

**Archive | NHPRC How You Gonna Keep 'Em Down on the Farm? (stereo master)
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SPEAKER 1: This young snort from the agricultural school came out there to North Dakota to look over my land and my stock. He said he was going to appraise everything on my farm for the government. He said he was going to make a report on everything there and help me pull out of the red.

Well, he looked over everything, wrote it all down on the record neat as a pin, stuck his nose into everything there. He thought he'd just about had everything, when he saw an animal looking around the house. We keep the old goat because we had him so long. What's he? The young squirt asked, and what's he for?

I said, you're the expert here. You tell me. I ain't supposed to tell you. Well, he said, I don't know what it is. I'll just have to wire back and find out what it is so I can put it down on my report. All right, I says, laughing, you do that.

So he wired clean to Washington to Secretary Wallace, I guess, and he said, there's an object here and I don't know what it is. It's long and lean with a bald head, chin whiskers, empty lean stomach, a long sad face, and sad cadaverous eyes. What is it? And Wallace wired back, you wet behind the ears mewling baby jackass. That's the farmer.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

We are at the crossroads of history. We don't want to be railroaded through. We don't want to fold up like a Jackknife. There are things solemn and dear to us. This is a grave situation and we must stand together. Where are we to stand upon the future? The farmers are on the march.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

SPEAKER 2: For a lot of reasons, we're taking people from the land and putting them in the wrong place. We have more arable, livable land in the United States than any country in the world.

And instead of encouraging our people in the cities to move there and to become a part of that, we're doing it the other way around. We're taking people from the farms and moving them into the cities.

And if you travel the roads in any of our farming states, you see empty farm houses, those that are still standing. Miles and miles of them, and they're concentrated in just one farmer farming it all.

**RALPH
BLINKER:** They appointed me to their agricultural relations board this spring. And it's part of a few other groups that they have started in this district. Another group I know they have started was where the teachers have to get involved in studying minority groups. I forget the name of it, but it's-- well, it's called a cultural group, by the way.

And I didn't know this at the time either until the last meeting, where this-- one of the representatives came to our meeting and asked for references to study agriculture because we seem to be the minority in this country already.

SPEAKER 4: They work hard day in and day out and they satisfy themselves. They tend to satisfy themselves in large part with what they consider realistic appraisals of what's available to them.

That doesn't mean that they should have what they have or they deserve what they have. It simply means that if you're living in a relative state of deprivation, if you always are looking, let's say, at the highest levels of rewards in the society, whether it's through TV commercials or someplace else, it's going to be a terribly frustrating experience. One has to make the adjustment in a society where there is many inequities as there are in our society.

FRED GAINES: I knew out here we could live on very little. We've had extremely thin years. I mean, poverty years, years with a couple of thousand dollars income. But I raise all my own food organically here. We supply ourselves totally in food, plus we sell. I sell food to organic stores and restaurants in the city and at the Guthrie. That's my biggest customer.

SPEAKER 6: I don't think most people realize how hard it really is. And I don't think most people would really enjoy it. I don't think a lot of people actually realize that this could potentially be farming country. It's traditionally been logging country and mining country. And that's the way it's always been looked at.

But actually, if a person is willing to work and take a risk, it's-- certainly, you're not going to have a bumper crop of tomatoes or anything, but there are crops that can be raised up here. In fact, a lot of people, they look at you like you're crazy when you tell them you're trying to farm. They just tell you, well, you won't be able to make it.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

SPEAKER 1: *A Sense of Place*, a documentary series, which looks at regions and regionalism in the State of Minnesota. Produced by Minnesota Educational Radio under a grant from the Minnesota Humanities Commission. This program is called, *How You Gonna Keep 'Em Down on the Farm?*

[MUSIC PLAYING]

From the days when 160 acres of fertile prairie land in Western Minnesota felt like a Kingdom to Scandinavian immigrants, through grasshopper plagues, droughts, and the depression of the 1930s, to today's immense agribusiness enterprises and their opposite phenomenon tiny organic operations, the idea of the farm has held claim to the imagination of Minnesotans.

