What Jessica Lange didn't say about the perils of farming.

THE IDIOCY OF RURAL LIFE

BY JEFFREY L. PASLEY

The bourgeoisie has subjected the country to the rule of the towns. It has created enormous cities, has greatly increased the urban population as compared with the rural, and has thus rescued a considerable part of the population from the idiocy of rural life.

—Marx and Engels, *The Manifesto of the Communist Party*

If we let Republican farm policies drive our family farmers off the land, then your food won't be grown by farmers whose names are Jones or Smith or Anderson. No, your food will be raised by Tenneco Corporation, or Chevron, or ITT.

—Senator Tom Harkin, Democrat of Iowa

THE IDEA that people still farm for a living in 1986 is an alien and yet somehow romantic one, redolent of grandparents and "Little House on the Prairie." A 1986 *New York Times* poll reported that 58 percent of Americans believe that "farm life is more honest and moral than elsewhere," and 67 percent think that "farmers have closer ties to their families than elsewhere." Images of rural life dominate the "Americana" that passes for tradition in the United States. At a holiday like Thanksgiving, when we are supposed to give thanks to our Pilgrim ancestors and the "bounty" before us, we pay homage to the values embodied in the idea of the "family farm."

At one time, this reverence for farm life made sense. The United States began as an agricultural nation. In 1790, 93 percent of the American population worked on farms. Agricultural products made up 80 percent of exports. The Founders, knowing which side their breadbasket was buttered on, heaped extravagant praise on the nation's farmers. "Cultivators of the earth are the most valuable citizens," wrote Thomas Jefferson. "They are the most vigorous, the most independent, the most virtuous, & they are tied to the country & wedded to its liberty and interests by the most lasting bonds."

The "family farm" remained a powerful myth long after it ceased to be a political fact. "The great cities rest upon our broad and fertile prairies. Burn down your cities and leave our farms, and your cities will spring up again as if by magic; but destroy our farms and the grass will grow in the streets of every city in the country," thundered Populist leader William Jennings Bryan. Yet as the myth gained strength, Americans were actually leaving the farm by the millions. Though the number of farmers continued to grow until 1920, the cities grew much faster, and the percentage of the American population working in agriculture declined with every census after 1790. The figure dropped to 30 percent by 1910, and to three percent in 1985. As the country grew, it exposed its citizens to creature comforts and other opportunities to prosper more easily, which made it hard to keep the farmers down on the farm. As farmers sold out or quit, those who remained bought up their land. Average farm size increased from 152 acres in 1930 to 441 acres in 1985.

I grew up outside Topeka, Kansas, attended a rural high school that had an Ag-Science building but no auditorium, and graduated from a college in the Minnesota farm country. In my experience, the standard image of the farmer has more to do with urban romanticism than with reality. Yet when the most recent farm crisis hit the nation's front pages and movie screens in 1985, the "family farm" captured the national imagination. Journalists suddenly found the stuff of Greek tragedy in Ames, Iowa. "Beauty is a cruel mask," wrote Paul Hendrickson of the *Washington Post*, "when the earth rolls right up to the edge of the interstate, freshly turned. When the rosebud trees are bleeding into pinks and magentas. When the evening rain is soft as lanolin." And so on.

With the papers full of stories about farmers going out of business, committing suicide, or shooting their bankers, farm-state politicians and activists began to campaign for a program specifically to help "family" farms, a proposal that evolved into the "Save the Family Farm Act." Introduced in October by Harkin and Representative Richard Gephardt of Missouri, the bill would impose mandatory controls on the amount farmers could produce and the extent of land they could farm, and would force larger farmers to set aside a larger percentage of their acreage. The bill would roughly double commodity prices (followed by additional yearly increases), sharply increasing the cost of raw food products. A small price to pay, its proponents say, so that family farmers can afford to maintain their traditional way of life. For supporters of the bill, the question is not primarily economic. On humanitarian grounds, they want to preserve the family farm as a way of life. On social grounds, they want a Jeffersonian countryside of small, independent landowners. Yet when I asked Charles O. Frazier of the National Farmers Organization, which supports the Harkin bill, whether the measure might hurt farmers in the long run, he replied, "To hell with the long run, we're talking about running a business."

Farmers are just like everyone else. They want to make money and live better than their parents did—and better than their neighbors, if possible. Urbanites often confuse the folksy ways of some farmers with an indifference to material wealth and the refinements that it brings. The difference between farmers and city-dwellers lies not in a different attitude toward money, but in different choices about what to spend it on. Washington lawyers want to make money to buy a BMW and a vacation in Paris. The average farmer may prefer a big pick-up truck with floodlights on top and a motor home he can take to Florida for the winter. Indeed, the young farmers who are in the most trouble today got that way by expanding their operations too quickly in the 1970s. Farmers aren't uniquely greedy, just ambitious like any other businesspeople.

