and Addie Grant, circa 1948.
From the Don and Rosie Grant collection.

Don's wife, Rosie, says that Addie cooked on a cookstove and didn't have any cupboard space but could put a meal on the table like there was nothing to it.

Cap and Addie also butchered their own meat and would stay up late at night cutting the pieces. Don recalls Addie rendering lard and packing it in jars. He said with fondness,

That was pretty tremendous because she always made doughnuts while she was rendering the lard. And coming home from school, I could smell those from a mile away. There would always be a dish towel at the end of the stove, piled with doughnuts.

Addie also played the piano and made sun bonnets that were prize items for purchase at church bazaars.

Don and Rosie met when they were students at Iowa State College. She had grown up in Minnesota. When she was only two years old, her mother died. Her father, Matt, never remarried. He was a musician and entrepreneur. Rosie says everytime she hears the song lyrics, “A hat isn’t a hat unless it’s worn with a rakish tilt,” she can envision her dad with his hat over one eye — “just as jaunty as could be.” She also says Matt was a gentle and conscientious man and someone she could turn to about anything she needed to talk about.



Rosie Gulden Grant, circa 1925.
Don and Rosie Grant collection.

I’ve known Don and Rosie for over a decade, and they have told me many stories about Matt. My impression is that he has been a great influence on both Don and Rosie. They are salt-of-the-earth people, funny, tender, gracious, and tolerant — not much different than how they have described Matt.

Although Don had been a childhood crony of my father’s and they did things like putting up a ham radio antenna together, I did not know Don and Rosie until I began this project. It is a gift to have gotten to know them. They have made me feel at home.

I recall a certain day in 1993 when I drove to my road for a photo excursion. As I turned onto the road, I was stewing about the obsessive nature of my project, about all the trips I had taken down that road, and the hundreds of frames of film and videotape I had already shot. I knew it was valuable to persist and pursue a project in depth, but I had also come close to thinking it was futile to try and find anything new. I breathed deep and said to myself and the universe, “May I see something I haven’t seen before.” In the next instance, I looked toward the fence near the place where the Grant building site used to be and saw a horseshoe. It was tucked inside barbed wire. The wire was stretched around a wooden post that stood as a sentry on one side of the lane opening into the cornfield.

The fence was ripped out in 1997 because with modern agriculture, there is no longer a need for fences since there are no longer any hogs, horses, sheep, or cattle to keep from roaming the countryside. I made arrangements with the Grant tenant, Bob Joens, who lived a mile away, to obtain the horseshoe. I asked how long it had been on the fence. He that said it had been there as long as he knew and that he had farmed for the Grant family for 35 years.

Don worked for Collins Radio during the first half of his career then was an engineering professor at Iowa State University. Rosie was an eighth-grade English teacher in Ames. They have six children and several grandchildren. At least a few are superb gardeners and musicians, following in the tradition of their parents and grandparents.



A horseshoe on a fence post near the entrance to the field where the Grant building site used to be, 1994.

The Farm at the End of the Road



Above: Paul Harrold harvests corn at the westernmost farm. Southwest corner, Section 9, Roosevelt Township, 1994. Below: A warning sign for a dirt road that was the last section of the road, 1995.

Sometimes, when I was growing up, the farm at the west end of the road was inhabited, sometimes it was not. The school bus didn't always go there, and when it did, it had to travel a mile on a dirt road that was sometimes muddy and treacherous with a bend at the end where the farmsite sat in a large grove of trees. It seemed like a dead end but was only a T-intersection. When the road conditions were questionable, John Hopkins, the school bus driver, would edge the bus to the beginning of that dirt road, peer ahead, and discern whether to take that road or go around the entire section to get to the farm. The kids on the bus would get caught up in the decision and cheer when Hoppy would forge ahead, taking the direct route on the questionable road and making our ride to school shorter.

According to Joe Reigelsberger, people used to say this farm was at the "center of nowhere" since it not only marked the boundary between school districts, but between phone territories and other jurisdictions.

Cheralellen Young lived on that farm. Her dad was a hired hand for the owner. When Cheralallen and family moved to the farm in 1957, in the middle of her sophomore year of



high school, it was confusing when she, her sister, and brother waited for the Rolfe school bus. Part of the reason was that they had never lived in the country nor ridden a bus nor did they know other youngsters on the route. But another reason was that buses from the Pocahontas, Havelock, and Rolfe districts all turned around where they waited. Now neither Havelock or Rolfe have districts of their own and are part of the Pocahontas Area Community Schools. Rolfe graduated its last senior class in 1990. The town lost its high school and elementary school but continued to be the site of the PACS Middle School for over a decade.

This farm is also where Joy Cornwell's great-grandparents, Herman and Elizabeth Wiegman, and their children lived from 1888 to 1913. Until recent years, the farm was owned by out-of-state people, Dallas Ives and his sister Sally Ives Quigley. They were also on our school bus route, and Dallas was a classmate of mine in high school and at Iowa State. After graduating from ISU in physics, he went to NASA in Houston where he worked until retirement, doing computer programming for the space shuttle. His oldest sister Carolyn was enough older than him that she went to country school for her first years of education. Mildred moved to Lake Havasu after her husband Arlo died. Then she moved to southern California and later to Oregon to be close to her daughter Sally, who is a physical therapist. Mildred died in 1998, and I felt deep sadness at the loss of another strong figure in my rural heritage.

Paul Harrold rented the farm from the Ives family for several years, has now purchased 80 acres of the land, and continues to farm it. The silo was torn down in 1995, and the county used the rubble from it and the concrete feedlot to prevent further erosion in a portion of Lizard Creek along Highway 3. The mile-long dirt road that travelled to the west farm was closed in the 1991, making it more difficult for Paul to have access to the fields.



Farm "ruins" at the west end of road, including a feedlot pump, rolls of barb wire, tin, and the foundation of a silo, 1989. The place is now completely cleared and tilled for corn and soybeans.

From the yet to be published book
The Road I Grew Up On: Requiem for a Vanishing Era
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