

The Center for Rural Affairs in the First 20 Years A Short Memoir, Mostly More or Less True

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The Forces that Led to the Organization of the Center

In 1973, we were employed by the Goldenrod Hills Community Action Agency, a Nebraska non-profit corporation that was federally funded to eliminate poverty in five Northeast Nebraska counties. Don was Deputy Director, Marty was a planner.

As part of a planning process involving citizen participation, Goldenrod Hills launched an agricultural redevelopment program aimed at stimulating alternative crop production (onions were a prime example) and conceiving alternative food system approaches, including a small-scale home canning center in Winnebago.

Advocacy efforts around agricultural issues were minimal. Our initial staff included Laura Snake (later using her maiden name Whitewing), a Winnebago; Everett Kilzer, a long-time Walthill citizen with deep roots in the local economic system; and Lynn Spivak, who had been a VISTA volunteer with Goldenrod Hills.

In January that year, newly re-elected President Richard Nixon decided to eliminate the federal anti-poverty programs that were the central funding source for Goldenrod Hills, and he appointed an angry conservative named Howard Phillips to shut down the federal agency that distributed the funding. Phillips issued a lengthy instruction detailing how to close out operations.

The local response was remarkable. The Goldenrod Hills board, with people like Art May, a community developer from Macy; Allen Heine, a prominent farmer/feeder from St. Helena; and Howard Swanson, a farm equipment dealer from Decatur, was defiant. Too bad the federal government doesn't think there is a need for anti-poverty programs – we do.

And we are not a federal agency. They can't tell us to shut down. The staff was commissioned to build a survival strategy. Anticipating more "shut down now" memos from Howie Phillips and wanting to reflect the board's defiance, Don bought a rubber stamp to record receipt of each instruction. It read: "BULLSHIT." We were off.

We were commissioned by Larry Lassek, the Goldenrod Hills executive director, to develop a plan by which the service programs of Goldenrod Hills and the advocacy and development efforts might both be preserved, perhaps under separate entities with differing funding strategies.

May, Heine, and Swanson ultimately became the incorporators of the Center for Rural Affairs, the advocacy and development strategy. It was designed to address controversial questions of economic policy affecting the agricultural base of Northeast Nebraska and to generate creative approaches to economic development. It would be largely privately funded.

But for starters, Goldenrod Hills would subcontract with the Center to conduct its own internal planning program and board of directors training. The Center owes a lot to its association with Goldenrod Hills – appreciation for the importance of an active, committed board of directors and the value of running a nonprofit organization (especially one dealing with controversy) in an accountable and businesslike manner, for example. By fall, we were in business as a separate entity.

Mr. Nixon, meantime, had come on political and legal hard times of his own making. Within a year, he was disgraced and out of office, and Goldenrod Hill and its subcontractor, the Center for Rural Affairs, were bigger, stronger, and better than before. The bullshit had made great fertilizer.

How the Center Was Named

Early in this period, we made a scouting trip to the East Coast to take stock of funding opportunities, largely in the private sector. We were right off the turnip truck, without so much as a name for the new organization we were raising money for. In Washington D.C. it became clear we needed at least a working name.

So we talked about it on the train between Washington and New York. We wanted to keep it simple. The name had to be versatile, something generic that would keep options open about how to define the program, that would accommodate an evolving mission. And it had to sound durable, not flash in the pan.

“Center” was in vogue and had an activist ring. “Rural” was a no-brainer. And “Affairs” seemed to make it clear that we wanted to deal in issues, using mutual action for the common good. “Center for Rural Affairs” would do for now – positive, activist, rural, but suitably nondescript and unlimiting. The Center’s image would be earned by its actions, not by its name.

How the Board Was Recruited

In early 1973 we began assembling a list of people to interview for possible board membership in addition to Heine, May, and Swanson. Our own contacts in rural Nebraska were limited, so we relied heavily on advice from these three and from a handful of associates we knew from our work in Nebraska’s anti-poverty programs. We were looking for people who were interested in rural Nebraska, had integrity and a good reputation, and “cared more about their integrity than their reputation.”

Some names came to us quickly because they were well-known in Northeast Nebraska as people who cared deeply about rural communities and agriculture – Vince Rossiter, a Hartington banker; Pat Rogers, the young Cedar County Attorney; Bert Evans, the famous iconoclastic UNL economist and cattle breeder from Crofton; and Bob Steffen, a Cedar County native who managed Boys’ Town’s farm and was perhaps Nebraska’s best known environmental activist and organic farmer.

We wanted to include the diversity of rural Nebraska, so we sought out women and minorities, adding Neola Walker, a member of the Winnebago Tribal Council and Miriam Ramirez, a Hispanic community activist from Grand Island whom Don knew from his work there as a VISTA volunteer.

And because the early recruits were predominantly Roman Catholic, we sought out people with strong involvement in other denominations – Ken Mesner, a farmer and long-time Quaker activist in the peace movement, and Ed Schlachtenhaufen, a young Lutheran minister who had just been hired to run a Luther rural ministries program established by three Lutheran bodies (ALC, LCA, and Missouri Synod).

It was important that although some of these people knew each other, mainly by reputation, this was not a chummy group. Most of these people were introduced to each other for the first time when our board first met at the first annual meeting in December 1973.

The Role of the Board in Program Development

It is remarkable that very few turned us down when we asked if they would serve. The early board was composed of people who were not “control” conscious, but idea people and hands-on doers. They wanted to be part of things, and a lot of our early program development was heavily influenced by board members.