IN ANY CASE, family ownership of farms is not in danger. Non-family corporations operate only 0.3 percent of the nation's farms, own only 1.6 percent of the farmland, and account for only 6.5 percent of total sales of farm products. Agriculture simply doesn't offer a big enough return to attract many large corporations. Though farmland has become concentrated in the hands of fewer landowners, more than half of the large farms are owned by families, in many cases organized as partnerships or family corporations. "The family farm today is grandpa, two sons, and some grandsons who all help manage the place. The family farm of the future is a family farm corporation. These are stronger operations than the old-style family farms," said Jim Diggins, vice president of Farmer's National Company, an Omaha farm management firm.

The USDA divides farms into five classes: rural residences ("hobby farmers"), small family, family, large family, and very large farms. The farm crisis has left the large and very large family farms relatively untouched. Because of their economies of scale, even when prices drop they can still make a profit. Large family farmers operate an average of 1,807 acres, hold an average of $1.6 million in assets, and clear an average income of around $78,000 a year; and they are located in areas where living costs are low. Families on very large farms hold an average of 3,727 acres and net an average annual family income in 1983 of almost $600,000.

What the Pa Ingalls fans have in mind are rural residences and small family farms, which usually occupy 300 acres or less. Although these small farmers make up two-thirds of the total, however, they do not depend on agriculture for their living. According to the USDA, their "off-farm income" has exceeded their "on-farm income" ever since 1967. The yeomen of 1986 till the soil only as a sideline, and make 90 percent to 100 percent of their income from jobs or businesses off the farm. So the "farm crisis" isn't impoverishing them.

In fact, just about the only ones really endangered by the current crisis are medium-sized family farmers. It is this group, which amounts to one-fourth of all farmers, whom the Save the Family Farm Act proposes to save. They are hardly what Jefferson had in mind. On average, they own about 800 acres with assets approaching $1 million. Despite their size, they are far from self-sufficient. These are the farmers, by and large, who depend on government subsidies. Their troubles lie in the basic economic facts of the institution. Unlike small farmers, who have other sources of income, or large farmers, who have diversified multimillion-dollar operations, the family farmer gets paid only when he sells his crops. In between harvests, he must borrow money if he is to stay in business and feed his family. In no other industry does a worker need to take out loans in order to keep his job. The farmer is at the mercy of the interest rate, as well the weather and the grain markets. They have the vulnerabilities of workers and businessmen with few of the benefits—neither employment security and benefits on the one hand, nor freedom and the possibility of lavish income on the other.

These family farmers occupy a precarious center between the larger and smaller operations. Their farms are big enough to require full-time work but not big enough to lower costs or allow them to take full advantage of new technology. In order to compete with the large farms, the family farmer has to invest in the same expensive machinery and chemicals. Because he has fewer assets, his debts are proportionately much higher. He often has to sell his crop when he needs to make a payment, rather than when the price is highest. His high costs relative to his size make his profit margin razor-thin when it exists at all.

Thus medium-sized family farmers rely heavily on the increasing value of their land to help them pay their debts and get new loans. While inflation plagued the rest of the country in the 1970s, family farmers experienced a boom, as food prices and especially land values climbed to unprecedented heights. When inflation slowed down in the 1980s, so did the farm economy, sending land values through the floor. The farmers who invested heavily in new land on the wave of rising values found themselves hopelessly trapped when the values fell. The moral of this tale cannot be missed: those family farmers' fortunes depended not on their farming abilities, but on land values, a factor out of their control. Their ownership of land made them only more dependent. According to the USDA, farmers that leased more land weathered the crisis better, since they had fewer debts to pay at inflated interest rates. The family farmer has always walked this economic treadmill. The United States had its first farm crisis, Shays's Rebellion in 1786, before it had a Constitution.

HOW, THEN, did American family farmers become, in Harkin's words, "the most efficient and productive in the world"? Family farmers can keep labor costs very low because the family provides the bulk of the labor. Family farms operate under vastly different labor standards than the rest of American industry. "Child labor laws do not apply to family farms because family farms must have child labor to survive," wrote Minnesota politician and family farm alumnus Darrell McKigney. "Twenty or thirty years ago farm families commonly had ten or more children. [With automation] today five or six is a more common size." From a very early age, family farm children participate in every phase of the operation, from work with dangerous heavy equipment to close contact with carcinogenic chemicals and disease-carrying animals. In numerous farm areas, so many children are taken out of school at harvest time that the schools officially close until the harvest is finished. Practices that would be outrageous at a textile mill suddenly become all warm and cuddly when they appear on the family farm.

