



THE BERRY CENTER



John Berry Sr., John Berry Jr., and Wendell Berry at the Berry Home Place in Henry County, Kentucky, 1978.
Photograph by Pam Spaulding, Louisville Courier-Journal

The Berry Center Journal

VOLUME THREE ~ SUMMER 2020

“We have lived our lives by the assumption that what was good for us would be good for the world.

We have been wrong. We must change our lives so that it will be possible to live by the contrary assumption, that what is good for the world will be good for us. And that requires that we make the effort to know the world and learn what is good for it.” —WENDELL BERRY, *The Long-Legged House*



Editor’s Note, The Berry Center Journal

FRIENDS,

THE COVID-19 pandemic and the ensuing economic ramifications have left us all no choice but to bear witness to a globalized and vertically integrated industrial farming and food infrastructure starting to crack up. This has been, and will continue to be, a devastating blow to the American economy. Unemployment has spiked, interruptions in supply chains have sent prices soaring for basic foodstuffs and commodities, and shutdowns have dealt a devastating blow to the restaurant and hospitality industries and to the farmers who supply them. In the meantime, industrial agriculture sees record profits while paying farmers and farm workers record low prices. All of these disruptions pale in comparison to the lives lost, the suffering, the anguish of those who are grappling with the disease, and those who have lost loved ones to it.

In light of these things, we felt that our planned slate of articles for this journal was insufficient for the moment. We have put those on hold for a little while and instead would like to offer a multi-generational look at the work we are doing here at the Center toward ‘farming in the middle’, the type of small- to mid-scale farming which leads to a prosperous rural economy, healthy soils and livestock, and diverse economies and ecologies. In contrast to the industrial model, a healthy regional farming and food system can be both resilient and humane, providing the cities and countrysides of this nation with sufficient goods at a reasonable price for both buyer and seller. The pieces following aim to highlight the history and future of the

efforts to support a kind of farming which provides for individual prosperity without sacrificing the commonwealth. Whether in John Berry, Sr.’s defense of parity agriculture in the Burley Tobacco Grower’s Cooperative Association statement to the United States Senate in 1947; John Berry, Jr.’s statement to the platform committee of the National Democratic Party in 1992, or a thousand other speeches, essays, transcripts, or research papers from any number of other sources, our Archive here at The Berry Center contains a testament to the hard work done to advocate for a rural prosperity. While both John Berry, Sr. and Jr. have passed on, their work continues through Wendell Berry’s agrarian writings and activism and our own work here at the Center, as Mary Berry, our executive director, will show in the pages following as she introduces one of our newest initiatives: a working and teaching farm here in Henry County.

As I write this, protests have erupted all over the country and the world regarding the treatment of people of color by law enforcement, and the systemic disregard and antagonism towards minorities by civil governments, banking and financial services, public and private educational authorities, and many more of the institutions that guard and maintain the mechanisms of opportunity in this country. This is not a type of struggle that is unknown to people living in rural places, where the grocery stores have closed down along with the tobacco warehouses, and social services depart with the young to the universities and city jobs. There is a long, sordid history of the resources of rural places being extracted at the lowest possible cost, with the least possible concern for the land and people



Grain bin and cooling towers over soybean field, southern Indiana, 2018.

being sacrificed for a higher dividend check. In the industrial economy, resources depart a place like our own Henry County, bound for Louisville or Chicago or New York. The institutional obstacles for black Americans are harsher in degree, but they are not unique in kind. To tie this to our own work, according to the USDA Census Of Agriculture, black farmers have seen an eighty percent reduction in acres farmed over the last hundred years and a cratering farm population, down to a mere fraction of the highs of the early 20th century despite a growing population overall. Small farmers of all backgrounds have seen declines like these, “helped” along by discriminatory practices in government, lending institutions, and malfeasance by agri-industrial corporations. We can see in these injustices and the impoverishment of poor urban communities an echo of our own impoverishment, and from that common ground we can build a solidarity of purpose, crossing the urban/rural divide to the benefit of both communities. This is what we hope to build here at the Center, through education, cooperation,

and a commitment to the good farming being done in this place.

Friends, we thank you for your continued interest and support in the work that we do here at the Center. We want to keep talking about these issues we face, whether or not our friends and neighbors are marching in the streets, whether or not the coronavirus has run its course. This Membership that we speak of so often is comprised of thoughtful people at work all over the world in service of their neighbors, communities, and a common good. We could not be more grateful for your contributions of time and treasure to this vital work, and to those who desire to contribute for the first time or the fiftieth, there is information on how to do so at the end of this publication, or at our website: www.berrycenter.org Please enjoy this journal and those to come. ■