Ed Schlachtenhaufen, who was a trained forester as well as a minister, consulted with us on development of a Timber Development program for the Winnebago Tribe, and helped raised start-up funds from a Lutheran economic development fund. This launched a number of projects through which we worked with the Tribe to develop a better understanding of the natural resource base and potential of its lands.

Bert Evans sharpened our economic critique of agriculture, Vince Rossiter chaired an early research committee report on the structure of the banking industry (*Where Have All the Bankers Gone?*) and authored the introduction, giving the report a tremendous boost in credibility. Allen Heine, Ken Mesner, and Bob Warrick, all irrigators, helped us analyze the data we developed on the growth and impact of center pivot irrigation (*Wheels of Fortune*).

Pat Rogers previewed our most controversial publications with an eye for any statements that might get us in legal trouble, and most important, he authored a legal opinion arguing that legislation restricting corporate farming did not violate the equal protection clause of the constitution, an argument that is indistinguishable from that later expressed by numerous courts.

The second generation of board members added in the late 1970s included some of the Center's strongest leaders: Paul Olson, Fern Norris, Clark Nichols, David Hansen, all of whom became President, leading the Center through successive stages of organizational development – a more active board, a more sophisticated management system, a change in staff leadership, an endowment.

In many ways, the Board was clearly out front of the staff in organizational development, too. It was the board, under the leadership of Connie Bowen, Fern Norris, and Paul Olson, who made us beef up the fringe benefit package, first with health insurance, later with a retirement plan.

All of these early board members contributed time and money to the cause, and most important, they took seriously the need to stand firm in the face of criticism. No pressure brought to bear on the Center in these early years – and there was plenty – ever made the board flinch.

The Origins of the Corporate Farming Issue

Northern Cedar County was vintage family farm country and heavily Catholic, so when the Omaha Archdiocese held a Rural Action Day in the winter of 1973 to define community improvement strategies for the deanery, we headed to Hartington to see and hear what was on people's minds. In one small group session, talk turned to the issue of corporate farming and to the fact that there was a legislative proposal to restrict it.

The group decided to form a Rural Action Group to study this bill and to promote effective legislation. A reluctant, thoughtful farmer, who had arrived late, Francis Wortmann, was pressed into service as chair. Over the next months, Francis proved to be just the right mixture of decisiveness and deliberation necessary to keep a torrent of local activists channeled constructively.

With the energetic support of Sr. Loretta Ruskamp, a local parochial school teacher, Francis did the yeoman's work of leading without dominating. With our research help, this local group studied proposed language, organized wider support, and sponsored large public meetings to talk openly about specific approaches to key legislative issues, such as how to define the "family farm."

They used their local clout to press a reluctant (but prominent) local Senator into sponsoring a weak bill, but also pressed more eager Senators into introducing stronger bills. They generated statewide contacts, organized "rural action days" in which busloads of rural people traveled to Lincoln for public hearings. In church basements and old opera houses throughout Northeast Nebraska, they authored the legislation that would become Article XII, Section 8 of the Nebraska Constitution.

Funding the Hard-to-Fund Advocacy Efforts

That Rural Action Day was facilitated by Sr. Norita Cooney, the Archdiocesan Director of Pastoral Development, who proved to be one of the Center's most valuable early friends. At the end of the day, as she watched us work with the small group focused on the corporate farming issue, she pulled us aside and asked us where our funding came from. When we told her we were launching something new, she told us to apply for a grant from the Campaign for Human Development (CHD), a Catholic social-action fund.

The local diocesan fund could only make small grants, but the national fund could do more. She was the local administrator. This proved to be our first private funding for the basic work of the

Center, and this relationship with CHD lasted six years. The stalwart support of Sr. Norita and of Archbishop Daniel Sheehan, who withstood organized Catholic agribusiness opposition to funding the Center, was absolutely essential to the Center's survival.

Funding the advocacy (or "policy" or "organizing" or "action") work has always been the Center's biggest financial problem. The CHD grant for our advocacy work provided this "activist" side of our house with credibility among private funders, and by 1978 we were attracting small private foundations used to taking risks with start up organizations.

Most of the early foundation grants (from the Stern Family Fund and the Shalan Foundation) were for our rawest activism. Much of this funding was marshaled to support a new project which we built around the talents of two "walk-on" players who simply presented themselves to the Center looking for a chance to make a contribution – Chuck Hassebrook and Gene Severens. Chuck was a university student with political savvy, Gene a young lawyer with years of volunteer and teaching experience in Asia.

The Small Farm Advocacy Project was designed to ferret out issues surrounding tax and credit policy and to engage rural people in a battle for policies that served public values as well as private interests. This project became the hallmark, along with the corporate farming battle, of the Center's growing reputation as a national leader on agricultural policy issues with a grassroots and populist perspective.

But a lot of the earliest energy came in the form of VISTA volunteers, at first assigned to us by Goldenrod Hills CAC, then directly funded from the federal ACTION Agency that administered VISTA and some associated volunteer programs. It is impossible to overestimate the impact that this source of talent had on the Center's development.

Those who came to us through this path in the early years included Chuck Hassebrook, Dennis Demmel, Judy Dye, Drey Samuelson, Tyler Sutton, Annette Higby, Paul and Jeanette Spivak, and others. They researched, wrote, organized, analyzed, designed (the logo, among other things), built, developed (the Small Farm Energy Project, among other things), and most of all, served.

