

Ending Lacewing Acres: Toward amplifying microperspectives on farm closure

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Abstract

Farmers are invited to tell stories about their farms, especially about their farm's origin and history. However, some farm stories go untold, are uninformed, or become obscured, including stories of farm closures. With this case study, we invite journalists and academics to provide further opportunities for farmers to tell their own closure stories. Written by the farmer and her CSA member and friend, who researches farmer communication, this case study calls on farmers to tell their farm-closure stories in the complicated and robust ways such stories deserve. We draw on academic and public scholarship about farm closures and farmers' disclosures to feature how one farmer decided to end her farm and farming career. We chronicle her

decision-making process and her strategies to communicate the closure of her farm, as well as analyze themes from how audiences reacted to her news. We also offer a range of reasons for inviting such telling of complex closure stories.

Keywords

Case Study, Communication, Community Supported Agriculture, CSA, Direct Marketing, Farm, Farmer Storytelling, Farm Closure, Iowa, Vegetable Farm

Introduction

When farmer Julia Slocum thinks about her Iowa farm and the name she gave it, Lacewing Acres, she recalls the moment when she first learned of

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Author Note

The authors are personally involved with the farm in this case study, as the former farm owner and as a customer of the farm's CSA. This is fully disclosed in the body of the article.

the green lacewing as a beneficial insect. Julia, a co-author of this case study, came to understand green lacewings as ever-present creatures that she saw everywhere once she could identify them. The consistent visibility of green lacewings on her farm serves as a metaphor for the case study of farm closure featured here, reflecting how farm closures are ever-present once we notice them. As we detail in this case study, after seven growing seasons and many months of consideration, Julia decided to close Lacewing Acres in 2019. Such farm start-ups and closures shaped the landscape of vegetable farms in the Midwest and across the country. Noticing the closure of farms such as Lacewing Acres and listening to the narrative of its ending—a common outcome in farming—help us more fully understand how former farmers have important stories to tell. In what follows, we feature a literature review on listening to closure stories, detail our methods for conducting this research and writing up this case study together, and describe the context of Lacewing Acres and the complexities of Julia's closure decision. Lastly, we offer our results and discussion that address the stakes for telling such stories.

Our focus in this case study is on farmers engaged in direct sales, those who sell their crops and livestock at local farmers markets and networks of customers organized through community supported agriculture (CSA) arrangements. Such direct-to-consumer farmers are accustomed to chronicling the activity on their farms and telling cohesive narratives of their approaches to growing food. These farmers address audiences of their customers, potential customers, grant funders, and fellow farmers, among others. Doing so enables them to articulate the beneficial contributions these farmers make to their communities, persuasive claims about the benefits of local food, the impact that CSAs have on farmers and customers, their environmental orientation as reflected in their farms, and other information that their audiences want to know. Acknowledging its importance, scholars have begun to study the role that storytelling plays in farmers' lives and businesses, including how, through their storytelling, farmers can describe their farms, market farm tourism, perform informal teaching roles, and help others to under-

stand the issues they face, such as weather changes (Mei et al., 2020; Roche et al., 2019; Smith, 2014; Stockebrand et al., 2011; Torres, 2019).

Farmers' storytelling aimed at nonfarming audiences tends to emphasize positive aspects of farming, featuring brief vignettes of bucolic elements of farming, such as beautiful produce, happy farmers and their fellow workers, picturesque sunsets, bustling farmers markets, and other optimistic visions of local agri-food systems (Brookfield Farm, 2022; Civil Eats, n.d.; Cook, 2019; Hall & Gamble, 2017; Truelove Seeds, n.d.; Whole Foods Market, 2009; Wilkinson, 2019). While necessary to build a customer base and invite readers into the farmer's life and farm community, these positive depictions are stories that farmers choose to tell about themselves to shape a narrative about their farms and lives. When farmers write such stories, they might obscure farming challenges, such as the unpredictable and accumulating risks they face due to climate change, equipment needing repair, repetitive motion injuries, and other factors affecting their lives and work. Additionally, such stories often do not allow for nuance and complexity when the farmers are expected to edit out any material that does not affirm their audience's understanding of farming as a common good and farmers as honorable, stoic workers who do not complain. Farmers are thus invested in telling stories that meet audiences' presuppositions and curiosities and simultaneously communicate positive images of their farm and its offerings. Likewise, journalists and academic researchers ask farmers to tell particular stories, including those about their farm's origin, their motivations to embark on career changes or other life choices that led them to farm, and other narratives of prosperity.