BEN AGUILAR, Director of Operations
The Berry Center

JOHN MARSHALL BERRY, SR. (1900-1991) was an attorney, farmer, and a longtime official for the Burley Tobacco Growers Cooperative Association. Here are presented excerpts from a speech, written on behalf of the BTGCA, which aimed to convince the Senate to re-examine proposed changes to the Burley program, a system of parity price guarantees and supply controls which had proven vital to the prosperity of farmers in Kentucky and the rest of the eight-state Burley Belt, and would continue to do so for many years. This program helped farmers maintain profitable, diverse, and sustainable farm operations based around a central “cash crop”, in this case tobacco, while encouraging other crop and livestock production to supply local needs and local markets. Though the Producer’s Program, as it was called, has gone away, the tenets of supply management and parity price to the farmer live on in various cooperatives around the United States, and most recently in The Berry Center’s own Our Home Place Meat initiative. The Tobacco Program served the people it was supposed to serve—the small family farmer—for its duration. The Program was threatened during its years in force, by the tobacco companies as well as individuals in Congress who saw it as an impediment to the free market and later, to health. In spite of this, and thanks in part to the work of John Berry, Sr. and John Berry, Jr, it stands today as a model of how to think about the economic lives of farmers if small family farmers are to survive in this country.



In Defense of the Tobacco Program

BY JOHN M. BERRY, SR.—DELIVERED APRIL 24, 1948

TO THE U.S. SENATE COMMITTEE ON AGRICULTURE AND FORESTRY

IT IS A RATHER flattering compliment that a common man from down at the grass roots may have the privilege of appearing before this fine committee . . . It fills one with a sense of infinite gratitude that he is an American citizen. But it is an incident of far worthier note that two hundred thousand burley tobacco growers—representing one million such citizens in those states of Kentucky, Missouri, Indiana, Ohio and West Virginia—may speak to this committee of Congress through their organization, the Burley Tobacco Growers Cooperative Association of Kentucky.

The tobacco growers of the burley area are a bit restless and anxious for their fortunes after 1948. They are obsessed with vivid recollections of those days of six-cent tobacco, farm foreclosures, unpaid tax bills, scarcely enough of anything except fear, and of those days when a farm program was merely the subject of elaborate planks in party platforms. They fear the premature death of the present program and the substitution of another, hastily devised, without the mature consideration and study that the envisioned, permanent or long-range, program must draw if it is to become a workable improvement.

Tobacco farmers are not unaware of the great benefactions in legislative measures that have come from the Congress. And it is a reassuring and heartening

fact that a program of a permanent nature for them is being contemplated by a very dutiful committee. But these farmers would counsel deliberation and caution so that the progress gained, and the foundation formed, by our experiences may not be lost even for a crop, or a year. Let progress for a permanent program be with only such speed as that, when we shall have laid down the hoe, we shall take up not just a mechanically superior, but a safer implement to do the job we so lately learned could be done for even the tobacco farmers.

THE NEED FOR FLEXIBILITY IN AGRICULTURE

The problems of American agriculture are diverse—made so by the diversities of season, climate, soil, methods of culture, and market conditions. We can all agree that an overall solution of these problems is an objective eminently worthwhile, and because of these diversities, we may also agree that methods to apply this solution must necessarily be as diverse as the conditions that make the problem in the case of each basic commodity.

No legislation, therefore, can provide this overall solution if it sets up but one method in the form of one rule, comprising a single measuring rod by which the rights of all farmer-citizens are to be

determined. The legislation posing the much-desired, long-range program must, be flexible enough to provide alternative devices and measures to the general rule. Those problems that are exceptional, because of climatic, soil, cultural, or market conditions, will be so provided for by such alternative devices in order that those people, whose livelihoods depend upon the production and sale of the commodities employing such devices, will be assured the protection and preservations of their rights, notwithstanding the inapplicability of the general rule.

HOW BURLEY RELIES UPON SUPPLY/DEMAND

While it may be true that a great majority of farmers in most sections of the country are opposed to any restriction on production as contrary to the idea of abundant food supplies, burley tobacco farmers fear unrestricted production. They urge the continuation of quotas because their product normally moves into consumption as long as three years after it is grown; and because the market price for their current production is directly affected by the "total supply" available for both immediate and future consumption.

Burley tobacco farmers cannot consistently oppose the idea of abundant production, but their conception of abundance is a production that cares fairly for all demands-both domestic and foreign-one that gives due regard to trends, but one that does not build surpluses that depress to the point of disaster for themselves. Indeed, it is characteristic of tobacco farmers to increase production as the market price of their product (affected by the "total supply") declines; or in the situation of too great a "total supply," they will restrict their production, if given the legislative authority to do so.

Burley tobacco farmers maintain that a formula for establishing quotas, if another than the one provided for in the Act of 1938 as amended, be substituted, should be so devised as to meet the anticipated domestic and foreign demands, take into account trends of consumption, and even approximate abundance, short of dreaded depressing surpluses.