A Sense of Place

The Center's origins were very local, and for many years, even after the formal separation from Goldenrod Hills and the termination of the planning contract, we maintained a local program aimed at natural resource development. The most ambitious effort was the Winnebago Timberlands Project and a series of studies we undertook to evaluate alternative agricultural strategies for the Winnebago Tribe.

But we also raised funds for and installed a home canning center in Winnebago and in response to the oil embargo and energy crisis, launched an investigation into how local farmers might respond by restructuring their farms into energy producers through the use of conservation and appropriate alternative energy technologies.

For the latter effort, we had the benefit of a lasting relationship with Roger Blobaum, a Creston, Iowa consultant who had helped us think through the data for *Who Will Sit Up With the Corporate Sow?* (see below). Roger was a great organizer, an energetic promoter, and a real articulator and communicator who helped us get together an effective program to demonstrate the cost-effectiveness of alternative energy on small, commercial farms.

The Small Farm Energy Project was based in Cedar and Knox counties where our strong board presence (Heine, Rossiter, and Rogers) were huge factors in gaining instant credibility for the effort. It is remarkable how, on so many fronts, these early board members were willing to take risks for the sake of ideas and unproven strategies.

The project was launched with a competitive federal grant from the Community Services Administration and staffed by Dennis Demmel, a young engineer, and Ron Krupicka, fresh out of a UNL masters' program. They were not energy experts, but both were Northeast Nebraska farm kids. Our reasoning: you can hire or acquire technical expertise, but this project has to have people in charge who understand the decision-making calculus of people who must survive on the land. It was the best decision we ever made.

Demmel and Krupicka, with Blobaum, proved to be an incredibly effective team, balancing strengths, tirelessly enthusiastic, careful listeners, wonderfully analytical, flexible, and innovative. They not only made the technology work, but they got the data to prove it, and they wove dozens of small successes into a tapestry of grand sweep.

Their little storefront office in Hartington became a national laboratory for the emerging sustainable agriculture movement, many of whose most enduring principles were demonstrated and defined by this heroic little project.

The Small Farm Energy Project established the "practical" side of our house and provided a base for other federal grants, including a research and development project focused on the infrastructure needs of small communities in the Upper Midwest and a multi-year study of the electrical energy pricing policies of Nebraska and neighboring states.

This "practical," bread-and-butter side of our program has become far and away the biggest part of the organization and has always served well as a source of and proving ground for policy issues (on the other side of our house).

As our program became more complex, so did our internal management systems and accounting. The establishment of an indirect cost allocation system (first used in the Small Farm Energy Project) was an important development in the financial base of the Center.

Though some of these programs began to take on a regional character, most of the earliest efforts were richly local in character and deeply rooted in the diverse communities of Northeast Nebraska. Knowing where it came from was one of the real achievements of the Center's early life, reflected in the proud notation on our letterhead that our address was Walthill, Nebraska, "Population 900."

Annual Meetings

Among the most delightful aspects of these early days were the annual meetings. Most during this period were in December or January, some of them in the midst of legendary blizzards and cold spells. One year we built the meeting around “round table” discussions in which we recruited people to participate in a topic on the basis of their potential contribution. There were no presentations and no advertised “panelists.”

Dozens of people who came had been recruited to make a specific contribution to a specific topic, but not asked to “speak.” We used every church and public building in Walthill to host simultaneous topic discussions, and when we gathered for the Populist Cocktail Hour (beer and cheese), then supper and square dance, we filled the American Legion Hall to overflowing with 400 people, eating in shifts amidst a din of happy talk.

It was 20 below zero that night and blowing snow, but we ate and square danced, the crowd only gradually diminishing as each successive group furthest from home had to leave. In these annual meetings meals were potluck, though we might provide the meat, and there were skits, poetry, song, and some talk, and a joy that only common cause and goodwill can generate.

Communications

We wanted to establish a short, simple, frequent communication vehicle that would have a feisty edge in its voice. A four-page monthly newsletter, the first two pages of short, pithy items with lots of information and insight, the last two devoted to a single, substantive analysis, critique, or feature. No authorship credit, to reflect the organizational nature of the message. Free, to make growth in readership quick and easy.

This was a cultivation and recruitment tool, not a moneymaker. But to avoid the notion that it wasn't worth anything and to establish our identity as an organization that people needed to support with money if they valued its work, we began immediately to solicit free-will donations and to require regular “updating” of reader interest. You had to return a coupon every year to stay on the list – and the coupon was a convenient donation form, too. We kept records of each donation from the beginning.

Within a few years we were also publishing a tabloid journal called the *New Land Review* (later, the *Prairie Sentinel*) featuring in-depth articles on a wide variety of topics. At one time, we were publishing four periodicals simultaneously (*Small Farm Advocate*, *Small Farm Energy Newsletter*, *Prairie Sentinel*, and the monthly newsletter) and lots of special reports. We had almost become a publishing house without a marketing strategy, and these publications could not be sustained. The decision to discontinue the *Prairie Sentinel* in the early 1980s was a big and a difficult decision.

The Investigative Research Style

Perhaps because we really didn't know much about agriculture or agricultural policy, a lot of early effort went into “research” or investigative reporting. The first project was an attempt to

define the corporate farming issue by doing a 13-county land tenure study in Northeast Nebraska.

We learned how to use public records in the courthouse, how to trace land ownership history, how to get information from the county level federal farm program offices, and how to use Secretary of State records. The report was published informally on legal-sized paper, stapled in the corner. Its findings were unimpressive, and it got almost no notice. But it had taught us the disciplines of fact finding and much about how to get the information you want.