Oh, farm kids come to town to be where the action was could listen with wry amusement to city types who talked of getting a little piece of land somewhere, being my own boss. But they knew what working with the land was all about. And if all else failed, that knowledge in their bones was not exactly like money in the bank, but a means to survival anyway.

RALPH BLINKER: My father was a farmer and his father was a farmer. And my mother's side, they were all farmers too. So it's been in the farm end of it. I think that there-- unless it's going to change, I mean, farmers always have been farmers, and their sons have always been farmers. And there have been very few people that born in the city come to the farm and started farming.

SPEAKER 1: Ralph Binker has been farming his 157 acres of Stearns County for a dozen years. He has a dairy herd and crops that help sustain it. And though he's not a rich man, he's doing nicely. Binker and his wife Corinne are rearing eight children in a spacious new home on their traditional family farm.

RALPH I guess it was just my blood. Once you're in the business, you just grow with it. And I just love to see things grow.
BLINKER: I love to see-- put the seed in the ground and see it come up, and harvest it, and livestock, a new baby is born. Let's see a cow gives a calf. I love to see it come up and grow. And it's a daily routine.

Comparing it to a factory, which I just go in and did one job every day and the rest of my life, I don't accomplish anything. And by working with something that grows, I'm satisfied. I've got more of a risk in this business and I play with nature, but this is part of everybody's farming business.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

If I had to do all the work alone in this farm, I don't think I'd be this efficient because there's too many things to touch and turn over and do. My brother lives next door, and we own a machinery in partnership. And we run it back and forth. But there's nothing that's specific that's for him or for me. We do it all.

SPEAKER 1: Corinne Blinker also performs a daily round of chores. And the Blinker youngsters all learn how to be good farmers from the time they're three years old.

SPEAKER 7: There's a lot of things to do on a farm, you know, work. Feeding the cows and feeding calves. When you first milk the cows, and then you put some milk in a calf pail.

And then-- and then you should feed the calves. If they're small, you just hold it up so they drink out of it. When they get bigger, like heifers, they eat hay and feed and all that. Drive tractors. Wipe the dishes, and sometimes wash. Seat mangers. Sometimes carry the hay out. You get strong, healthy.

(SINGING) Mihti Mahti had a hen.

She laid eggs for gentlemen.

Sometimes 9 and sometimes 10.

Mihti Mahti's [INAUDIBLE].

Mihti Mahti had a hen.

She laid eggs for gentlemen.

Sometimes 9 and sometimes 10.

Mihti Mahti's fashion

RALPH Oh, you've got to be a half a veterinarian, and half a mechanic, and half an accountant, and a strong back and a
BLINKER: weak mind. Sometimes I enjoy it when it rains and I can just sit down and think a while.

But if it rains-- for example, 1972, if it rains too much, well, you don't want to say the bad things about it because it can turn dry on us. But in your mind, you just think a little differently.

SPEAKER 1: I was a small farmer, Fred Andrew President of the Superior Farming Company of California and Arizona told reporters in the March 1973 issue of *Saturday Review Society*. "And there's no way you can do it today, you need technology and you need efficiency. And there's no way the individual farmer can do that."

CHUCK He's a big man. He's a small man. He's a laughing working tall man. He comes in all assorted shapes and sizes,
LILJEGREN: happy, sad, wide, and lean. He's a farmer. He's tomorrow's breakfast with a grin on his face. He's the nation's breadbasket with a cocked left eyebrow.

He wakes at dawn to feed the world. He carries nations on his big shoulders. He holds the Earth in his hands and lives by the sun and the rain. He's America riding a tractor, democracy wearing a straw hat. He's freedom holding a hoe. He's the future of the world in a pair of blue overalls.

SPEAKER 1: University of Minnesota sociologist, Dr. George Donahue.

GEORGE Assistance farming, where there's diversified farming. A whole series of products to commercial, specialized
DONAHUE: farming. You might say that about 60% of the farmers in the countryside are marginal in the sense that they are not really essential to the production of food and fiber in this country as a whole.