BURLEY'S VIEW OF PARITY

The parity concept is the happiest and most fortunate thought that has visited the minds of statesmen of this country in generations. It accords with our way of life, and it gives real and tangible meaning to the philosophy of "equal opportunity." It is a consistent American way of striving for, and approaching, parity of income without the use of direct subsidy payments by the government. It must be preserved and effectuated to the end that farmers may continue to enjoy the high standard of living and opportunity which they have had only a taste of.

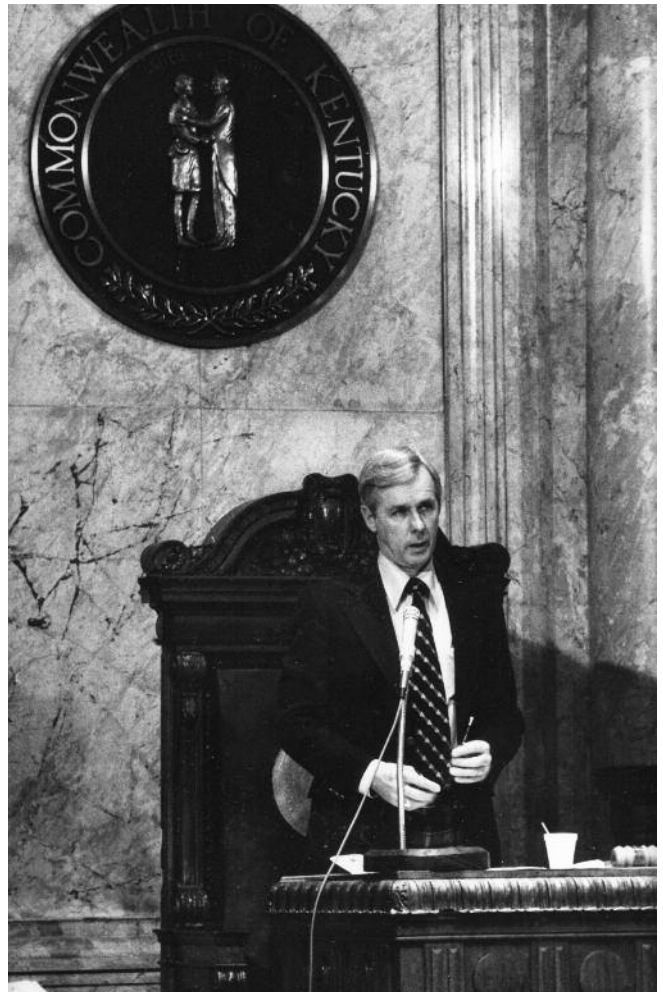
We believe no better rule for determining parity can be devised than the thoughtful selection of some past five, or ten-year, period that, with respect to a given commodity, reflects prices of what the farmer receives and pays in their proper, equitable relationship.

IN DEFENSE OF THE TOBACCO PROGRAM

Until this time the administration of the price-support program at 90 percent of parity has not cost the government a cent; and if we may have quotas provided for by law, then burley tobacco farmers will, by the use of them, regulate their own production behavior in keeping with the law of supply and demand. As a result, they will continue their own affairs in order and, at the same time, safeguard their government's interest under such loans to the maximum of 90-percent parity.

In the final analysis, in order for any farm program to be successful and effective, it must be popular with those for whose benefit it is enacted. The elements of such a program-as emphasized in this statement-are those that account for the popularity of the present program with tobacco farmers.

We advocate the continuation of the program with respect to quotas, parity, and support loans. either by the extension of the Act of 1938 as amended, or by the inclusions of these features in such legislation, as may be enacted by Congress for the establishment of a long-range agricultural program. ■



Top: John M. Berry, Sr. (center) with
Burley Cooperative farmers in tobacco field.
Bottom left: John M. Berry Jr. on the Senate floor.
Bottom right: John M. Berry, Jr.
addressing the Kentucky State Senate.

JOHN MARSHALL BERRY, JR. (1935-2016), or 'Brother John' as he was known to family and friends, was an attorney, farmer, two term state senator and Senate majority leader, and President of the Burley Tobacco Growers Cooperative Association. He served on several policy initiatives, including the Democratic Platform Committee during the 1992 election, which would have a profound impact on American agriculture in the years to come. This statement, delivered to the Democratic Platform Committee in 1992, is an excellent example in the long historic tradition of agrarian thinking and advocacy by the Berry family and their colleagues and allies which we preserve and protect in the Archive of The Berry Center, and while as a nonprofit we don't endorse parties or candidates, we do strongly encourage any policy of agrarian restoration and a return of agrarian thinking to the forefront of the American political imagination.



Statement of John M. Berry, Jr., Platform Committee Member to Platform Committee of the Democratic National Committee

CLEVELAND, OHIO MAY 18, 1992

OUR POLICY AS DEMOCRATS should be to prevent any further deterioration of our nation's agriculture and the rural communities and economies that depend upon it. Nothing is more essential to any nation than to have in place a sufficient and sustainable agriculture. As Democrats we have always believed that wealth and power should be widely dispersed and not be concentrated in the hands of a few. My father once said, "If you want people to love this country, give them a chance to own a piece of it."