Next, we dispatched Lynn Spivak, a former VISTA volunteer with no background in agriculture, to find out about vertical integration in the pork industry. We were looking for evidence of forward contracting arrangements or other semblances of the heavily industrialized poultry industry.

She came back with a tale about sow leasing by feed companies and the advent of large-scale confinement technology and with details about the complex cooperatives farmers were organizing and how the tax laws and the technology itself (largely developed at publicly-funded universities) were encouraging the rapid transformation of these farmer-owned cooperatives into closely held, investor-owned corporations that would eventually prove that you don't need farmers to raise hogs. We were stunned by the data she had gathered on 43 operations in Nebraska. It named names, gave the numbers.

None of us really knew what it meant, so we traveled to the University of Missouri to visit with V. James Rhodes, a leading researcher in livestock policy and markets, and to Creston, Iowa, to get Blobaum's insights into how to tell the story. The result was *Who Will Sit Up With the Corporate Sow?* (1974), perhaps the most prescient piece of work the Center has ever done.

You can read that report almost 30 years later and marvel at the accuracy of its predictions. It earned us our first lawsuit threat (Walnut Grove didn't like what we said about their sow leasing program), our first headlines, and our first notice in the agricultural research establishment. The report was formally published by us with a heavy stock cover, although the cover was hand drawn. Not even the title was typeset – Spivak hand wrote it. It looked amateur then. It looks fashionable today.

The growth of confinement hog feeding in Nebraska was accommodated by the movement of the Corn Belt west by the growth of new irrigation technologies exploiting the Ogallala aquifer. Capital intensive center pivot irrigation systems were opening up new lands to irrigation, imposing environmental risks, and creating opportunities for investors and wheeler-dealers to create the first very large-scale crop farms.

We used our land-tenure research skills to find out who was doing what on what kinds of soils in a handful of the counties most impacted by these developments. *Wheels of Fortune* (1975) told that story, naming names, substantiating the facts, creating a big stir, prompting more lawsuit threats, and boosting the effort to restrict corporate farming.

This report drew attention from the *Washington Post* and the *New York Times*, but its impact might best be measured by the rueful description given it in the newsletter of the Nebraska Society of Professional Farm Managers and Appraisers: "It appears," the newsletter reluctantly reported, "to have been professionally done."

Following was a report on the structure of the banking industry in Nebraska, with a detailed analysis of ownership and control arrangements, using creative data sources such as FDIC disclosure reports showing which banks had large blocks of stock mortgaged to another bank (*Where Have All the Bankers Gone?*, 1978).

Getting Bullied

With these research reports, especially *Wheels of Fortune*, the bullying grew. Custom farm manager Glenn Williams wanted to know "who your superior is in Washington," and threatened to "put us out of business in six months." Senator Walter George of Blair told the newspapers we must be "commingling" federal money with private money for political purposes.

Senator Loran Schmit made frequent public attacks, accusing us of wanting every farmer to farm with "a sow, a cow, and a walking plow," and Senator John DeCamp set up a public forum in Neligh richly populated by irrigation developers roughly resembling a lynch mob.

The Skinner Macaroni firm in Omaha threatened to organize Catholic businessmen to withhold donations from the Catholic Church in retaliation for the CHD grants. Angry bankers sent the FBI to find out how in the world we found out from the Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation which principal bank shareholders had mortgaged their stock to another bank.

We weathered all this, one way or another. The things we had said about Williams' operation were true, and he had problems of his own with the truth, as clients in his custom farm management service found him converting their assets. Last we heard, he was on the lam avoiding federal agents.

We told Sen. George publicly to come to Walthill with his accountants to examine our financial records, provided he release the results to the public. He stayed away and shut up. When a group of irrigators and farm managers came to disrupt our annual meeting in Neligh, Bert Evans and Allen Heine took them on, backed them down, and sent them packing.

Macroni's threats proved only to solidify the Archdiocesan support for our CHD grants, and the FBI investigation ended when Don handed the agent a copy of the letter by which we had simply requested the data from FDIC (data we were entitled to have).

The battles with Schmit and DeCamp were longer. We organized support for corporate farming in their districts, giving them fires in their own backyard to worry about. Schmit, the more adaptive of the two and Chair of the Agriculture Committee, agreed to come speak to the Rural Action Group, and we picked him up at the Norfolk airport and drove him to Randolph for the meeting.

On the way, we listened to Richard Nixon's resignation speech. Our respective reactions to this speech proved a metaphor for our respective fates. Schmit was livid that Nixon was disgraced, while we rejoiced. Schmit's stubborn resistance to corporate farming restrictions eventually proved his undoing at home in his own district, while our perseverance on the issue paid off, and our influence grew.

A Culture of Commitment

It is difficult to appreciate the bare-bones nature of the Center in its earliest days. We were housed in one room of the old bank building that was home to Goldenrod Hills Community Action Council. When we separated formally from the CAP, we moved into the old post office two doors down, and our budget that first year of independence was about \$65,000. We shared that space with the Thurston County food stamp office, separated from each other by portable cubicle partitions.

Over the next five years we grew slowly until they moved out, but throughout this period the Center's working space had the character of an old-fashioned news room – crowded, cluttered, noisy, ugly. We shared two phone lines on three telephones, one of which was for the receptionist and the other two of which were placed on small tables between desks.

We built a dark room for developing photos for the *New Land Review* in the bathroom, a closet arrangement that measured less than 4x6 feet. A noisy off-set press cranked out news releases and action alerts against the back wall.

