

## Overcoming the Great Divide

*Some analysts see ordinary, working-class Americans in a backlash against a liberal, out-of-touch elite, sometimes putting universities with the elite and farmers on the other side.*

As I write this column in the post-election season I am painfully aware that we are deluged with post-election analyses, most of which purports to tell us what went right or wrong—depending on your political persuasion—with the election. One of the re-occurring themes suggests that we are a nation deeply divided, and usually the divisions are described as blue versus red states, retro versus metro, or right versus left.

One of the more interesting analyses came from the pen of Thomas Frank. In his book, *What's the Matter with Kansas?*, Frank provides us with a witty and insightful hypothesis that describes our current cultural divide. Frank argues that we are experiencing a backlash on the part of ordinary working-class Americans who are tired of being marginalized by a class they consider liberal, elite, overbearing and increasingly out of touch with reality. Occasionally Frank makes reference to the fact that the university community gets lumped in with the elite class and that farmers increasingly side with the backlash.

Since land grant universities were created to serve working-class Americans, it is important to explore whether a divide between the university community and farmers exists, and if so, why.

I have had the good fortune of being both a farmer and a member of the university community. When I left a university career in the 1970s to manage operate our family's farm in North Dakota, my neighbors were deeply skeptical about my ability to manage a farm.

"He will lose his shirt" was a common phrase heard around the neighborhood. Their skepticism was not based on what I may have been learning at the university; it was based on the fact that they believed I

had been part of an "ivory tower" world that likely made me unfit to deal with life on the farm.

In this context, I think Frank is correct. There is a cultural divide between the university and farmers that has existed for a long time. In fact, it could be argued that the split may have been rooted in the very fabric of the university system. One underlying assumption holds that the research community generates wisdom, which is then transferred to the farmer (the passive recipient) by the Cooperative Extension Service.

*Based on their experience, farmers bring insights that give depth to research. Working with researchers, farmers gain a new appreciation for the importance of testing assumptions against measurable data.*

A famous Norman Rockwell painting is a poignant metaphor of that cultural divide. In the foreground an extension agent measures the girth of a calf for the enthusiastic children (the future farmers) while their father watches unconvinced from the barn and the grandfather, even further from the action, peers over the farm wife's shoulder.

The implication is that wisdom is only generated in the university while devaluing the knowledge generated by experience on the farm. But such an approach not only deprives both farmer and researcher of valuable information, it also contributes to the cultural divide.

Our tendency to favor reductionism—easily quantifiable research that tends to analyze the parts rather than the whole—further nurtures a cultural divide. This approach to solving problems tends to provide really good information about a small, isolated part of a

very large, complex whole. Consequently, research tells us a lot about ingredients—how many units of nitrogen will stimulate how much of a yield increase, or how much oat bran contributes to a specific health benefit. But this approach can seldom tell us how those ingredients contribute to a profitable farm or a healthy family, let alone a healthy food system or a healthy landscape. One suspects it is by these latter realities that many working people evaluate research.

Some people argue that we are moving from an industrial era to an ecological era and in so doing, more attention is being paid to the interdependence and emergent properties of everything within nature. That may

be one of the reasons new research models are being explored, such as the USDA's Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education (SARE) program. The SARE program requires farmers and researchers to

work together from design to evaluation, moving us toward more whole-systems, reality-based projects. Based on their experience, farmers bring insights that give depth to research. Working with researchers, farmers gain a new appreciation for the importance of testing assumptions against measurable data. And since both farmer and researcher are appreciative of what they are learning from each other, there is little to divide them.

For many years, the Leopold Center has followed this model. We encourage researchers to work with their counterparts in other departments, even other colleges, and to include farmers in their project planning and evaluation and certainly in their educational and outreach efforts.

Perhaps we could begin to explore further steps in healing the divide.

- Could we consider appointing experienced farmers as adjunct faculty to enrich our research with the benefit of on-farm experience?
- Should we consider conducting

### ON THE WEB: [www.leopold.iastate.edu](http://www.leopold.iastate.edu)

See Norman Rockwell's 1948 painting, "The County Agricultural Agent," now housed at the Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln.

DIRECTOR

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# Forages offer options in all types of farming systems

GRASS

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“When these acres begin to leave the program in 2007, we need to have viable, forage-based alternatives for landowners.”

In September, the Center issued a targeted request for proposals for a plan to establish, coordinate and lead a statewide grass-based research program at the Center. Sellers was one of three people interviewed for the position, which will be half-time through 2006.