The free market farm policy of the industrial economy has been a disaster for the nation's farmers and for the nation's economy in general. Democrats must do more than simply criticize Republican policy, we must offer an alternative. To do this does not require that we re-invent the wheel.

In the 1930s, to address the problems that brought about the Great Depression, Democrats put in place, over the strenuous resistance of corporate America, a number of farm programs. First, they established a price for U.S. farm commodities at a level which allowed farmers to make a reasonable profit. Second, they created the Commodity Credit Corporation to make loans to farmers whose commodities fell below the loan rate. Third, they regulated farm production to keep it in line with demand and, finally, they created the national grain reserve to give the government the ability to release commodi-

ties into the market at times when for one reason or another supplies dropped dramatically causing an undue increase in consumer prices. From 1933 to 1953 those programs were extremely successful. Farmers received fair prices in relation to their costs. Costly surpluses were prevented. Consumer prices were low and stable. Farm debt declined. The rural economy of this nation was stabilized and people generally prospered. The Commodity Credit Corporation—in other words the federal government—made a net profit of 13 million dollars from loans that it had made to farmers.

By 1954 the nation's agribusiness corporations convinced the Congress to repeal many of these successful farm programs and to put in their places set-asides, buy-outs, target prices and other forms of governmental subsidy. The cost of these programs to the American taxpayer has been devastating and the cost to the American farmer, the environment, and the nation's economy even worse.

The primary objective of the new policy has been to reduce the price paid to farmers for their commodities. Between 1950 and 1960 the farm population dropped by 30%. Between 1960 and 1970 it dropped another 26%. Reduced farm prices created the need to increase production to off-set the narrow profit margin. Republicans have advised farmers to get big or get out and to borrow more money for expansion. Farm debt rose from 20 billion in the early 70s to

over 225 billion by the mid 80s. By 1987 another 20% of the farm population was gone.

While these programs were sold to the United States Congress and the American people on the theory that they would benefit farmers, the only beneficiaries were the agribusiness corporations who during the same periods experienced record profits. The new policies do nothing more than depress the market price paid by agribusiness corporations for farm commodities and then partially make up the difference between the market price and a fair price by paying subsidies to farmers. As evidenced by the record number of rural bankruptcies, the subsidized price has not been sufficient to keep farmers financially afloat. On the other hand, the reduced market price permitted agribusinesses to experience a wind-fall. Farm subsidies do little more than launder tax revenues, through farmers, for the agribusiness corporations.

The cost of these farm policies is staggering. Millions of farmers have been driven from the land. Thousands of rural communities and economies have dried up. National debt is increasing in frightening proportions and the few farmers that are left have been relegated to welfare recipients.

Upon the insistence of Republicans, the United States Congress has taken a farm program that many call its greatest success and substituted for it programs that have proven to be among its worst failures. Two of the programs created in the '30s have managed to survive. [*One that Berry refers to here is the Producer's Program of the Burley Tobacco Growers Cooperative Association — ed.*] For over fifty years now these programs have continued to operate at very little or no cost to taxpayers and have, in fact, earned a profit for the government. At the same time, they have allowed farmers and rural communities in the areas where they are implemented in this country to survive and enjoy reasonable prosperity.

Recognizing the blight that has been brought to rural America by current farm policies, the administration has now undertaken the task of revitalizing

rural economies. The focus of these efforts is in effect to convert the rural economies to urban economies by luring business and industry, converting farms to subdivisions and industrial sites, and replacing rural towns with shopping centers. The whole effort ignores the fact that, if farm production were kept in line with demand and farm prices were fair, the rural economy would revitalize itself.

All of this has been in the pursuit of what the Republicans call the "free market." The free market has been free to the powerful interests which are generally associated with the Republican party, and which have been protected by it, but it has been very costly to the American farmers and taxpayers whom we historically have called Democrats.

We should not place all of the blame on Republicans. In the 1950s even Democrats subscribed to the notion that we had too many farmers and joined the effort to eliminate many of them through economic pressure. More recently, however, Democrats have again recognized the problems associated with a deteriorating farm economy. The farm policy statement adopted at the 1988 Democratic National Convention is a step in the right direction and is correct in what it says. However, it fails to recognize the relationship of the farm economy to the overall economy; or the importance of a sufficient and sustainable agriculture to our nation's security; or the need in a successful Jeffersonian system of freedom and self-government for small family farmers to own land and prosper; or that the right way to revitalize the rural economy is by revitalizing agriculture.

Our political failures in recent years are not because we are wrong but because we have not clearly said why we are right. We need to call the party back to its principled and correct stand of the 1930s and then nominate a candidate who understands the problem well enough to articulate the solution. ■



Neighbors sharing work, 1973, from *Tobacco Harvest: An Elegy* by James Baker Hall.