Now, I know that sounds rather crass. And if I were a farmer and somebody said that, I would resent that statement. But when you look at the picture, you find that 80% of the product of food and fiber in this country happened to be produced by about 20% of the farmers.

That means that the remainder produced very little. And you could say that even those 20% who produce the 80% are not practicing the highest levels of efficiency with regard to inputs, technological inputs, and other inputs, labor inputs, and so forth.

CHUCK Since the dawn of time, he's wrestled the land and squeezed life from the angry soil. Armies marched on his
LILJEGREN: muscles. Cities eat on his laborers. He fills the marketplace and makes the wheels of commerce whirl. He's a farmer.

Politicians promise him things. Bankers respect him. Middlemen live off him. He's day laborer and capitalist, handyman and boss, toolmaker, mechanic, veterinarian, salesman, purchasing agent, production manager, weather forecaster, and good neighbor.

GEORGE Now, given the organization of the family farm and having the farm life more or less coterminous with the life of
DONAHUE: the farmer himself and not thinking in an indefinite timeline, the way the corporation does, and then thinking of hiring labor and so forth to work on a farm as a corporation does, you would think to limit the enterprise to the availability of family labor and to the activities of the farm owner.

So you have a completely different frame of reference, as well as timeline, that you happen to be working with in the family farm. You see, that timeline is changing. And those efficient farms, even though they remain family farms, many of them have a timeline that exists beyond the life of the family, in the sense they're beginning to think of extending the farm indefinitely. They-- when they make capital investments and land investments.

Some of their family may take it on or they may sell at a certain point to another family so that the life span of the farm, that is would build up. And a decline in the farm is not the same as the buildup in a person's life and the decline, as was true of the old family farm.

CHUCK He likes the smell of alfalfa fields, and the look of dawn coming over a mountain, and the sound of cattle in a
LILJEGREN: meadow, and the jaunty jig of a hoedown fiddle. He likes the music of small streams and the look of trees climbing a Hill.

He likes the breath of air filtered through growing fields in the echo of a sharp axe cutting into a tree trunk. He likes the look of corn shucks at autumn time and the smile of a harvest moon. He's a farmer.

**GEORGE
DONAHUE:**

There's still a lot of quote, "family farms," but these are the marginal farmers. Farming, let's say, of the way it was in the past in terms of the value system of the so-called family farming is probably best represented by part-time farmers today.

Most of whom-- well, let's say, a third or a better of the farms in the United States are part-time farmers. They produce about 2% of the marketable farm products. They're out there because they're the values that they associate with that type of activity.

And that's the whole notion of family farming, you see, was a way of life, not a business enterprise. It had certain values beyond profit-making, in terms of the values that it might have for one's aesthetic appreciation of his environment or the interrelationship between him and his wife, the so-called socioeconomic unit of the family and its operation, the togetherness values or whatever else one might associate traditionally with farming.

**CHUCK
LILJEGREN:**

He's the meat and potatoes of a nation. He's the ham and eggs in the menu at a restaurant. He's Halloween pumpkins and cold watermelons at a 4th of July picnic. He's the turkey and yams at a Thanksgiving Day dinner table. He's a farmer.

Tan and lean, he's always the first of the pioneers. He breaks frontiers, and clears the Earth, and tames the land for the city men to come. He's a strong man and a gentle man. Strong enough to hold a plow in line against the hard Earth and gentle enough to caress a newborn calf with loving hands. His tall, strong sons fight the nation's wars. And his bustling wife brings gentleness and peace to the raw plains in the wild valleys.

**GEORGE
DONAHUE:**

The fact remains that there is still millions upon millions of people who are seeking to fulfill their life's desires and experiences in open country and in small communities throughout the country. And I think that's-- what we should do is consider equity among different types of social structures for citizens as a whole.

And in order to do that, we're going to have to begin to think of, to what degree can we permit people to live in areas that might have to be subsidized, not only economically, but socially, in terms of some type of social policy regarding social services? Which might cost us dollars, but in the final analysis we'd say, this is a desirable balance of types of social organization and types of life experience that Americans may choose.

