

Revisiting a Rural Community 25 Years Later



Twenty-five years ago Sonya Salamon, a cultural anthropologist at the University of Illinois, conducted a study that included a sample of 89 households in a randomly selected door-to-door survey in a small, conservative German farm community. The project took on a new long-range dimension when she recently returned to that community to talk with families who were still living there. Today there were just over 50 households surveyed who remain somehow connected with the farm. Many of those originally surveyed are now elderly and live in the house but have relatives other than children farming the surrounding farmland.

The shift from crop share to cash rent arrangements or selling out completely has resulted in fewer small and mid-sized farms being farmed by an increasingly smaller number of Germans. "While in this community, locals continue to farm the land, in similar communities, as operators retire, absentee heirs rent to big operators who don't live in the community. Consequently, their time and money are not spent locally, which can lead to a decline in the community," said Salamon.

The increasing trend toward cash rent has made it easier for big operators to get a foothold in family-oriented communities because they can pay higher rent. Additionally, a cash lease requires little interaction between landlord and tenant as opposed to a crop share lease in which the landlord and tenant share the decisions as well as in the profit or loss. It's easier to cash rent to a stranger.

Through the interviewing process, Salamon noticed one crucial theme that emerged was the changing meaning of the land. "The data from the study done 25 years ago showed a population who believed in the sacredness of the farm land; family land was never sold and normally was farmed by someone in the family. The people knew each other and looked out for each other. They went to the same Lutheran church with services in the German language," said Salamon. "But now, children often attend college and are encouraged by family members to find a career outside of farming. Because of this, heirs to the smaller farms live elsewhere and are more likely than in the past to sell their inheritance. There has been a drastic change over just this one generation."

The farms in this particular community are not dying. There is some consolidation going on and in this community, it is primarily occurring among the local families.

For four generations in the community Salamon studied, parents retired early so that they could give each of their children acreage when they graduated from high school in order to get started on their own farm. They were set for life, with a future on the land.

Today, Salamon said that the pattern has become that the elderly stay, while the younger generation goes off to college or jobs in urban settings. Currently, Midwestern rural communities are often made up of 25 percent elderly, whereas the national average is 12 to 13 percent. Houses don't gain in value and aren't kept up. The level of neighborly watchfulness has declined. While this German farming community has not suffered such a fate, some homes have been sold to non-Germans, and the elderly for the first time are experiencing neighbors they don't know.

The community Salamon studied is one of many in the huge belt of Germans living in a diagonal band across the state from Chicago to St. Louis. "These are persistent, conservative people who care about the farmland that has been in their family's possession for four generations. It's their passion and their security and now they're thinking of selling it," she said. "Twenty-five years ago any six-year-old could describe the history of every acre of his family's farm. Today's generation who moved away, doesn't have the same passion for the land."

Salamon said that the result is an aging farm population. "Farmers over 65 have children who aren't interested in farming or even managing the farm. They want the money and are willing to sell the land to get it."