IN JANUARY OF THIS YEAR, the Wendell Berry Farming Program of Sterling College welcomed Amish farmer and author David Kline, his wife Elsie, and son and daughter-in law Michael and Martha Kline for two days of conversation and instruction. On the second cold Kentucky morning, the Klines joined their friend Wendell Berry in the fellowship hall of the Port Royal Baptist Church for a wide-ranging and convivial panel discussion about farming, animal power, and the economy. The following is an excerpt from that conversation.



Neighborly Economics

WBFP Student: We talked yesterday about efficiency and how that's not a great word all the time. Can you give some of your perspective on the drive to be efficient, always? In modern farming a lot of people want to do better, better, better all the time, which kind of pushes for the big technology and the advancements and I think a lot of people financially get themselves in trouble by saying, "Well, if I just had, you know, \$45,000 to get this piece of equipment so that I could do so much more of this." Can you talk a little bit about keeping efficiency in mind and doing your best with that and pushing for more than what is necessary?

David: Well I think for one thing, the horse has sort of, should I say, put in a governor where they determine our scale of farming. We use a 10-foot disc mower with horses. We can mow 12 acres in four hours and that might be more efficient compared to the seven foot. Again, that's also weather related, because we have to hurry to get that hay in or, as I think I said yesterday, that when Elsie and I were farming, many years ago now, we put in all our dry hay without any rain. It was a different weather pattern. So now, efficiency, this Amishman, Jonas Schlabach made a twenty four foot mower, nine foot wings with a six foot in front. You hitch a team of horses in there and it looks as if they're pushing it, but they're actually pulling it behind. And his idea is, he lives in hill country, is that he can mow enough hay in a forenoon that he can rake in the afternoon and bale before dark. And that's his idea, though I guess I wouldn't want the machine, that's his. But how much does one of the new ones cost?

Michael: 33 grand.

David: I used to say, all the farm equipment we had would fit into a new huge John Deere tractor as far as cost, and we would still have enough left over to take a vacation if we wanted to. Wendell, you answered that question of efficiency. I know you're in love with the term efficiency.

(Laughter)

Wendell: It depends on the circumstances. If the measure of efficiency is simply quantity then you're playing by the other fellow's rules, it seems to me. It's more efficient in some circumstances to cut down on the cost of production than it is to increase production. That's the simplest way I think you could make the difference, because in modern circumstances to increase production always means paying money to people who are going to make more money out of the deal than you are. So efficiency is not necessarily a cuss word, but it depends on whose efficiency you're talking about.

Michael: You take the small swing six dairy parlor that a lot of the small Amish farms are putting in. That is because it is a lot more efficient to milk. One person can milk by themselves. It's not to milk more cows, it's to make it an easier chore, especially for a young family with young kids. The other side of efficiency is that the only thing the small farmer can control is his cost of production. When you mentioned efficiencies in that sense, just last week we did a podcast with a young Amish guy and he talked about cost of production and he said his goal is to get efficient with his cost of production. He never wants to milk more cows. He doesn't want to grow. He wants to do a better job, become more efficient with what he's doing, which I think is a great use of the word. But then with my work, they're talking about efficiencies of milk pickups on farms. We need more volume to up our efficiencies. That's where it's the flip side, where I think it's a negative. So it was interesting that I saw both uses of the word the same day and one was positive and one was negative.

Wendell: There used to be a story about the farmer who was finishing his hogs in the woods, eating mast from the woods. And the county agent came by and explained to him that if he'd finish those hogs on corn, they'd finish a lot faster. And the farmer replied, what's time to a hog?

(Laughter)

That used to be told as an illustration of the ignorance of the farmer. But as my own understanding of the circumstances, the importance of circumstances, has improved, it seems that the farmer had the better of the argument. To speed it up he would have had to pay somebody else.

David: That was always Elsie's and my idea, that every dollar you don't spend is a dollar earned. That was our view of efficiency, to produce as much of our milk at the lowest cost possible, yet not sacrificing comfort or ease of labor. So it may be that we never really used the word efficiency, but that was our goal.

Michael: I have seen farmers, though, save themselves into debt, where there are no inputs to where they can't survive because they're trying to operate on such a fine line and trying to operate at a cost of production so cheap that their production goes away. Well, if your production goes away, it's not going to be cheap production.

David: Well, our dad would say of the neighbor, "He was too tight to make money."

(Laughter)

You know, there's also a line the other way.



Nick Coleman and team cutting hay near Lacie, Kentucky in the late 1970s. Photograph by Tanya Amyx Berry.

Wendell: A smart farmer here I used to know would argue that if you had room and feed for a milk cow and you didn't have the cow, that didn't count as a zero, it counted as a loss.

David: Yes, but it's also when they figure costs of production...I can never get this. Our son in law has a little bit of this, that because I'm cultivating corn, I have to account my time as labor even though I'm enjoying it, every minute of it, and if I sit under the shade tree I don't have to figure my time. I could never connect those dots. Why do you have to count every hour you're out there in the field? That's your livelihood! You're enjoying it. He would say I'm inefficient. No, I'm not inefficient, I'm enjoying myself!

