

## Confessions of a Wannabe Farmer

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My husband Bill and I hosted our first pasture walk the other day. Actually, it was probably more of an ‘un-pasture walk,’ since there are no pastures here, no fences, nor any animals. We’ve been here less than a month. About 25 people showed up, perhaps to see what their county agent had gotten herself into this time.

As a female Ag Agent, one of the first questions I always get from my male clientele is: did you grow up on a farm? I’ve always interpreted this question as kind of a test to see if I measure up—does she have any REAL experience or is it all just ‘book-learning?’

I’ve always been a little sensitive about this question, because, in fact, I didn’t grow up on a farm. I grew up with the aroma of corn and soybean processing in my nostrils, but we didn’t grow any of those beans ourselves and Decatur, Illinois, is too big to be considered a farm community. It’s a handicap that I just have to live with.

After maybe the 5000<sup>th</sup> time someone ‘questioned my credentials,’ it occurred to me that I might be interpreting the question wrong. They might just be a little curious why someone like me would chose a profession like this. That’s a good question. Why do I do the work I do and why did I just buy an 80 acre farm?

Having grown up in town, I don’t have the ‘going back to my roots’ sort of reasons that others have. But I think even those who grew up on a farm or have always farmed must have reasons for doing what they do. It’s not just tradition that keeps them farming. And if it were just about earning a living, I can think of a lot easier ways of doing that.

There’s something very satisfying about owning and managing a piece of land, making things grow, making it productive. Some people view it as mastering nature, but I think it’s more about challenging yourself and, at some level, it’s about self-expression. As Aldo Leopold said, “The landscape of any farm is the owner’s portrait of himself.”

I guess you could call me a wannabe farmer, but my motivation is not all that different than anyone else’s. Actually Bill and I have shared the goal of owning a chunk of God’s green earth since before we were married. When the last kid left home last fall, we realized that a window of opportunity had opened. We figured if the urge hasn’t gone away after more than a quarter of a century, maybe it’s real. We might even be a little better prepared for managing a farm than the just-out-of-college, 1970s era idealists we were then. We’ll see. Anyway, we can always get help from our Extension Agent, right?

So after looking at dozens of properties, this spring we found our dream farm....actually, we found a place we could afford (it needs work, but maybe it will evolve into our dream farm). It’s about 82 acres, actually, and it has a stream, a fish pond, and about 60 acres of work land, mostly good, silt loam soils.

There’s your typical farmhouse built in stages starting in 1875; a beat-up, but very salvageable barn; a collection of miscellaneous sheds in varying conditions; and the accumulated ‘stuff’ of many years of farming. It has character, if you know what I mean.

Now that we have it, what are we going to do with it? It would be quite easy to get bogged down in the details

of restoring the place and just let things happen. But, if I were smart, I'd insist that we do things the 'right' way. I'd follow my own advice and do some long range planning.

Here's what I tell people about planning: you need to start by stepping back and looking at the big picture. You're not asking what breed of cattle to raise or how to divide the pasture into paddocks, although those questions definitely need to be answered at some point. The first questions need to be broader than that. What do you want your life to look like in 5 years? In 10 years? When you retire?

When you think about it, the really important questions are about those quality of life issues. How do you want to live your life? Then you ask yourself, what sort of enterprise do I need to finance the life I want?

In some ways, this can be an easier question for us to ask than it might be for someone with a farming background. Many graziers that I know have talked about how they feel hindered by weight of tradition and expectations. We have nothing to build on, but we also have no preconceived notions. We're starting with a clean slate, no infrastructure, no animals, nothing to point us in any particular direction. We're free to consider almost anything.

The down side is that we don't have much experience to help guide the process. Although I've walked many pastures and have had the opportunity to learn from many experienced graziers, that's not the same as doing it yourself. I know just enough to be dangerous.

The objective of this process is to end up with a plan that fits your own capabilities and resources, whatever they may be, with the capabilities of the land. What we're talking about here is called holistic management or whole farm planning. It really means looking at the big picture, considering all of the resources you have at your disposal, and developing a consensus among the people with whom you share your life. Then you have to follow the plan.

It's recommended that you write down your holistic goals and have everyone involved sign their names to them. Make it a working document, refer to it often and evaluate your day-to-day decisions to make sure they're taking you in the right direction. And look at the results of those decisions. Did that work? Did it move me closer to my goal? Do I need to modify my goals based on the realities I've encountered?

Whatever we end up doing here, I'm guessing it'll be watched and remarked on. With the public nature of the job I have, it kind of comes with the territory. I figure I might as well make the most of this opportunity. This will be the real test. Can I follow my own advice? And more importantly, does it work?

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