**CHUCK
LILJEGREN:**

He's a farmer, always a pawn of the times. He's a gambler. He throws his seed like dice on a giant gambling table of land. He bets his muscles and his know how on the heat of the sun and the turn of a rain cloud. Sometimes he wins. Sometimes he loses. The gods make him sweat for his winnings.

He builds the schools and hews the logs for the churches. He takes wild land and tames it into peaceful acres. And he makes the smoke rise from friendly chimneys dotted across the plains.

His hands toll the church bells on country Sundays. He lives by the code of the land and never refuses a helping hand to a friend or a stranger. He's America's best customer. He's the world's most constant hope. He's the most useful man in America. He's a farmer.

SPEAKER 1:

Stephen Pitch writing in the *North Country Anvil Number Five*, "why did my parents like farming so much? Why did they never complain? Why did they never want to sell the farm and seek a different way of life?"

How could they be unaware of what was happening around them? How could they actually choose to live on a farm when so many others were selling their farms finding comfortable jobs and leading the good life?

Failing to find the answers to these questions by the time I finished high school, I was resolved to find the good life, which my parents for some reason had ignored. Well, I graduated from college, earned a master's degree, got married, and found a job.

Tomorrow, I will have to get up at 6:00 in the morning and start my hour drive to work over an overcrowded congested freeway. I'll have to work in a windowless office, breathing air polluted by cigar and cigarette smoke.

I'll fight my way through traffic to the grocery store to buy a quart of milk. I'll have to make a TV dinner because my wife will still be on the freeway trying to get home from her job. I'll take my son to the zoo to see the animals. I'll see about getting the air conditioner fixed. I'll send a check to the health spa.

I'll apologize to my wife for complaining constantly about my job, my boss, the traffic, the noise, and a million other things. I am 25 years old today. I know now why mom and dad never thought the good life. They had it all the time."

(SINGING) A farmer boy, a farmer boy, a farmer boy for me.

If ever I marry all in my life, it's a farmer boy for me.

When my Johnny sings behind the plow, it's music sweet to me.

And if ever I marry all in my life, it's a farmer's wife I'll be.

I would not marry a railroader that drives the engine train.

I'd rather marry a farmer boy that loves the mind and rain

When Johnny sings behind the plow, it's music sweet to me.

And if ever I marry all in my life, it's a farmer's wife I'll be.

I would not marry a doctor man, he's full of pains and pills.

I'd rather marry a farmer boy with corn upon the hills.

when my Johnny sings behind the plow, it's music sweet to me.

And if ever I marry all in my life, it's a farmer's wife I'll be.

I would not marry a lawyer man, he tells too many lies.

I'd rather work with my father boy beneath the open skies.

when my johnny sings behind the plow it's music sweet to me.

And if ever I marry all in my life, it's a farmer's wife I'll be.

SPEAKER 1: Minnesota poet Lewis Jenkins. "As she smells the clean sheets, the farmer's wife remembers the 1930s. Wind whips the clothes on the line, blows her dress tight against her heavy legs.

The farmer in his dirty overalls searches through years of broken machinery behind the barn, searches through tall sunflowers, through the nests of rabbits and mice with a wrench in his hand, looking for exactly the right part or one that might do. Seven skinny cows lie in the mud where the tank overflows. Throughout the hot afternoon, the windmill continues to pump long drafts of cool water."

[MUSIC PLAYING]

SPEAKER 6: Just like a mob coming in, really you don't believe it. You can't see anything but this wave of people coming down the aisles. And really it's-- I don't know how to explain it. It's a real experience there.

The first time you've been at the market on a Saturday, for instance, which is really your busiest day, it's just unbelievable. The doors are closed and everybody is inside the market.

All the farmers are just waging, and tensed up, and standing by the booth. And you hear this noise outside of the market. I don't know what else you can call it. It's just human noise. And then the next thing you know, the door is open and pow, you're just flooded, and there's people standing six or seven deep in the lines.

