Illinois Issues

A publication of the University of Illinois at Springfield

April 2003 *Volume XXIX, No. 4*

Digging dirt, page 23

Carrot and stick, page 20

Growing change, page 25

FEATURES

Credits: The cover was designed by artist Kathleen Riley.

DEPARTMENTS

STAFF

Editorial and business office: HRB 10, University of Illinois at Springfield, One University Plaza, Springfield, IL 62703-5407. Telephone: 217-206-6084. Fax: 217-206-7257. E-mail: illinoisissues@uis.edu. E-mail editor: boyer-long.peggy@uis.edu. ***Subscription questions:*** *Illinois Issues*, Subscription Division, P.O. Box 2795, Springfield, IL 62708-2795 or call 1-800-508-0266. Hours are 8:00 a.m. - 5:00 p.m. Central Time, Monday-Friday (except holidays). ***Subscriptions:*** $39.95 one year/ $72 two years/ $105 three years; student rate is $20 a year. Individual copy is $3.95. Back issue is $5. *Illinois Issues* is indexed in the PAIS Bulletin and is available electronically on our home page: http://illinoisissues.uis.edu. *Illinois Issues* (ISSN 0738-9663) is published monthly, except during the summer when July and August are combined. Periodical postage paid at Springfield, IL, and additional mailing offices. ***Postmaster:*** Send address changes to *Illinois Issues*, Subscription Division, P.O. Box 19243, Springfield, IL 62794-9243.

government, I mean) have aimed at creating the perfect environment for producing those burgeoning harvests. Used to be the ag service recommended arsenic to kill pests; there is still plenty of the residue lying in Illinois lakebeds. Then came the chemical hydrocarbons, DDT and such. Often against the misgivings of farmers themselves, farm agents rammed these chemicals down everyone's throats, only to reverse course when Rachel Carson pointed out that DDT killed eagles and robins, caused a variety of cancers and did a poor job of eliminating insects.

DDT was banned for use in the United States, but the mentality that promoted its benefits in the first place sustains itself. Newer, "safer" chemicals take the place of the old, raining down while rivers turn odd colors, nesting falcons disappear and pregnant women make a run for it — whatever chemical it takes to produce more, even as farm prices drop through the floor.

Farmers are rightly regarded as conservative and suspicious types, resistant to change. Given the welter of conflicting advice they have absorbed over the past half century, who can blame them?

Once upon a time, there was real ecology in the practice of farming. The goal was to establish a sustainable enterprise, one that could support a family over the long haul. The land had to produce, but the farmer had to takes steps to ensure the health of the land as well — a wise bargain negotiated between humanity and nature at their most frequent meeting place, the furrow.

But the progressive types had other plans. In the name of rational science, they sought to destroy — systematically — that older, ecological bargain. In its place came the worship of the ever-larger harvest, gotten by whatever means cheaply available. Squander the land, squander the energy required to produce the chemicals, squander whatever water and earth is necessary to sponge up the excess, but always, always produce more corn, more soybeans.

The soil beneath our feet is a living entity, an organic system comprised of countless life forms building up nutrients, breaking them down, fixing them in the dirt. Modern science too much ignores this life, giving over to quick fixes, working hard to create an artificial heaven to last the maize a season or two. We measure the cost only with a ledger: Did we get more harvest this year?

Small wonder we think of dirt the way we do. ❑

Robert Kuhn McGregor, an environmental historian at the University of Illinois at Springfield, is a regular contributor to the magazine.

Profile

Growing change

Some Illinois farmers are finding ways to save their land, their livelihoods and their communities

by Alan Mamoser

Allen Williams is a pioneer. He's among a relative handful of Illinois farmers who are finding innovative ways to challenge conventional agriculture.

Williams, who operates several farms near Cerro Gordo just east of Decatur, is an advocate of what has come to be called "sustainable" agriculture. This means that for him and other like-minded farmers agriculture's long-term impact on the land is its most important measure of success.