Wendell: You remember Gene Logsdon was doing the accounting on your economy and he asked you what it cost you to cultivate your corn? And you said, I don't count cultivating corn as a loss. I count it as income. I like to cultivate corn.

David: I sure do.

Wendell: Well, that would drive economists insane, which would be good for them.

(Laughter)

David: I once asked one of the researchers at the Ohio agricultural research center, "Now what good is an agricultural economist?" Well, he said he's the only guy that can be always wrong and still keep his job.

(Laughter)

Later he backtracked a little bit, but I think he was right the first time around. They are always making these predictions. They're usually wrong. But again, just getting back to when you're paying somebody. Our oldest son works for a seed company in his spare time to supplement his farm [income], and they

paid a high price for their farm. We all know grain farmers, everybody was struggling this year, but the company had a terrific year selling seed. Didn't they have one of the most profitable years they've ever had? That's what he was saying. They had a tremendous profit and he said now they want to gear up for the three thousand cow dairies. He said he'd like to quit. He said, that is so contrary to our philosophy, and he told the owner, and he employed some new people. That's all they think. He said, you're losing your mission, your vision by going for those big farmers but it's all about money, money, money.

Wendell: David, I want to remind you of your father again. He had a rule never to have a horse harnessed after supper.

David: He did, we were talking about that yesterday.

Wendell: Doesn't that tell you something about scale?

David: It does. And we had one of the larger farms in the neighborhood. We hardly ever went to the Mount Hope auction on Wednesdays because we had work to do, and he un-trained us from going to auctions unless there was a horse sale and you needed a horse or a machinery sale and you needed some machinery. But when we came in from the field and were finished cultivating or whatever and no rain was on the horizon, we'd unharness the horses and turn them out to pasture and then the evenings were for us, for all of us to do whatever we wanted to do. It sort of started when he was a boy. He was born in 1905 and during the 1920s they played baseball on Saturday afternoons. So on Saturday afternoon he didn't like to have a lot of work, we slowed down. And then I shared that view. Michael shared that view. Tim shares, our two sons-in-law share that. We all share that view. We hardly ever work in the fields on Saturday afternoons unless, threshing was the one exception, because the neighbors were there you worked until dark. But it was a very short cycle. You have to get that done in about three, four days, five days before it rains, but otherwise I think that's where our love for farming comes in. We simply weren't overwhelmed by work all the time.

Wendell: But then you were saying last night that regular farmers think you Amish are working yourselves to death,

David: Oh yes.

Wendell: But you said you're not.

David: We're not!

(Laughter)

David: They drive down the road, they see us, they feel sorry for us, but they shouldn't. We aren't killing ourselves. We're out there enjoying ourselves.

Wendell: But at your scale don't the religious reasons and the economic coincide frequently? If you get the scale right, you can afford to love your neighbor.

David: Oh yes.

Wendell: If you love your neighbor, you've got help. ■

Amish Economy

We live by mercy if we live.
To that we have no fit reply
But working well and giving thanks,
Loving God, loving one another,
To keep Creation's neighborhood.

And my friend David Kline told me,
"It falls strangely on Amish ears,
This talk of how you find yourself.
We Amish, after all, don't try
To find ourselves. We try to lose
Ourselves"—and thus are lost within
The found world of sunlight and rain
Where fields are green and then are ripe,
And the people eat together by
The charity of God, who is kind
Even to those who give no thanks.

In morning light, men in dark clothes
Go out among the beasts and fields.
Lest the community be lost,
Each day they must work out the bond
Between goods and their price: the garden
Weeded by sweat is flowerbright;
The wheat shocked in shorn fields, clover
Is growing where wheat grew; the crib
Is golden with the gathered corn,

While in the world of the found selves,
Lost to the sunlit, rainy world,
The motor-driven cannot stop.
This is the world where value is
Abstract, and preys on things, and things
Are changed to thoughts that have a price.
Cost + greed – fear = price:
Maury Telleen thus laid it out.
The need to balance greed and fear
Affords no stopping place, no rest,
And need increases as we fail.

But now, in summer dusk, a man
Whose hair and beard curl like spring ferns
Sits under the yard trees, at rest,
His smallest daughter on his lap.
This is because he rose at dawn,
Cared for his own, helped his neighbors,
Worked much, spent little, kept his peace.

“No matter how much one may love the world as a whole, one can live fully in it only by living responsibly in some small part of it. Where we live and who we live there with define the terms of our relationship to the world and to humanity. We thus come again to the paradox that one can become whole only by the responsible acceptance of one’s partiality.” —WENDELL BERRY



Wendell Berry Farming Program of Sterling College students and faculty learning about Kentucky pasture from generational farmer Steve Smith in Trimble County.

What Can A Good Farm Teach?