A skylight let in glorious sun, but also leaked miserably when it rained, as did the roof generally. We'd put out buckets and coffee cans, emptying and putting them away when the rain stopped. The number of buckets grew, however, and it got bad enough that we finally just left them in place as we needed too many to justify the time it took to deploy and restore them each time it rained.

In the summer, we welcomed the rain because it cooled things off in the air-condition-free office. We got our first air conditioner, a mammoth window unit that ran on 110 volts and generated about 4,000 BTU in 1978. You could not hear the phone ring when it was on. It might have lowered the temperature 2 degrees, but that is doubtful. Later we got a 220 unit, but had to wait for a 220 line to be installed to use it.

Our receptionist-secretary had an electric typewriter with several interchangeable font balls, but the rest of us used antique manuals, one of which was stored on a rolling cart that we ferried from desk to desk depending on who needed it most – or whined most. We had access to a photocopy machine at the CAP, and we stacked items to be copied in a box so that once or twice a day they could be hauled down the street to copy.

Our supply storage was the old post office vault until we got a local carpenter to build some shelves out of plywood. Everything was make-do. We wrote checks by hand on a check-writing system that used carbon paper to keep dual-entry accounting books. We invented as we went.

A couple of VISTA volunteers doodled around until they crafted the logo. When an itinerant sign painter came to town to paint a sign for Don Sampson's insurance agency, we beckoned him across the street to paint one for us, and on the spot he designed the cursive name wrapped around the logo that became the Center's trademark.

The clock meant nothing to us. We started early, worked late, came and went as we saw fit, and washed down each day's events with beer at Brown's Derby (later named the French Quarters, and now the Horseshoe Lounge).

All of this constituted a culture of shared commitment, but it should not be mistaken for a culture of sacrifice. There was no feeling of deprivation or hardship. We were hungry for the action, and the Center invariably attracted VISTA volunteers, employees, and hang-arounds who were there for the cause.

As the Center matured and took on necessary institutional characteristics, more professional staff, people with families and other responsibilities, and people who expected to stay for more than awhile, the notion of sharing and commitment remained, but the reality of the sacrifice became more apparent, and the need to allocate the suffering equitably became a big part of managing the Center's limited resources.

The board was more sensitive to these needs than the staff, in some respects. It was the board, under Connie Bowen and Paul Olson's persistent leadership, who forced on the staff an enlarged fringe benefits package that included health care insurance and a pension plan. That was not until about 1982. For the first seven or eight years we breathed fire and ran on unrefined youthful energy and an absolute ignorance of the things that everyone knows can never be accomplished.

Growing Up

"The old keep getting older, but the young must do the same," says the songwriter, and the first sign that the Center was getting to adulthood was the decision in 1980 to buy the old Metz Hotel down Main Street from the post office building we rented. Like many small town buildings, it had served many masters, housing a hotel, café, liquor store and bar, grocery store, and gift shop (more like a "head shop" actually) at various times over 70 years.

It was structurally sound but badly in need of remodeling, which we did for the most part ourselves, as volunteers, with the able leadership of Tom Graff, then editor of our publications and a real handyman. It was 105° the July day we tore out the front wall with its high glass heat-sink windows and porous front door and replaced it with a well-insulated wall and energy-efficient windows.

When we climbed up to re-paint the golden colored ceiling tins we discovered they were painted silver, not gold, and that the uniform gold color came from 70 years of grease from the kitchen. The basement was completely filled with the residue of a lifetime of bargain hunting at auctions, and we hauled over 30 pickup loads to the landfill.

We worked nights and weekends and stole hours during the day too, and in a few months we were ready to relocate into our completely remodeled, amply insulated, fully wired, well-lit, warmly carpeted, tin-ceiling restored office. We missed the skylight at the old post office, but not the leaky roof and the bucket circus.

It was nine years before we remodeled the upstairs, renting out the front half of the second floor to the Legal Aid Society for a few years before our own growth overtook the entire building and we were, as in the post office, jammed tight.

Initiative 300

We and others had tried valiantly for eight years to get corporate farming legislation passed in the Nebraska Unicameral, to no avail. Most years we couldn't even get a bill out of committee. In a way, we had nearly stopped trying.

To our astonishment, Neil Oxton, Nebraska Farmers Union president suddenly announced at his annual meeting in 1981 that they would launch a petition drive to place a constitutional amendment on the ballot. With help from a number of rural groups, organized labor, and the Catholic Church, and with a Herculean effort by Farmers Union, the signatures were gathered in a blizzard of last-minute efforts.

The next five months – July-November – were critical months in the Center's history. It was during this period that we proved we could collaborate with our friends, punish our enemies, and speak the truth to powerful interests in a way that persuaded the general public.

And we proved we could be creative. Working closely with Farmers Union late in the campaign, we used campaign finance disclosure laws to reveal that a \$500,000 campaign against the amendment was being financed by corporate funds, much of it from out of state. Armed with the facts, we responded to a traveling news conference planned by opponents of I-300.

The news conference was to take place in half a dozen cities across the state, with leaders of the farm organizations opposing I-300 being flown from site to site. We hastily organized news conferences the day before in each of those cities, with local people speaking on behalf of I-300, focusing on the source of the money funding the opposition's campaign.

Next day, when the flying news conference showed up, the first question they got everywhere they went: "Who's paying for the jet?" It was a marvelous demonstration of how people can beat money when they know the score.

