



# PHP POST

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*A Hunger Justice Journal*

## Against the Odds: Family Farm Economics in the 21st Century

By Lisa Griffith, National Family Farm Coalition

Our Missouri farm is quite small by most U.S. standards – 250 acres total, including only 50 acres flat enough to till easily. Several springs water the woodlands, and a creek forms one border of the fields while flowing toward the Mississippi. No livestock reside there today – the last cows were sold about 10 years ago – so the barn is used primarily for storage. My parents are less hardy now, so they hire a friend to plant some corn or soybeans and native grasses for wildlife cover. In addition to the barn there is a workshop, tractor shed, tack room and two small doghouses. Our home is a 1960s-era brick ranch built using wood salvaged from the original, more romantic farmhouse – a 1830s-era log cabin with 1900s-era brick addition – that was leveled

after my parents decided it was too far gone to renovate.

The rising costs of seed, fertilizer and fuel – not to mention equipment – have made it nearly impossible for smaller farmers to compete.

Dad worked at a local fertilizer plant to support the farm and to provide health insurance for the four of us. His eight-hour shifts changed weekly to begin at 8 AM, 4 PM or midnight; he would become accustomed to one shift just in time to adjust to the next and was always tired. At the plant he climbed tall ladders to load

the fertilizer into rail cars and risked falling into the path of moving trains.

Not having grown up on a farm, Mom learned about many things quickly, including driving a tractor to plant crops, keeping ice from forming in water tanks, the perils of befriending animals headed to market, the joys of garden-fresh tomatoes, potatoes, beans and sweet corn, and the wrath of lightning and tornadoes on trees, trailer homes and terrified beasts.

As my father's first cousins aged, most of their children – like me and my brother – finished college and found jobs elsewhere, although a few stayed and took off-farm

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The photo was taken at the celebration of the 100th Anniversary of Calumet Presbyterian Church in 1957. By Lisa Griffith of the National Family Farm Coalition.

Lisa Griffith

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jobs to keep their farms running. If there is one clear message in all of this, it is that few seem willing to chance strictly farming anymore.

Towns in the surrounding county have lost population and businesses in the past 30 years (excluding those closer to St. Louis, which have become bedroom communities). In the 1970s the town a few miles north had more than 5,000 residents, six or seven grocers and several restaurants, including a local dairy and bakery café. Today the population sign denotes fewer than 4,000 residents and the specialty stores (clothing, shoe and jewelry), dime stores, catalog outlets and button factory that used mussel shells from the Mississippi River are long gone. For grocers there is now one large Kroger and a small IGA store, both located at the western edge of town, and downtown streets seem to have less need for parking meters. The grain terminal once labeled 'MFA' for the former Missouri Farmers Association now reads 'Bunge', representing a shift from regional to international ownership.

Most local churches, including the small country church in my immediate community, have been a site of stability. Our congregation has diminished but services are held each Sunday and the annual Christmas Eve program still draws from 50 to 75 people, depending on the weather, road conditions and extended families' plans.

The land has such a strong pull on me. Although anxious to see the world after high school, sometimes I feel as though the farm itself has a string attached to my heart. Memories of riding horseback along dusty trails, picking warm tomatoes and plump juicy cherries, fishing or swimming in the creeks and stargazing on the front lawn nag at me to do something with the land. Of course that something should be

useful, creative and sustainable but what does that mean outside of choosing the right crops and markets? What about livestock? Could I handle it all myself, or seek business partners and interns?

With these questions in mind I interviewed a cousin of my generation who stayed on his family's farm and worked full-time at a local cement-manufacturing plant until it closed two years ago. To make a decent living as a farmer, he stressed the pressure he felt to get bigger, the necessity, as yet unrealized, to expand his cattle herd from 70 to 300 and his crop acreage to at least 1,000. The rising costs of seed, fertilizer and fuel – not to mention equipment – have made it nearly impossible for smaller farmers like him and my father to compete. Farmers driving older equipment must also be their own operators and mechanics, as older machinery is less computerized and therefore understood by fewer mechanics, just like their highway counterparts. Small farmers are also at the mercy of market prices, but the largest – and primarily corporate – farmers can either lock in prices or store their crops until prices lean in their favor. He strives to be environmentally friendly, administering no steroids or non-therapeutic antibiotics to his cattle, and describes the advantages of planting genetically engineered seed, namely fewer chemicals and less time required for spraying weeds. As one who opposes the planting of GE seed, I cringe at these words but respect his decision, knowing his limited time. We discussed our parents' determination to provide us with college educations and other possibilities most of them did not have, yet understood that we both wanted to work our family farms.