Sellers said he wants to build an awareness and appreciation among farmers and others about what forages can do for farms and farmers in all parts of Iowa. “From the way I see it, every acre that we can turn green part of the year is a victory,” he said.

He said that forages could be used in a corn/soybean rotation, either as a third crop or as a cover crop for weed control. Such practices can interrupt a cycle of diseases inherent in monoculture systems and decrease soil erosion. Other farmers may find that by growing small grains they can serve an increasing horse population in the urban fringe areas. By adding grass, absentee owners and their farm managers can protect fragile areas that are now cash-rented for row crops. Grass-based systems also provide a lower risk way to enter agriculture or invigorate an existing operation, Sellers added.

Sellers owns 520 acres in northern Wayne County.

## New program area complements other Leopold Center work

The Center has completed 22 projects that relate directly to grass, grazing and keeping animals on the land.

Most of the work focused on feed and forage options for performance, such as switchgrass and bluestem grazing, CRP grazing, publication of a user-friendly pasture management guide, instructional videos for beef grazing, rotational grazing for beef and dairy, berseem clover feeding trials, increasing first-year alfalfa yields, evaluation of forage collected from permanent pastures, oat variety blend performance, and early summer pasture management. Other work has been wide ranging, including breaking seed dormancy of Eastern gamagrass and beef production grid marketing.

In addition, the Leopold Center has funded numerous research projects conducted by Iowa State University professor Jim Russell, who headed the Center’s Animal Management Issue Team for more than a decade.

Russell and ISU forestry professor Dick Schultz, who led the Leopold Center’s former Agroecology Team, are now collaborating with farmers and scientists to study the sediment and phosphorus losses for a number of management variations on cattle grazing systems in and around riparian areas. Their research is being conducted on university-owned and private farms, expanding on work done in an earlier Leopold grant. The goal is to better track phosphorus movement associated with pastures and grazing systems. Among the many partners are Iowa State University, USDA-ARS National Soil Tilth Laboratory, the Iowa Department of Natural Resources, the USDA’s Natural Resources Conservation Service, the Iowa the Beef Center and Neal Smith National Wildlife Refuge.

The Leopold Center also has five ongoing projects that relate to forages and grazing, including work on leafy spurge, integration of hunting and grazing in the Loess Hills, forage double-cropping, and winter grazing of stockpiled grass.

Although he grows some corn, oats and hay for a small cattle operation, most of his farm is used for switchgrass, a native crop he began growing more than 20 years ago to improve wildlife habitat and reduce soil erosion.

Until earlier this year, Sellers was field coordinator for the Chariton Valley Biomass project, helping 70 farmers grow switchgrass to burn with coal at a power plant in Ottumwa. At one time, switchgrass was planted on as many as 7,000 acres in five counties. Alliant Energy currently is planning its third test burn to determine long-term efficiencies.

Sellers began management intensive grazing 12 years ago. He has 16 paddocks on about 100 acres, and was the first recipient of a federal grant in Wayne County to install a rotational grazing system on CRP land.

“One practice doesn’t fit all farms,” he added. “There’s an enormous need for forages to become a part of the Iowa landscape again.”



John Sellers

*Many people blame science for our surpluses of farm products. They say the trouble is that science taught us how to grow two blades of grass where one grew before. I think the trouble is that that is exactly what science did not teach us. Instead it taught us how to grow something else where two blades of grass grew before. – Henry A.*

Wallace, Secretary of Agriculture, June 21, 1940, “The Strength and Quietness of Grass”

## Closing a cultural divide

DIRECTOR

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regular faculty seminars out on operating farms to obtain consistent feedback and to remember the daily realities that farmers face?

- Could we make a case, in cooperation with farm organizations, to restore some of the formula funds that have been lost in recent years, to conduct locally-relevant research, freeing researchers to work more closely with farmers instead of spending all of their time chasing research dollars?

In this newsletter we announce that we have hired a farmer to direct our new grass-based research project. The search committee, consisting of researchers, farmers and other stakeholders, was insistent that what we needed most was on-the-ground experience to guide our work. We agree.

Some years ago Herman Daly and John Cobb suggested that we not only need to study problems in the context of disciplines, but that we also needed the disciplined study of problems in the world. And so we welcome John Sellers, farmer extraordinaire, to lead our grass-based research project.