

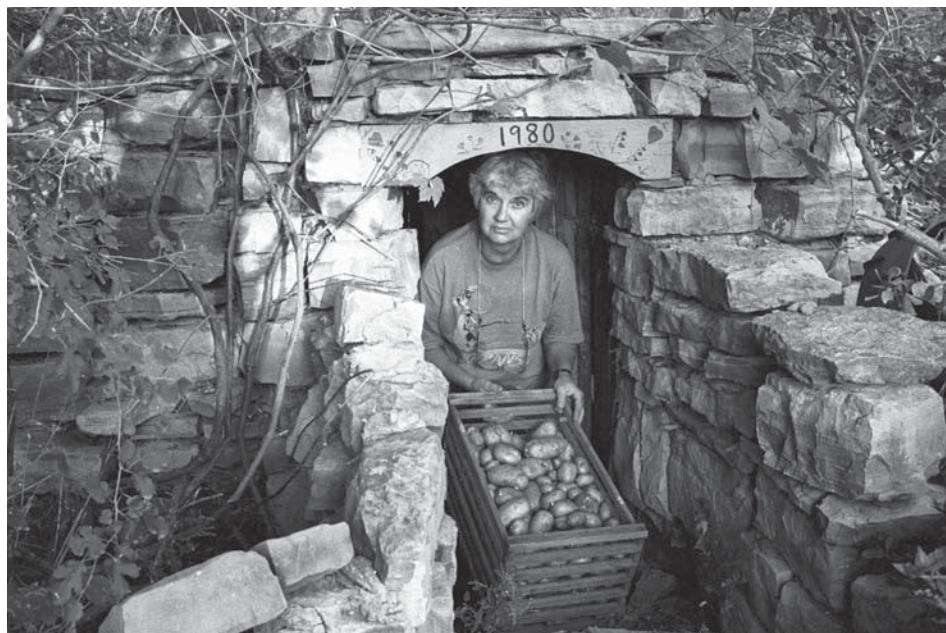
LISTENING TO VOICES FROM THE FIELDS

Cynthia Vagnetti

The authentic voices of farmers and ranchers across America have been uncovered by Cynthia Vagnetti and are the basis for the collection of oral history, black-and-white photography, and contextual video titled *Voices from the Fields*. Her vision to document the story of sustainable food and farming systems was inspired by Lisa French from Partridge, Kansas, in 1991 when Vagnetti embarked on her first project, *Kansas Farm Women: Growing Out of the Tilt*. While sitting on the edge of the Great Plains, Lisa commented, “Our imagination is shaped by our cultural



Lisa French



Marilyn Jones

idea of what a farmer is.” Lisa, as are many other American farmers and ranchers is leading a growing discourse that is turning the tide in the prevailing perception of who is a farmer, what are sustainable farming practices, why Americans are altering their food choices and how local communities can respond to rapid changes in agriculture.

“A REAL FARMER LOVES THE LAND”

Marilyn Jones

As a scholar of arts and letters a broad description of sustainable agriculture is necessary, but to fully understand the meaning and depth, it is best to listen to the stories of farmers and then carefully

compare and contrast the principles expressed. In the script, *What Will Be in the Fields Tomorrow?* we hear the voices of 20 farmers. The readers theater script like all of the products in which Vagnetti has provided creative direction-is about farmers who represent the growing trend to operate small independently owned farms and are in a large part the driving inspiring force behind the changing perception of American agriculture. Some are intergenerational farm families, some are new farmers owning and operating a farm as an individual or managing the operation in collaboration with community membership. They are diverse men, women and children who daily converse with the land and the environ-

ment while making a living by producing food for people through sustainable farming practices.

“THE LESSONS LEARNED FROM THIS FARM WILL HELP MY CHILDREN BECOME RESPONSIBLE ADULTS”

Nancy Vogelsberg-Busch

Early on in her career, as a graduate student, Vagnetti found that the stories of farm families informed her shooting script and picture-taking process. From the stories, she has been able to reveal a farmers’ past, thus providing a historical context to each individuals present understanding of their role in sustainable agriculture. The farmer and rancher of sustainable food and farming systems will explain that the three tenants of sustainable agriculture are economics, environment and community. A sustainable agriculture should support viable rural communities and fair treatment of all people involved in the food system, from farm workers to consumers. Farm families must have a fair and reasonably secure living and their practices should minimize harm to the natural environment of soil, water, and air.

Each person represented in the pictures and stories of Vagnetti’s collection, *Voices from the Fields* embodies a



Nancy Vogelsberg-Busch

transformative story that is a model for shaping the future of agriculture. Moving towards a sustainable agriculture we find farmers who are turning a profit that has saved the farm and a way of life and a majority of small scale farmers prefer to keep the land in active cultivation by feeding their neighbors. Working from this framework, farmers grow to be more sensitive to what the customers want and willing to produce those things rather than traditional crops. Farmers will quickly explain their intent has never been to turn back the clock, but rather pay careful attention to the biodiverse components managing the farm as a whole eco-

system. Relying on nature and web of place-based relationships, farmers and ranchers are moving out beyond the fence-post. With an overall conviction and purpose they are shaping the story of sustainable food and farming systems that provide economic opportunities that secure the health of the land and people.

A farm operation is as unique as the people managing the operation. As Amy Miller, an Iowa vegetable farmer, sums up, “We have one objective and really that is that we want to stay on the farm and everybody goes about that in their own way.”