But maybe the most effective campaign tactic was the simple TV ad we made with a real farmer standing in his field saying: "Let's send those out-of-state-corporations a message: Our land is not for sale...and neither is our vote."

We did not have the funds to pay for the ad to be run, but we invoked the "fairness doctrine," a federal regulation at that time (since eliminated) requiring federally licensed electronic media to cover ballot questions fairly, whether both sides of the issue could pay for ads or not. We wrote

every TV and radio station asking for free air time, and most of them gave us some – about one minute for every five the other side bought.

Our ads ran no more than a couple weeks. But they were brutally effective because they focused on the money, on the attempt of corporate America to buy this election, and they were juxtaposed against slick Madison Avenue ads with actors and urban leaders (former Congressman Cavanaugh, for one) bombarding people with phony claims that most farmers didn't want anyone telling them who they could and couldn't sell land to.

Our ad was real, convincing, and powerfully simple. Its message gave voters the same stake in the outcome as farmers – our land is not for sale...and neither is our vote. The other side probably drove voters away from its cause during the last week of the campaign by implicitly reinforcing our message with their expensive ad campaign.

In any case, while we lost Omaha by a modest margin, we made up the difference in Lincoln and won by 2:1 in rural Nebraska.

In some ways, Election Day 1982 is when the battle over corporate farming began. Hell hath no fury like the rich and the powerful when they can't have what they want. The Omaha National Bank almost immediately filed a lawsuit to have the amendment declared unconstitutional. It failed.

There were three more suits over the years in state and federal court, all failing. Each year there would be open or surreptitious legislative attempts to place repeal on the ballot. There were petition drives, paid and volunteer, to place repeal on the ballot.

Nothing worked because family farm supporters kept the focus on corporate farming, collaborated closely without organizational jealousy (forming Friends of the Constitution), and operated an amazingly efficient telephone tree and action alert system (hats off to Nancy Thompson and Mark Epp) that kept people informed and engaged.

We filled the legislative chamber whenever hearings were held, flooded Lincoln on an annual Family Farm Day, confronted paid petition circulators with volunteer counter circulators, asking people not to sign the petition. We made sure TV cameras were there filming farm wives arguing with mercenary college kids being paid by the signature.

And perhaps most important, we went inside the bowels of farm organizations who supported corporate farming, notably the Nebraska Farm Bureau Federation and the Nebraska Cattlemen, and cultivated their local leaders to effectively neutralize these organizations. From 1983-1990 this battle raged, but there was never a time when the corporate farm proponents had the upper hand.

The Farm Crisis

If I-300 tested our mettle with the corporate interests, the farm crisis that befell American agriculture in the mid 1980s tested our character in far more difficult ways. While it takes

courage to speak truth to power, it takes a lot more courage to speak the truth to a friend you think is wrong about something important. Many of the Center's friends saw the farm crisis much differently than we did, and many of them had a lot at stake personally in the outcome.

We disappointed many when we refused to endorse the Harkin-Gephardt Farm Bill that would have introduced a mandatory supply management program on most major crops. We wrote an open letter to the family farm movement explaining our position on the merits of the issues, and we offered an alternative approach.

We kept as many doors open as possible to activists in the field who felt our position undercut their efforts to help farmers, and we were especially trusted by them when it came to addressing issues related to credit, debt settlement, and taxation. But this period hurt the Center with some church denominations, with the activist left, and with many lately activist farmers, and with some funders.

But among many leaders of rank and file farm organizations, this was a period when our credibility grew. We were increasingly valued for the service and leadership we provided on credit issues and organizing and leadership development we provided on federal tax reform.

It was during the farm crisis that we insisted that the policies that fueled the boom that had become the bust – tax subsidies to capital investment and cheap and loose credit that protected the most aggressive expanders from the consequences of their actions – be changed. Over time we prevailed on both issues, to greater or lesser extent.

During the farm crisis we also urged farmers and policy makers to focus on the farm recovery by helping farmers to downsize when necessary and reposition themselves for starting over at a time when declining land values were making bargains in the land market. In this we failed because the bargains came and went quickly, and policy makers were focused on bailouts and emergency assistance, not recovery.

Frustrated, we responded by fashioning a strategy around use of the new federal Chapter 12 bankruptcy law. A lot of farmers positioned themselves for recovery by forcing creditors to accept some responsibility, but unfortunately, the creditors most vulnerable were the unsecured creditors who were friends and neighbors of the farmers going broke.

A farm crisis not managed by sensitive and informed policy hurts the innocent on the farm and on Main Street, as well as those who fueled it with their greed.

Sustainable Agriculture Movement

The farm crisis also fed the need for farmers to get off the capital-intensive, environmentally destructive, anti-social path of industrial agriculture and to seek what we initially called a “more resourceful” agriculture, but which eventually became known more generally as “sustainable” agriculture.

While the seeds of these efforts had been planted in the Small Farm Energy Project, the work fully blossomed in the mid 1980s with the emergence of a national sustainable agriculture movement. The movement was supported (albeit meagerly) by a federal research funding program called the Low-Input Sustainable Agriculture (LISA) program.

Our Congressman, Doug Bereuter, was the first Republican to sign onto sponsorship of the bill after he toured the Small Farm Energy Project and visited with dairy farmer Gary Young, who explained to him how he could use minimum tillage without chemicals by using a nine-year crop rotation scheme. This, we observed, was a problem mainly because a nine-year rotation more than quadrupled the tenure of a U.S. Congressman.

