



Iowa Writers' Circle
for Sustainable Agriculture

PO Box 349, Ames, IA 50010 · 515-232-5661

July 2, 2004

Restore the Balance of Crops and Livestock

By Dick and Sharon Thompson, with Robert Karp

Is it possible that a farm is not really a farm without a balance and integration of soil, crops, livestock and family?

Is it possible that we tamper with a wise and intelligent order of things when we separate out the crops from the livestock as we have in recent years?

Think about it.

Since we lost the cow, -- since we lost animals and livestock as an integrated part of the farm -- the fabric of rural life has been steadily unraveling.

When we lost the cow, we stopped planting oats and hay, we lost our crop rotations, and we lost the best source of our soil fertility -- animal manures. We gained costly inputs, eroding soils and impaired waters.

When we lost our animals, we turned our grass, our pastures and our meadows over to row crops. We gained lower grain prices, greater weed and pest pressure and a less diverse and resilient landscape.

When we lost our livestock, we lost much of the hard work of the farmer, we lost chores for the kids, and we lost a cooperative spirit with our neighbors. We gained outside jobs, aimless youth and the need to gobble up our neighbors farms to stay in business.

When we lost the balance of crops and livestock, we lost a farm that needed a whole family to work together. We gained farms that could be run by one person and lots of equipment. We gained boredom and fragmentation of the family.

When we concentrated the livestock, farms began to struggle economically, we began to lose more and more farms, and we lost the vitality of our small communities. We gained boarded up main streets, empty churches and consolidated schools.

When I was a boy I attended Jordan school, one of three in the Boone area. After we lost the cows -- and the chickens and the pigs, and the goats and the lambs -- those three schools consolidated into the United Community School District. Now we are told there are not enough kids for United, so it may need to close too. Some people think we need one school per county.

In our push to get bigger and better, and make life easier physically, we have changed the physical anguish of the past into the mental anguish of the present day. This kind of stress plays an important role in our modern day diseases, such as heart trouble, cancer, arthritis and so on.

This over-aggressive competition does not build good relationships with other people. The situation is typified in bidding against your neighbor and paying \$4,250 per acre for additional land, or trying to cash rent land for \$175 per acre, or painting cattle in order to win a prize. What a farmer won't do to beat his neighbor by one bushel an acre! This kind of lifestyle is violent and exploits our inner being, our fellow man, and last, but not least, our environment.

Balanced, integrated and sustainable farming practices are the only common sense solution to the problems facing agriculture. If we don't make this approach the foundation of agriculture, no amount of value-added products or farm subsidies will save our farms, no amount of regulations or buffer strips will save our environment, and no amount of positive thinking or economic development will save our rural communities.

Today we have information and technology overload, which has brought on new problems we are trying to solve without considering the human dimension. Commodities do not make communities; it takes people to make communities. We are going to have to learn to say no and learn how to sort the good technology from the bad. Instead of talking about a higher standard of living, we need to learn a new term: appropriate living.

This calls for a change in lifestyle, a change that starts in the heart. A healthy heart -- and mind -- is necessary before we can have a healthy agriculture. Now is the time to change our priorities. Now is the time to listen to a different drummer. Now is the time to give to the land rather than take from the land.

It's not about going backwards; it's about going forward with greater wisdom -- the wisdom of soil, crops, livestock and family integrated and in balance.

Dick Thompson co-founded Practical Farmers of Iowa (PFI) in 1985. He and his wife Sharon operate an integrated farm near Boone. Robert Karp is PFI Executive Director. PFI is a non-profit sustainable agriculture group, with over 700 farmer and non-farmer members, dedicated to farming that is profitable, environmentally sound, and healthy for consumers and communities. For more information, call 515-232-5661 or visit www.practicalfarmers.org.

##