This conversation mirrored many I have held with farmers around the country, particularly those who choose to remain small and/or to grow alternative crops.

Adding to the physical activities of planting and harvesting, they must also be concerned with inadequate credit and crop insurance as well as unfair pricing structures. To improve their lot small farmers may also muster the energy to become advocates and challenge the current policies and programs that often harm family farmers.

I hope that those of us who care about our farms and the quality of life they can offer are given the chance to disprove the notion that the only way to succeed in farming is to get bigger. Whether it is through mentoring potential farmers, sustainable timber harvests, contracting with farm to school programs, selling organic produce and pasture-raised meat at farmers markets and through community supported agriculture (CSAs) or any combination thereof, we must provide and promote viable examples and opportunities for family farmers and rural communities.



**PHP honored George Bates and Roxanne Burgess** at the Advisory Committee Meeting this past March. George and Roxanne served as members of PHP's Advisory Committee for six years. Thank you both for your dedication and years of service!

## Home/Land Security: A South African Community's Struggle to Retain "God's Gift"

By Phillemon Talane Sisonke Masilwe Indlala (SMI) Interim Coordinator

In the book of Genesis, we find this declaration: "See, I have given you every herb that yields seed which is on the face of the earth, and every tree whose fruit yields seed; to you it shall be for food." (Genesis 1:29)

When God created the human race, God knew that people are dependent on the universe for survival and vice versa. Access to natural resources is a God-given right to all human beings on the face of the earth. However, throughout human history, we've seen how the powerful are greedy with natural resources, taking more than they need and leaving the weak to fend for themselves.

In 2000, when the price of platinum went up, multinational companies doing business in South Africa took advantage of the boom to apply for extensions for existing mining licenses and for new licenses, particularly in the provinces of Limpopo and Northwest, which are rich in platinum.

The problem is: those platinum deposits are underneath communities where people have lived for generations. In order to get to the stone, communities are relocated to make way for the expansion of mining operations. Such relocations put a stop to

how generations of indigenous people were living sustainably on the land.

One such community is Ga-Pila, where small farmers derive their livelihoods from planting crops and raising goats, sheep and cattle. Over the years, these farmers were able to manage their resources sustainably, without compromising the future needs of the coming generations. On their land, they designated which portions to use for crop production and which to use for grazing and burials, etc. There was never any lack amongst them, as they practiced good land use plans from generation to generation.

With 40% unemployment in South Africa, it was easy for mining companies to convince government officials and traditional authorities to give into requests for mining expansion and for the relocation of the Ga-Pila community. Relocation is traumatic, since people's history is tied to their land and they gain identity from it. Furthermore, farmers are spiritually rooted to their land.

Big business always lobbies with resources, like big money, and officials are tempted to accept it. In fact, corruption is such a problem in these kinds of deals that an international legislative campaign is under way to get more transparency within the extractive industries' interactions with government. In the United States this act is called the Energy Security Through Transparency (ESTT) Act S.1700. See [www.openthebooks.org](http://www.openthebooks.org) for more information. In the case of the Ga-Pila community the government allowed the mining company to evict families with court orders and to relocate the community, with the promise of better things at their new destination. Those who resisted faced threats and name-calling by the authorities,

who said they were unruly and anarchists.

The community members who resisted relocation are joining hands with the Joining Hands network in South Africa, Sisonke, to seek justice and to defend what God has given them for survival. One is reminded by the prophetic voice of Amos 5: 14-15, a passage which continues to give us, as a movement, hope for the future and solidarity from our Lord. There will be opposition from the powerful in our quest to do good and to seek justice.

Through the support of Sisonke, in partnership with the Presbyterian Hunger Program and all the Joining Hands networks, the community came together to reflect critically about their situation and to seek God's guidance. Just as Jacob in the Bible left the Philistines behind and established his own territory (Genesis 26:2b), the Ga-Pila community agreed to govern themselves with one voice so they can live in peace and be fruitful and remain on their present farmland.

Indeed, their wells are contaminated with rubbish from underground mining and their grazing land is confiscated. Also, the heavy metal content of the streams is now suspect. The chief is in the process of registering the people as an independent community in hopes of securing a title and deed to the land, where they can enjoy the security of tenure (ownership) without fear of eviction and intimidation. With solidarity from our partners, such as SAMP (South African Mission Partnership) and PHP, we will surely overcome the kind of evils, which tries to take away the people's sense of pride.

One day, we will surely sing: Long Live the Security of Tenure, Long Live.