By the mid 1980s there was growing national interest in sustainable agriculture, with its emphasis on resource conservation, reduced cash flow, crop diversification, and risk management. Many alternative agriculture organizations were springing up nationwide, and though many of them were interested in advocating government policies to encourage sustainable agriculture, most of them did not have much experience with federal farm policy.

We played a key role in organizing the Midwestern Sustainable Agriculture Working Group and a parallel Coalition, which in turn spawned regional working groups in many other parts of the nation and eventually lead to establishment of a National Campaign for Sustainable Agriculture which has played an increasingly important role in all farm bills.

Water Conservation

In the early 1980's, our concern about irresponsible irrigation development lead to an alliance with rural (and urban) interests trying to limit construction of a massive federal irrigation project that would be fed from a dam on the Niobrara River. The Norden Dam would supply northern Holt County, a region infamous for corporate farming, and destroy one of Nebraska's most precious natural streams.

This was the occasion for adding Bassett rancher Wes Sandall to our board, who with Bob Warrick anchored our farmer-environmental perspective. We joined forces with Audubon and Sierra and other groups to form the Nebraska Water Conservation Council and launched a door-to-door canvass that gathered signatures and donations to fight the Norden dam. The effort was very effective, and the project was de-authorized by the late 1980s.

Diversifying the Program

Our work had never been just about farm policy, but about farming practices, environmental issues, and rural development, but during the 1980s and early 1990s this diversification became more apparent and more ambitious. We hauled out many tools from our toolkit and put them to work building a rich and complex program.

In 1980 we were still mostly gadflies on economic policy issues, criticizing bankers and farm managers and agricultural researchers. By 1992 we were operating our own ongoing research

effort, making loans, managing farm land. We were still critics, but we had put ourselves to work performing the way we thought those we criticized should perform.

First, the Small Farm Energy Project evolved into the Small Farm Resources Project, a much more comprehensive approach to on-farm research focused on a wide range of sustainable agriculture practices and appropriate technologies. A lot of the effort centered on moisture management strategies, critical to the survival of dryland farming and animal agriculture in the western Corn Belt and eastern Great Plains. Later, this work evolved further with a growing emphasis on management strategies for beginning farmers.

That emphasis was a natural outgrowth of the continuing deterioration of federal farm policy's social mission, the diminution of beginning farmer loan programs, and rising land values that once again priced beginners out of the market. In 1991 we launched Land Link, a multi-dimensional program including a clearinghouse to link beginning farmers with retiring farmers, a comprehensive farm planning program, and a licensed professional farm management and realty service.

Joy Johnson and Allen Prosch designed and implemented Land Link, which has inspired over a dozen replications nationwide. None are as comprehensive, but all have been fashioned to create new economic opportunities in agriculture.

At the same time we inaugurated the Rural Enterprise Assistance Project (REAP), which used community organizing strategies and group lending models to foster entrepreneurship in rural communities, first in Nebraska, then in Iowa and Kansas. REAP became a model for rural micro-enterprise programs, and led to broad development of the strategy throughout Nebraska. Gene Severens and later Rose Jaspersen were the key developers of the concept early on.

These innovative and positive programs gave depth to the Center's work and engaged us with new constituencies and partners. There was sometimes tension between these more affirmative and collaborative strategies and the Center's traditional in-your-face advocacy.

Can an organization be a lender and a critic of credit policy, a farm manager and an advocate of owner-operatorship, a scientist and a skeptic of technology? We thought so, and we hope so. There is no doubt that we learned a lot about very pragmatic matters from designing and implementing these programs. It would be a blessing to know that it made our policy advocacy more effective. But it is not clear to us that it did. Maybe from a further distance, it will become clearer.

During the 1980s the Center also got involved with local historic preservationists trying to save the small hospital building originally built in Walthill by Dr. Susan LaFlesche Picotte, the first Native American woman physician. The Center borrowed the money and bought the building and over the next several years worked closely with the local group to rehabilitate it, research, design, and produce several exhibits on the "shared history" of the Native America and white people in the area.

Eventually we turned the building over to the local group. It is a National Historic Landmark and a marvelous tribute to a great woman and to the enduring struggles of the people of the area.

Dealing with Founders' Syndrome

The board had been growing in many ways, partly because of the growing role of women. Fern Norris became the first president other than Art May. (Center titles have sometimes confused all of us – the president has never been a paid staff person, but the board chair.) Connie Bowen, Maryanne Rouse, and Karen Tikalsky all became strong leaders in many capacities. (All but Bowen, whose death was a tragic loss for many good causes, have served as President.)

Things started getting taken better care of close to home. We added health insurance and other fringe benefits for a staff getting older and taking on more family responsibilities, incorporated bylaw provisions that required the board to add at least one new member each year (which implicitly required someone to leave if the board was at its size limit), established functioning board committees, adopted a budget process and a general planning process. And we turned attention to the biggest issue looming over the future of the organization – founders' syndrome.

We had served as co-directors from inception, and our entrepreneurial, share-everything-with-each-other leadership style worked well in a young and somewhat wild organization. But the Center was getting more sophisticated, its need for management systems more formal, its need for division of labor and wider participation in management decisions more apparent. Any organization that intends to outlive its founders needs to recognize and respond to this need. Beginning in 1988 we did.

During that year, Marty took a leave of absence from the co-directorship and, with the support of a grant from the Joyce Foundation, became a "senior associate" working on various projects that were, for the most part, outside the scope of the Center's program. During this period a management process evolved within the staff.

