

AMERICAN FARMER: The heart of our country

An excerpt. Photos by Paul Mobley. Interviews by Katrina Fried.

THIS BOOK BEGAN ALMOST FOUR YEARS AGO in a small coffee shop in northern Michigan, near my family's cabin in Glen Arbor, my longtime refuge from the intensity and demands of my life as a commercial photographer and city-dweller.

I liked spending time at the local places, like the farmers market or the coffee shop—where I'd always find a group of guys from the area, farmers mostly, talking about nothing and everything, you know, solving the world's problems over a cup of coffee.

I was up there one morning with my friend Doug and I remember looking across the table at this line of weathered, salt-of-the-earth faces, and I just knew, in that moment, that I wanted to

photograph those faces.

By the end of the summer I had taken portraits of a couple dozen farmers in and around Glen Arbor. I had no idea at the time that they would represent the first of 300 farmers I would photograph in 35 states, leading me to travel more than 100,000 miles during the next three years.

Entering into this rural culture, this family of farmers, has revived my own sense of spirit and optimism. You want something you can believe in. You ask yourself, where have all the good people gone? Well, I can tell you. Drive up to any farmhouse in this country. You'll find them. They're there.—Paul Mobley



BRANDON and MONICA SCHAFER

with their children, KENNY, MAX, KENDRAH, and MADDIE.
Swine and cattle, Goodhue, Minnesota.

THERE'VE BEEN SCHAFERS ON THIS LAND SINCE 1886. Back then it was more diversified farming. But for the last three generations, it's always been beef and hogs. We focus on genetic superiority and try to make selective matings to capture the opportunity and the benefits that each animal might present in terms of their offspring.

There are 40,000 pigs born here each year—that's more than a hundred a day. But from the standpoint of the industry, we're

actually quite small. And every time a boar fathers a new litter, you have another piece of data to input to determine the accuracy and the productivity improvements that might be generated from that particular animal....

On the beef side, our focus is obviously what the consumer wants when he goes to a restaurant or to the grocery store. We do a lot of ultrasound on our cows to confirm they have enough intramuscular fat, which ultimately makes for a juicy, tender, and very pleasurable eating experience....

My wife Monica and I met when we were about three years old. We grew up a quarter mile apart and started dating when we were sixteen. She's a stay-at-home mom, but she

also manages our boar stud. She does all our semen collection on Mondays and Thursdays. She's got fourteen boars to accommodate 1,600 sows.

I won't say it's her passion but it's a very good part-time job....

Where do our children fit in? I only hope I can be as forward thinking for my kids as my father and grandfather were for me. Too many farmers farm with an emotional attachment because it's a way of life instead of a business. But it comes down to dollars and cents. And when the emotional side can't keep up with that, the business fails and the lifestyle disappears. I love what I do, but I will never let it control where I go tomorrow.

ALICE WIEMERS

Grain, livestock, and bees, Hondo, Texas.

I GUESS YOU COULD SAY THAT when I married my husband, I married the bees. He said, “C’mon Alice, help me with the bees!” So that’s how I learned about honeybees. I was a total novice. But he’d started as a beekeeper in his teens, helping out a neighbor, and just got hooked. We make our principal income as grain and livestock farmers, but keeping honeybees has been our hobby for the past fifty-eight years.

In the agricultural world, bees are actually considered as livestock. So, just like all of our animals, the bees have management needs. We see to it that they’re in the proper location, protected from predators and close to water. And we inspect the hives throughout the year to make sure that they’re healthy.

I would say most of the time we have a dozen or two colonies. That’s not many compared to the beekeepers who do this as their living—they have thousands of hives. However, we have a nice little local business selling honey, and we consume a lot of honey ourselves. We sweeten our beverages with honey, and I do some baking with it. We have honey for the pancakes, and for the cornbread. No, ma’am, we never get sick of it. And each time you take the honey from the hive it has the unique flavor of the particular flower that the bees were pollinating and visiting for nectar....

But we’re not in the pollinating business. We just want the honey. We like to keep the colonies near our home so if we have an hour or two we can say, “Let’s go look at the bees, see how the bees are getting along.” We watch to see how they’re flying, how they’re bringing in pollen, and things like that. You can learn a whole lot about the condition of the bees by observing them come and go....