For this reason, these farmers pay attention to the subtle interrelationships of soil, plants and insects, experiment with a greater diversity of crops in more complex rotations, and put considerable effort into conserving black earth. They avoid genetically modified seed and dependence on chemical fertilizers and weedkillers.

In short, they think of the farm in the natural ecosystem. And they believe these innovative practices will sustain their land, their livelihoods and their rural communities.

While this perspective has yet to send deep roots into Illinois, it does show life. The Illinois Sustainable Ag Society, for example, estimates that between 1,500 and 2,500 of this state's farmers and livestock producers are following some sustainable practices, depending on how the term is defined. The farmer-based group is one of many representing diverse interests within sustainable agriculture.

Photograph by Jason Laubsch

Some Illinois farmers have been testing and blending farming methods for years. Williams, for instance, operates conventional as well as organic farms. Still, his methods might seem radical in this traditional corn-and-bean state. Williams plants a diverse mixture of crops across the year, including white corn, soybeans and occasional winter wheat, which he double-crops with sunflowers. He intermixes his main crops with companions, planting buckwheat in the corn rows to attract beneficial insects and ward off pests. And he plants cover crops to hold and nourish the soil in off-seasons.

"I cannot say at what point in time my farming is 'sustainable,'" he says. "I can't say, 'this year I'm more sustainable or this year I'm less.' It's always a goal of trying to conserve and improve the land, and to do this while making a living."

In the early 1990s, Williams dedicated some of his land to organic crops. Since then, he's watched the market for organic products grow. Encouraged, he added more acres. Today, several of his farms are certified as organic.

Williams arrived gradually at a crop mix for his organic farms, always adjusting to suit the market. He began with a four-crop rotation of blue corn or popcorn, then soybeans, then grains of different types, followed by a fallow year. Later, he realized he needed a better return on the organics and went to fallow after a two-crop rotation. Every seventh year an organic field is left fallow or planted in cover crop. Recently, he stopped using genetically modified soybeans on his conventional fields in order to protect the integrity of the organic fields.

Williams has long struggled to conserve the soil on his organic and conventional acreage. Gradually, he reduced tillage to almost nothing, planted wind breaks and grass border strips between fields and along waterways, and began to terrace his fields along the land contours. Always looking for new systems and approaches, he decided to try removing pesticides and synthetic fertilizers altogether.

Through years of experimentation, innovative farmers have gained insight into the natural systems on their land. Yet most believe their dialogue with nature is far easier than their struggle with the market, whose infrastructure is dominated by the big commodity crops.

Just finding outlets for a changing mix of crops presents considerable difficulty. Williams had to haul one crop of organic canola 200 miles to get it processed. As for his popcorn, he had to create his own label and sell directly to organic food brokers. To seek out new markets for his array of products, he worked closely with a local elevator, the Clarkson Grain Co. in Cerro Gordo. Clarkson, as it happens, is now the largest U.S. domestic supplier of organic grains.

Yet, despite their struggles, Williams and other innovative farmers — like most pioneers — may be better suited to the future than others who stick to conventional ways.

If Illinois farmers are to endure, or grow in number, they will need to gain more prowess in marketing many new crops, according to Mike Rahe of the state Department of Agriculture. "Farmers cannot continue to rely on the corn-soybean rotation and survive, especially now with rising international competition in these staples. We'll need to seek alternatives and become more diverse in our growing," says Rahe, who monitors land and water resources for the agency.

For the moment, that's decidedly not the direction of Illinois agriculture. The momentum has been toward fewer crops grown on bigger farms. Beyond the concerns this raises about economic

and environmental impacts, there seems little doubt about effects on the state's social ecosystem. Fewer young people are staying on farms, and rural communities are becoming less viable. Advocates of sustainable agriculture worry about the loss of local independence. Growers, they argue, are caught up in far-flung markets that draw resources from home.

"A lot of cash flows out of communities, and the towns lose a locally based economic system," says Rahe. "There needs to be more opportunities for growers that are not based upon size or scale."

This is the heart of the matter. Ultimately, soil conservation, pesticide reduction, crop diversity and other strategies of sustainable agriculture are undertaken to address one central concern: the future of Illinois' rural communities.