A cloud hovered over the project because the goal was to establish management systems that would free the Center from excessive dependence on us without forcing us to leave. The goal was to establish a management system that would accommodate Marty's return to the staff. We affectionately, but painfully, referred to this as the "re-entry" issue.

This year was painful and difficult. The Center had grown large as a series of unilateral relationships between individual staff and us. People used to having confidence in their relationship with us were being asked to deal with each other in a process that would redistribute power within the organization.

The board too was being asked to grow, to make formal decisions of a nature it had simply relied on us to make previously. There was uncertainty, confusion, sharply different views (especially over how much we should just go back to the old ways when Marty "re-entered") and not a little distrust. Fern Norris' patient leadership as president during this period was crucial to the effort.

And it was a productive effort. Out of it emerged a different Center, in these ways:

- A participatory money management and shared fund raising process called Resource Allocation and Management (RAM) established systems by which spending authority was decentralized, discretionary resources allocated to the projects where they were needed most, fund raising opportunities identified and assignments made, and a culture of sharing institutionalized and supported by both data systems and administrative processes.
- A clear division of labor between us, with separate but equal lines of authority and responsibility to the board – Don for administrative matters, Marty for programmatic matters; the co-directorship, with its joint and indivisible powers and diluted accountability, was terminated.
- Regular, formal, and participatory evaluation of all staff by supervisors and of us by the board was established.
- A wider range of policy issues were to be addressed by the board, which would exercise more leadership in decision making and organize itself into working committees.
- The program would be managed by two program leaders (Chuck Hassebrook and Nancy Thompson) chosen by project leaders and reporting to Marty.
- A program council consisting of administrative director (Don), program director (Marty) and the program leaders (Chuck and Nancy) would be the central management team.

This system continued to evolve for several years but was functional in decentralizing management, sharing power, and increasing accountability throughout the organization. Probably it was not the management systems that emerged, but the process by which we came to grips with the problem that mattered most.

From this point on, it was presumed that one day Don and Marty would leave, and that when they did, it would be a small event in terms of the viability of the organization. As it was, Marty stayed nearly eight more years, Don nearly 13. While the directorship has been unified into an executive director position since then, the other elements of the system remain in place.

Granary

It was also during this period of defining the Center's institutional future that we launched an endowment fund, which we called The Granary. It was under Paul Olson's leadership as president that we took this important step. The beginnings were modest, but the spirit of stewardship was firmly established by the first gifts to the Granary.

Those gifts memorialized Bert Evans, whose humor, passion, and intelligence sustained and energized the Center for many years; Connie Bowen, whose bright and clear-headed approach to the Center's organizational development and commitment to environmental issues led us in new

directions internally and externally; and John Vlcek, a Nebraska native son whose work in Tennessee and Texas on alternative agricultural marketing was an inspiration.

These early gifts were seedlings for the first major gift from the estate of Pulitzer Prize nominee Norris Alfred, the long time publisher of the Polk (NE) Progress, whose humorous and poignant editorials about rural life we collected and published as *Butterfly Against the Gale*. That gift, in turn, inspired donors in our first endowment campaign in 1997-98, which raised nearly \$8.0 million.

What Have We Learned?

What have we drawn from this experience? Too much to distill here. We were asked to write a short essay – perhaps eight pages – about the “early” years. When we handed in our assignment, we were told it would be nice to write more, to bring it up into the 1990s.

We find that as it gets closer to the present, our ability to think clearly about it diminishes. That might mean we are only deluding ourselves into believing we remember that further past with good insight and perspective – “for now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face.”

Ten quick thoughts (in no particular order) about some lessons we have learned from this history.

1. There is no work you will ever do that pays better than doing what you believe in every day. Doing what you believe in often requires financial sacrifice, but you won't notice it if you are being fulfilled. If you are keeping score, however, you are losing.
2. Rural organizations not rooted in rural places are easily distracted, often shallow, and usually ineffective. Loving rural places enough to criticize them and to know their strengths when you see them requires being there.
3. Do not take yourself too seriously. People who do not have fun, who cannot laugh at themselves, who carry the weight of the world on their shoulders and anguish over every negative turn of events don't last long in this business, drain energy from others, and can't see the forest for the trees.
4. The most important decisions are hiring decisions. Hire good people and give them lots of room to do their thing. If you don't, you spend all your time cleaning up messes.
5. Take care of each other. Whether it is the way you run meetings, the way you allocate salaries, or the fringe benefits you provide, mutuality is the most valuable source of good morale.
6. Don't let the staff get out in front of the board. If the board is not leading, it cannot or will not play its most important role: protecting the integrity of the organization, establishing its political independence, and defending it from its critics.

7. Conduct yourself with honor and integrity and courage. Make the issues, don't become the issue.
8. You cannot invent too many ways to reward sharing and to encourage sacrifice. People who are not expected to share will hoard, and hoarding is the bane of good resource management in a small organization.
9. Listen to those with whom you disagree. Especially, understand the other side's argument in a political debate better than they do. Know it so well that you know what it is about their own arguments they don't really believe. There is nothing more demoralizing than being confronted with your own doubts.
10. Manage your resources prudently, conserve everything, especially time, and never cut cord. You might need it.

We would like to close by acknowledging that it has been impossible for us to mention with sufficient respect all of the people who have served on the Center board and staff and contributed in important ways to its development. We apologize. Each sentence we have written calls up a fresh memory of people and events not yet mentioned, and while we appreciate the need to get some of this into the record, we think it is time to say "enough."