Most people don’t know that honey has natural healing properties. It has such a heavy viscosity that germs can’t live in it, so it can be used as a topical dressing for wounds. Occasionally I also gather the pollen just for personal use. You can take a teaspoon of pollen

like a food supplement. It helps your immune system. People with multiple sclerosis actually buy bees to sting them in the critical areas. They’ve found that the toxin in the bee venom helps give some relief. There are some more unusual things that come from the hives too, like royal jelly. It’s what the queen bee larvae feed on, and it’s highly nutritious. They sell that in capsules or freeze-dried, and it’s supposed to give you lots of energy. We’re about at the retirement age. When you get older and you can’t lift the honey-filled supers so easily anymore, then it’s not that great to be a beekeeper. But we sure do love it. We’ll keep doing it as long as we can.



BROOKE RYAN TURNER

Cows, kids, and crops, Clarinda, Iowa.

I BOUGHT MY FIRST COW when I was eight and went from there—farming's just in my blood. Anytime I'd get a little extra money, I'd buy another one. By the time I graduated high school, I had twelve cows and their babies.

Today we run 150 head of cattle on about 1,500 acres. We also grow corn and soybeans, and we put up alfalfa hay. A lot of the hay goes to feeding the cows, and then we sell square bales to horse people. That's our grocery money—or my job in town, you'd say.

I'm a cowboy poet and singer-songwriter. I've been singing since I was just a little bitty tyke on the tractor. We started a cowboy church here, and once a month or so we get



together and do a service. It's got a western flair to it. I perform my music all over the country. In the spring and fall I don't book much because we're so busy on the farm. But in the summer and winter I do quite a few shows—sometimes two or three a week. There's also a national cowboy poetry festival in Elko, Nevada, every year, and a big cowboy gathering in Heber City, Utah. If I can, I always take the kids. So they've seen a lot of America....

With everything we're doin', our days are long. Last weekend we were in the field, and the earliest I got to bed was two in the morning for five days in a row. I'm always up at 6:30 to get the kids ready for school, and we have breakfast together every day. I'll sit right there and visit with them 'til 7:30 and put them on the bus. Then I start on my day. You can't imagine the hours we put in.



JOHN and TOM LARSON

Grain and livestock, Mt. Ayr, Iowa.

JL: TWINS RUN in our family. On my mother's side, her brother has two sets of twins.

TL: And our great-grandfather on our dad's side was a twin.

JL: Best part of being a twin, somebody was always watching my back.

TL: Our dad always says, two heads is better than one—even if one is a sheep's head.

JL: When we were in school, he would study for one test, and I would study for another test, and then we'd each just turn around and

go back in the room and take the same test for the other twin. So, that way we both got good grades and we only had to study for one test instead of two.

TL: Same way with girls. We wanted to know if the other got the right one....

TL: Our parents were a good Christian family. You lived in the House of God with them.

JL: We had sixteen-year center pins, you know? That's when you don't miss a Sunday at church for sixteen years.

JL: In our senior year, why, we both got 1967 Mustangs. Mine was yellow with a black top, and Tom's was a red one.

TL: Well...we don't have those 1967 Mustangs anymore.

JL: They got crashed.

TL: Let's see now, John was at Maryville, and he was going with this girl, and her boyfriend came home from the service and didn't like him, and so he took a twelve-gauge shotgun and shot it.

JL: I wasn't in it—he just shot the car.... Now Tom, he just hit a bridge and that was it.... Nowadays Tom has an '04 Corvette, and I've got a '06 Mustang.

TL: See, we weren't such bad trouble.

JL: Nah, no collateral damage.



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ED FROEHLICH

Alligators, Christmas, Florida.

I'VE BEEN RAISING ALLIGATORS SINCE 1966. I created the first alligator farm ever in Florida, and sold the first alligator meat in the country. You know, there's people that like dairy farming, there's cattle people, horse people. I just happen to like the gators. You can't be an alligator farmer and be successful if you don't really love 'em—if you don't really live it, breathe it, and eat it for breakfast, lunch, and dinner.

I guess I've always been an outdoors guy. When I was a young fella I handled a lot of wildlife—snakes, raccoons, foxes, possums, wildcats, otters. But I always thought it would be fun to raise a few alliga-

tors. You know, it's no big deal catching little gators; you just lean over the side of the boat and pick 'em up and put 'em in a sack. But having a place to keep them, that's the hard part. So when I got into beef cattle, and I was ranching on a few thousand acres of good pasture, I figured I had enough space to give it a try. I dug a small pond behind my house and fenced it in and started bringing in some small gators—just a couple feet long. I raised them up till they outgrew the first pond, and then I fenced in another bigger one. I wound up digging four or five more one- and two-acre ponds as the gators increased in size and number. An alligator grows about a foot a year when they're living outdoors. I've grown some up to fourteen feet....