—MARY BERRY EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, THE BERRY CENTER

IN EARLY SUMMER OF 2019 it became known to me that a good farm, near Port Royal, might be for sale. This information came to me from my mother who heard it from a friend at church. Velma Jo Brown is the organist and my mother is the pianist at the Port Royal Baptist Church. Velma Jo and her husband Bobby have lived and farmed all their lives in the Port Royal community. (One of Velma Jo’s lesser claims to fame is that she was my Sunday school teacher during my extremely charming teenage years.) Bobby Brown’s brother Dalton and his wife Anna were said to be interested in selling their farm but had not made this public beyond the confines of the Port Royal community.

For some months I had been looking for a farm for the students enrolled in The Wendell Berry Farming

Program of Sterling College, for The Berry Center’s work with the Henry County farmers who are a part of Our Home Place Meat, and for the good of our community. My search, by the time I learned of the Brown Farm, had been difficult if not depressing. What was once a healthy agrarian community has hit hard times with many farms either over- or under-farmed. I found myself standing in the middle of worn out corn and soybean fields again and again. On farms with no infrastructure left: barns falling down, fences gone, waterways plowed through, gullies so deep that they can’t be driven through, and woods that had been ruined by the practice of “clear cutting”—the detritus of our toxic industrial agriculture, and all this at a dear price. There has been enough urban pressure in Henry County that land prices have stayed pretty

high even though there is no bright spot in conventional agriculture right now. It is a stretch for The Berry Center to buy a farm, much less to buy one that would need an immediate, and unknowable, amount of money spent to make it usable for students. We are teaching the diversified farming that existed here in the years of my childhood and still exists here and there on the farms of, for example, the farmers involved with Our Home Place Meat. Once there would have been farms all over this county and state that would have offered, just by looking, an education in good farming if looked at by someone who knew what they were looking at or someone guided by a good teacher. Now we have farms that testify to the ignorance of industrial farming - testimony to the great ignorance and indifference of the industrial mind and the great weight of the general indifference to rural America.

Upon hearing that Dalton and Anna were interested in selling their farm I gave them a call. As usual, the news from my mother and the neighborhood of Port Royal was correct; the Browns were, in fact thinking of selling their farm. I made arrangements to see it and went to visit them accompanied by Leah Bayens, Dean of the WBFP, Ben Aguilar Director of Operations at The Berry Center, and Ed Fredrickson, Visiting Faculty in Sustainable Agriculture. On that June afternoon almost exactly a year ago it was as if time had fallen away and I was back on Owen and Loyce Flood's farm in the early 70s, or any one of the healthy farms it was my good fortune to be on when I was young. And still more was my good fortune to be told to look and see the health and appreciate the intelligence that was required to achieve such health and to respect the culture it took to maintain it. The farm is rolling with roughly a third in woods, a third permanent pasture, and a third hay ground. It is representative of most of the farms in our part of the state, therefore a good classroom for the farming program. It is lush and verdant, calling to mind my grandfather's belief that the way to make money on a farm in Kentucky is grass, meaning farming with grazing animals. It provides woods that have not been logged in the Browns' memory to teach stu-



Mary Berry with Marvin "Mob" Ford on the Flood farm in 1973, from *Tobacco Harvest: An Elegy* by James Baker Hall.

dents horse logging and sustainable forestry. The farm reminds me of the hope that comes from a good farm economy, keeping land in the hands of people who know it and love it. For once and for a while we had just that in Kentucky and the eight state Burley Belt. The Berry Center is inspired in all of our programs by what it will take to have that again.

It is clearer to me now than it was in 2011 when The Berry Center was started what we are up against—the siren song of limitlessness. This fantasy, that we can exist outside of nature and her rules, is everywhere—it *is* our culture now. And the suffering caused by this is everywhere. It is felt in rural places where the land and the people have been sacrificed for cheap food and cheap fuel. It is felt everywhere that people are used as a cheap labor force as if they are machines; as soon as there is a machine for their job they will be sacrificed for that. It has been inherent in a society that has cultivated an aversion to physical work. It is the reason for our poisoned water, air, and our changing weather.

I am sixty-two years old and I don't remember a time before the environmental movement, the peace movement, the "war on poverty," the civil rights movement or the women's movement. The



Sunrise on the Brown farm in Henry County, Kentucky.

“Local Food Movement” is somewhat newer but I was going with farmers from Henry County to deliver food to restaurants in the mid-seventies. What has kept us from becoming a culture deeply and fundamentally changed by these movements?