This might seem a daunting challenge. But a few innovators are turning again to the land as a place to begin, making the highest commitment to understanding the farm as a whole system, then trying to open new markets for the products they generate. They are creating a counter-trend of sorts, admittedly small, but one that is nevertheless emerging in communities throughout the state.

Among their number are small-scale producers who are moving into food-grade quality crops, finding markets here and overseas for edible soybeans, buckwheat, white corn and blue corn. Many are trying pasture-raised poultry, vegetables, grapes. Some are turning to fiber crops for energy generation, medicinal crops, including Ginseng, and aquaculture, including shrimp cultivation. One southern Illinois farmer in Golconda, who is raising fresh water prawn using a chemical-free recycling system, hosts an annual festival.

And that is one unexpected byproduct. Innovative farmers also are creating new communities. They are learning to promote new products by celebrating the growing seasons. They are finding opportunities for agri-tourism, opening their land for mushroom hunting and summer camps for kids.

Others are entering urban markets directly and creating communities around their products. These farmers are helping to grow the best guarantee of long-term market viability: They are finding loyal customers for life.

This suggests ways in which sustainable agriculture might emerge on a large scale. It would begin with the farmer who nurtures the biotic community of the land, then extend to everyone involved in the chain of food production and consumption. If marketers, grocers and consumers take greater responsibility for the origin and quality of the food they consume, they might well share a sense of ownership in local farms and farm communities.

Allen Williams' farming practices require extra effort, certainly, and intense care for the land and careful management. Even he acknowledges that the short-term gain is not always apparent. "Many farmers are not doing this because the near-term cost is high," he says. "But the long-term gain will pay off over years, many years, looking at two and three generations out."

It is two and three generations out, and the thought about what life will be like on the land in this state, that is motivating many farmers to experiment, improve techniques and develop new methods that will improve the land and support the communities that live off that land.

No new orthodoxy has arisen to counter the dominant conventional agriculture in Illinois today. There is only the belief on the part of some that the land, cared for in the long term, will allow the long chain of agriculture to thrive, from rural communities to urban consumers. This is stewardship based on the highest principle, a close human relationship to the land. In essence, sustainable agriculture means handing the next generation something better than what we received. ❑

Alan Mamoser is a regional planner in Chicago. His most recent piece for Illinois Issues, *"Island Grove afternoon," appeared in November 2001.*

Producers meet consumers at a Chicago farm market

At the heart of sustainable agriculture is concern for community. The farm market in the Austin neighborhood on Chicago's West Side brings the concept to life. Since 1998, city residents have been buying directly from those who work the land.

LaDonna Redmond, a community activist in Austin, got the idea because her young son suffered from food allergies and she wanted him to have the freshest and best food possible. After learning about organic foods untreated by pesticides, she got in touch with a high school friend who had bought a farm in Pembroke Township in Kankakee County, south of Chicago. Through him, she encountered a community of African-American farmers who are dedicated to organic farming. She worked with them to establish the farm market for the Austin community.

Some 12 families from the Pembroke Farmer's Cooperative provide produce for the Austin market. About six vendors arrive for the Saturday market. What they bring is seasonal and tasty fruits and vegetables, including a wide range of greens, peas and beans. A fruit grower from Michigan also makes the trip to Austin.

Some of the best customers are the neighborhood's many senior citizens, who begin arriving at market opening at 7 a.m. and provide a steady stream for two hours. About 4,500 customers each season make the market pretty hectic for the first few hours.

Redmond prefers the term "sustainable" to "organic" because it encompasses concern for the whole community. In fact, she fears the "organic" label will become too trendy and lead people to miss the point. "We're trying to say something greater than just organic. It's not about corporate farms with 3,000 acres in organic peas. We want to support small family farms."

Redmond loves the tomatoes, the turnip greens and the mustard greens. "These foods are important in African-American tradition, and it's good to see them getting produced by local farmers, organically." The market is open for business every Saturday, June through October, from 7 a.m. to noon, on the Emmett School playlot at Madison and Central in Chicago.

Alan Mamoser