There's probably 10 lines across the front of each booth. It's just like a big sale at one of your supermarkets or something. It's just fantastic. But it's fun because you're dealing with the people. And you can talk to them a little bit.

And everybody's got kind of a funny word or a kind word to say. You don't see too many grouchy people coming down the farmers market to buy vegetables. And that's just a good group of people. I'd come in for fresh produce, and they realize they're getting it. And it's just big happy family trading is what it is.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

SPEAKER 1: Bob and Chris Walton are performing the somewhat remarkable feat of growing in the rocky soil and capricious climate of Northeastern Minnesota just outside Duluth. Some 17 acres of vegetable crops for sale through the farmer's market and out of the home on their tenant farm.

In their 20s, and rather more practical than philosophical, the Waltons had no farm experience in their backgrounds. They learned how to do it through college courses, county agents, advice from other farmers, and sometimes difficult experience.

SPEAKER 6: We had a very bad year last year, as did everybody. All over the country and all over the world, in fact, it was a bad year for farming. I wouldn't go into farming if I didn't feel that you could make, not only a living and support your family in a relative amount of comfort, certainly, you're not going to be driving Cadillacs, but you can have a car and have most of the comforts that anybody else can have, and you can have a decent savings plan. And you can look forward to retiring and supporting yourself comfortably.

I speak of subsistence farming as being just that, being able to support yourself and live comfortably for the duration of your life. You're not going to be hiring 10 or 20 other families and supporting them, you're just going to be subsisting yourself.

You have to look at it from the family standpoint. My wife is, as you know, an artist. So she-- this is advantageous for her. She has the country living, and she can paint out here. She has the quiet and the serenity that the country provides.

I enjoy wildlife. And I enjoy being able to raise my ducks, and geese, and chickens without somebody disturbing them constantly. And I enjoy being able to walk out in the field and have deer fairly close by.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

It's sort of like when our nation was young in the pioneering families. If you're pioneering, you're certainly not a pioneer in the strict sense of the word, but you're a pioneer as far as your self-goes, your own values and your own ideals.

You're still searching and you're still developing, and so are most of these other people that are going back to the land there. And you are helping one another, just as the early settlers did. There really-- especially in this area, there isn't too many places you can go to for advice.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

You don't want to sound like you're trying to be a hermit, but it is nice to get away from people and to look out and know that there's nobody back there, just the land. It just gives you a feeling of self-assurance, I suppose. I don't really know how it can or how it does, but it does. It just makes you feel good to sit there and know that you're by yourself, just you and the land.

SPEAKER 1: From *Rain Gatherer*, a book of poems by Franklin Brainerd recently published by the *Minnesota Writers Publishing House*. "I put in Cedar posts instead of pitch and was glad with the more temporary thing. Each has its grace and strength, but I knew that Cedar would see me through.

I felt at times as if there were something pompous about a longer impermanence. I have seen too many monuments of death whose carvings grow illegible. In rural graveyards, the single hand its index finger up, stands reminding and rum about the sign gone home.

Well, manure is a temporary thing. And so are the songs of those who sing walking behind the spreader. And I take for better the singing of the folk who walk and know their walk. And if my Cedar posts become the soil that holds them and the rusted wires fail, I know another will build his fence on the same old heaving ground. Sensing that even where my old posts stand, they will no longer do."

FRED GAINES: I'm the biggest organic farming playwright in the country. I'm a tenant farmer. I'm a tenant farmer. I'm a poor tenant farmer up here. And that is in any conceit, that's our exaggeration.

We came out here five years ago after I left the Guthrie Theater. For a variety of reasons. I've got a family that I wanted to get out. But that wasn't the real reason. I think I was sick of the cities. I mean, that's an escapist attitude. I did. I ran away from the cities. I ran back to a kind of world that if I didn't know exactly from living in Nebraska on a farm, I knew what it was going to be like. This particular community just was a lucky guess.