We need to see all of these movements as connected. The fact that we can’t seem to think of more than one of them at a time gives evidence of this. A violent, extractive economy is at the heart of the terrible need for all of these movements. An economy that consolidates wealth for a few; uses land and people up in the name of progress; takes resources away from particular places at the lowest possible price and then sells it back to them at an exorbitant price; that sacrifices what is precious, beautiful, sacred, and necessary *will never be just*. To accept our economy as it is, is to accept the suffering that it causes as inevitable. This is the terrible economy of war. There will be winners and there will be losers and that is just the way it is. Unless we accept the

limitations asked of us by nature and by every ancient belief I know anything about it will stay this way until we reach the end of the fertility, stored for millennia, that we have been living on and we are forced to change. Doing unto others as you would have them do unto you must become an economic principle.

So, I turn back to the Brown Farm and the family that made their lives and their livelihood there. I wonder what it can teach, both as it is now and as we go forward in our work with the students, the farmers we work with, and the community that we live in. What kind of model can it be for young people who want to make a life on a piece of land? It seems to me that to learn to be at home in a particular place, to not ask of it more than it can bear, and to leave it better than you found it is the highest use of a liberal arts education. One must know soil science, animal husbandry, economics, mathematics, geology, and history. Because we have

lost so much of the culture of good land use when “get big or get out” became the agricultural policy of this country, young people will need the knowledge of the great agrarian canon to which my father belongs. They will need these books for information and companionship. They will need the arts: cooking, gardening, music, and literature so that they can make their own subsistence and entertainment. They need examples of people who have lived such lives. Dalton and Anna Brown are such people.

Dalton and Anna bought the farm in 1964. Dalton was born three miles from the farm at a place charmingly called Echo Dell. Anna was raised on a small subsistence farm some ten miles away. When I renewed my acquaintance with them last summer Dalton was 93 and Anna 85. I have known them all of my life but hadn’t seen them in years. Anna has been slowed down physically by health problems but is wonderful company and took great pleasure in talking about her years of field work, the acre of garden she raised every year, raising children, and especially showing me the house that she and Dalton built, doing much of the work themselves, four years after they bought the farm. Dalton is a vigorous intelligent man who, until 2018, took care of the mowing and haying by himself. He was still taking care of their cattle when we bought the farm.

On one of my first visits with Dalton and Anna, Dalton said, “We made a good living here.” What a thing to be able to say. What would I give to be able to say to the young people we are working with, “You can make a good living farming here,” or to know that the farmers in our country *are* making a good living. Maybe it is necessary to say a little more about that phrase, “a good living” as opposed to “a killing.” The Browns could say that they made a good living because they were content within the limits of their community, their farm, and their income. Their farming fit their farm. I believe they could be content first of all because of their character, but also because they had a passion and a calling for farming. They were not living for the weekends, working all week at “just a job.” They were working on their own place for the good



Wendell Berry Farming Program of Sterling College students Emily Wade and Ashland Tann attend to draft oxen Bright and Lion after putting up hay for the winter.

of it and for themselves. To really know a particular place that one loves and has some hope of handing on to someone who knows it, or wants to know it, is of endless fascination.

There are many young people who feel a call to farming the way the Browns did. This country needs them a good deal more than it knows. My father and I had a conversation many years ago—a generation ago—about how much harder our struggle would be to strengthen and build a farm base in this country if we lost another generation of farm kids. Well, we’ve lost them, and so now our obligation to those younger than we are is to teach them something of what we know. The Brown Farm, left better than it was when the Browns bought it, is a lesson in itself. The life of satisfaction and delight they lived on that farm is another one, maybe harder to teach, when the loudest voices in our culture preach dissatisfaction solved by money spent.



Wendell Berry Farming Program of Sterling College students Brennan James and Grace Desrochers learn draft power fundamentals with the help of Felix, Jed, and professor Rick Thomas.

To live a good life farming is to take joy and satisfaction from the work which, if not too arduous, and not done under constant economic pressure *is* joyous and satisfying. Living in farming communities where a neighbor is valued more than the neighbor's farm eases the difficulty and strain inherent in a farming life. Anna and Dalton Brown bought a farm, paid for it, and lived in the order that they made for many years surrounded by neighbors who had done the same. The possibility that their story, once common, could happen from generation to generation is now rare.

Greed is our problem and the purpose of industrialism has been to gather rural wealth at the least possible cost to the cities. We have reached the limit of that now, imposed by nature and by many of us who envision a kind of homecoming involving the possibility of pride and competency in good work in particular places. The Browns' life on their farm and the possibility of teaching people who desire

such a life is hopeful work. We are grateful to have found this excellent farm for the next chapter of The Berry Center. While we could not have commenced this purchase without the support of several generous donors, we will be asking everyone to help us in the final stretch. This fall, I will be reaching out to you all with more news of the Brown Farm and how you can help.

Anna and Dalton hated to leave their place and I hated it for them. It is their business why they felt that they needed to move and I'll leave it there. But I'll tell one more story about my visits with them. One of our students, in reaction to the sadness that the Browns felt leaving their place said, "Don't worry, we will take care of it now." Surely culture has thrived when that impulse to care for other people and for particular places has been allowed to flourish, not starved out. When people can gather the virtues and rewards of their calling and make themselves whole. ■

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