Family farmers also achieve efficiency through a draconian work schedule that no self-respecting union would allow. "The farm family does physically demanding and highly stressful work at least 14 hours a day (often at least 18 hours a day during harvest season), seven days a week, 365 days a year without a scheduled vacation or weekends off," wrote McKigney. "The farmer must endure all of this without the benefit of a health plan, safety regulations, a retirement plan, workmen's compensation, or any of the benefits that most U.S. labor unions demand." Psychologist Peter Keller, past president of the Association for Rural Mental Health, pointed out that many farmers are permanently tied to their farms. A dairy farmer, for instance, cannot just take off for a two-week vacation and not milk his cows. "Farmers lose perspective on the other things in life," said Keller. "The farm literally consumes them."

And the family farm physically consumes those who work on it, too. According to the National Safety Council, farming is the nation's most dangerous job—more dangerous even than working in a mine. In 1983 farming clocked in at 55 job-related deaths per 100,000 workers, or five times the rate for all major industries combined. In 1984 Tom Knudson of the *Des Moines Register* published a Pulitzer Prize-winning series that cataloged the myriad health and safety risks run by farmers. Farmers working with powerful farm machinery face death or maiming by crushing, chopping, asphyxiation, or electrocution. ("As he reached for a stalk of corn dangling from the corn picker, Vern Tigges of Dexter felt a jolt. In the next moments in a fierce and frantic struggle with the machine, three fingers were ripped from his hand.") They may be poisoned by the nitrogen dioxide gas that accumulates in grain silos, or have their lungs permanently damaged from breathing the air in enclosed hog pens. They may be crippled by "farmer's lung disease," caused by moldy grain dust. They may develop leukemia from contact with herbicides used on corn. (Iowa farmers contract leukemia 24 percent more frequently than the average American.) Knudson wrote that recent health findings exploded "the myth of farming as the good life of fresh air and sunshine."

BUT WHAT ABOUT the benefits of good-old-fashioned-lemonade values and the supportive friendliness of a rural community? Though hard data is difficult to come by, many small towns appear to suffer from teenage pregnancy, alcoholism, and other social maladies at rates that are higher than average. One New England study showed relatively high suicide rates among farmers during a period antedating the farm crisis. And rural communities haven't always stood by their financially troubled members. Sociologist Paul Lasley's Iowa Farm and Rural Life Poll reported that a majority of Iowa farmers felt they received little or no support from their churches, neighbors, schools, or local voluntary organizations. At a "town meeting" with Representative Tim Penny, Democrat of Minnesota, in New Market, Minnesota, I heard farmers ridicule the idea of slightly higher property taxes to improve the area's meager school system practically in the same breath that they demanded higher subsidies for themselves. These things never happened on "The Waltons."

THE USUAL lesson gleaned from the facts of farm life is that there is nothing wrong with the family farm that higher commodity prices won't solve. Yet farm programs have come and farm programs have gone, and still farmers (and especially farmer's children) have left, for the simple reason that life is usually better off the farm. "It is a way of life, but so was the village blacksmith," says economist William H. Peterson. The urban "wage-slave" worker, for all his lack of "independence" and supposed alienation from his work, has some decided advantages over the rural yeoman. He has the security of a regular income, and definite hours set aside for his leisure. More often than not, the law guarantees the non-farmer a safe place to work, and protects him from the whims of his employer. The urban wage-earner has daily contact with a wide variety of other people, and access to cultural events and decent public services.

Proponents of Harkin-Gephardt and similar measures worry about where farmers will go once they leave the land. Yet former farmers do not just fade away. They have skills and work habits that many employers find attractive. (If they sell their farms, they will also have several hundred thousand dollars.) Growing farm management companies hire experienced farmers to manage large rented operations, under much more favorable terms and conditions than they could get on their own. Farmers working for others would demand better working conditions. Many states now have retraining programs for those who give up farming and want to learn a new trade or profession.

I saw the movie *Country* on a rainy Monday night in Topeka. Two farmers and their wives and a group of teenage girls were the only other people in the theater. The farmers complained loudly throughout the first hour of the film, and then left, shaking their heads in disgust. The girls sat through the final credits, sniffling at the plight of Sam Shepard and Jessica Lange. At a farm protest rally in Minnesota, I heard a song that went like this:

> Now some folks say
> There ain't no hell
> But they don't farm
> So they can't tell.

We should take the singer at his word. Tyrants from Stalin to Mao to Pol Pot have subjugated their populations by forcing them to "stay on the land." Given the conditions of life on the family farm, if ITT or Chevron or Tenneco really does try to force some family farmers off their land, they might well be doing them a favor.