SPEAKER 1: Minnesota playwright Fred Gaines, now farming and writing near the town of Somerset Wisconsin.

FRED GAINES: Farming in the north, and they call this the upper Midwest. It's the north as far as I'm concerned. We get 90 days, if we're lucky, of growable weather. I'm really only invited about five months a year.

With my animals, I've got 30 some head of cattle out there. I'm involved in a lesser capacity all year round, but that involves me for an hour and a half morning chores and a night. So really I can work four or five months, and then I'm free the rest of the year.

And it's the-- I really enjoy the labor of farming and gardening. Yeah, it really does help my head work. It helps my head work in the sense that-- I hope farmers aren't listening. It's idiot labor.

I don't need to involve my head very much because most of it is very simple work. Now, I'm not talking about the decisions that have to be made, I'm talking about the actual labor of throwing hay, and cleaning manure, and plowing. That kind of thing.

And when I'm doing that, your head really races ahead. You're not aware of it. It's like a cushion period. It's like an empty period that things just fill in. It does. It helps me tremendous amount.

Plus, I've found that I'm writing more and more about the people I grew up with, which were rural people, and people I'm living with now. I mean, I think some of my best writing is about people who are non-city people, who are village people, or farm people.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

I think you learn a different kind of respect for life. And I don't mean any exalted, lyrical, kind of that soul thing. I'm not into that at all. It's a much more kind of direct. You see yourself.

You see people reflected in animals rather than seeing-- rather than putting any kind of anthropomorphic soul or something in a cow. A cow is a cow, but it has-- it's exhilarating to watch a cow, to try to nurse back a sick cow or something.

You get involved. You're suddenly aware of how vulnerable you are yourself. You invest so much of yourself in animals. You can't be a writer really until you have hurt yourself in some kind of way. I don't mean a psychic way at all, but until you realize how much you care about things. And you learn that real very quickly on a farm.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

Out here, you're open to things all the time. Every part of you has to be. I mean, the people in the country have really taught me how to love again. Not just love myself, or my family, or my friends, but the love of the world.

We've got people here, it sounds like an exaggeration, but they can't wait to get up in the morning. They love-- they love the change of climates. When it's 40 below out here, it's a kick to them. It's a challenge to them. They get up, it's bracing. And I didn't have that feeling in the cities. When it was cold and you're worried about your car, it wouldn't start, it was a drag and you'd fight it. Not out here.

SPEAKER 1: *Song for a Widow's Marriage* by Franklin Brainard. "Husband I come to you no girl, but a woman earthed from North Dakota. I have known the farm, have milked cows, have fork manure into the spreader, have smelt the deep ammonia of horse urine.

I have borne the womb burden. I have borne and bear the woes of children, woes that hang as unaccountable as moon dogs or a dry dipper. I come to you no girl, but I come rich with peasant blood and warm as sun dug potatoes.

You shall have me warm beside you when winter turns over the roof's edge. You shall have me like something held for winter coming live with flavor from the double-doored root cellar. And when I take the pies from the oven and when I take the bread that yeasted all the kitchen in the afternoon, come kiss my neck and walk with me through the late garden."

[MUSIC PLAYING]

The Farmer Is the Man as told by Meridel Le Sueur in her book, *North Star Country*, published in 1945 by Duell, Sloan, and Pearce, New York. Excerpts from the articles, *How Fred Andrews Tills the Soil With A Computer* Saturday Review Society March 1973. And oh, to be back on the farm by Stephen Pitch, *North Country Anvil Number Five*.

Poems by Franklin Brainard originally published in *North Stone Review*. And now, included in his book, *Rain Gatherer*, published by the *Minnesota Writers Publishing House* 1973 and by Lewis Jenkins from a forthcoming book to be published by the same press.

Music from the album *So Early in The Morning* and *Anthology of The 12 String Guitar* both on the tradition label. And Oscar Brand, and Jean Ritchie, and Archive of Folk Music Production. And special thanks to Chuck Liljegren for reading the Dan Valentine verse, *What Is A Farmer?*

[MUSIC PLAYING]