In this article, we argue for telling a wider range of farm stories, particularly those about farm closures. We invite farmers to tell their own closure stories and call for journalistic and academic venues to host such stories. Although public audiences can access a wide array of farmers' stories about starting and maintaining their farms, a lack of platforms and opportunities for farm-closure stories means these stories go untold. Therefore, we feature Julia's strategies to communicate the closure of her farm and themes from audiences'

reactions to her news.

It matters that Julia's farm is in Iowa because her location shapes the stories she tells. As Brandi Janssen (2017) describes in her book on Iowa's small farmers, *Making Local Food Work*, it is difficult to overstate the importance of agriculture in Iowa, since nearly 100% of the original tallgrass prairie is now in agricultural production, enabling Iowa to grow more corn and soybeans than any other state—as well as produce seven pigs per human in Iowa (p. vii). Likewise, the Iowa State Extension Report (Harris & Iyer, 2014) on prairie conservation strips characterizes these dramatic changes:

Agriculture in Iowa owes its immense productivity to an extreme trade-off. Once, perennial prairie covered 85 percent of the state, and its deep root network built and held together a fertile topsoil layer many feet deep. Now, more than 85 percent is in agricultural production, with the majority in row crops. (para. 1)

Iowa's economy is thus dominated by infrastructures that support commodity-centric, large-scale, industrial agriculture, so Julia's farm did not benefit from well-established support or well-funded networks like it might have had in states with more infrastructure for small-scale vegetable farms, such as Vermont. That said, local food production continues to have an established presence in Iowa. In 2017 Janssen wrote that most Iowa farmers markets are thriving, a claim that future research may revise as the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and other pressures on local food producers increase.

We write from this Iowa context to invite conversations serving these three goals: to complicate bucolic myths about farming in the United States, to subvert capitalist logic depicting farm closure as mainly financial decisions, and to destigmatize farm closures in public discussions. To those ends, we begin with a literature review of the scholarly research and public writing about farm closure. Then we detail our methods and describe our case study of Julia's closure context and decision-making process before turning to how Julia communicated her closure to audiences connected to

her farm and their responses. Finally, to invite a broader and more diverse array of stories that reflect the complexities of how farmers closed their farms and ended their farming careers, we offer further considerations for telling and hosting farm-closure stories, as well as other ways in which the knowledge of former farmers can be harnessed for improving the prospects of those farming for local communities.

Literature Review: Farm Closure and Disclosure

People interested in the local-food aspects of agriculture have called for increasing opportunities to learn about farmers' efforts to grow food for their local communities. As farmers accept opportunities to disclose the challenges they face, narratives about farm closures are on the rise. For example, as Melissa and Andrew Dunham, owners of Grinnell Heritage Farm in eastern Iowa, disclose in their 47-minute interview on Iowa Public Radio (Nebbe & Harrop, 2020), climate change and a lack of infrastructural support were the primary motivations for closing their farm, a much-beloved and mourned resource in their community. Similarly, Glenn Sheeder describes the changes to downsize his family's dairy as caused by a multifaceted combination of his parents retiring from the business, barriers to hiring employees, and his inability to do all the work himself (Bacon, 2022). As Tom Philpott (2020) writes in *Mother Jones*, "we need more real talk about the failed individual-family model of farming" (para. 41), a model that is often propped up by undisclosed and invisible benefits such as inherited land. Such constraints and benefits can be hidden from consumers, who might not have information about the pressures that farmers face and the privileges from which some benefit and others do not, such as access to land and markets. Thus, because information about such systemic and infrastructural impacts is not often available to audiences and since less than 2% of the U.S. population works in agriculture (U.S. Department of Agriculture Economic Research Service [USDA ERS], 2021), closure news can be shocking, especially if a farm's public story has always been that of a bucolic, thriving farm.

Academic researchers encourage agriculture

producers to tell their stories and prompt increased listening to farmers (Rissing, 2019), dedicating entire journal issues to beginning farmers (Hilchey, 2010). While many farmers are accustomed to telling their farm's origin story and describing to audiences why they choose to farm, they might not be accustomed to telling the stories of how their farms end. Although farmers are often asked about their farms' origin stories throughout their farm careers, they typically only tell their closure stories when they announce their decision to close their farms. Further, whereas origin stories strike tones of optimism, closure stories may come with complex affective impacts, such as feelings of vulnerability, shame, anger, exhaustion, and other emotions that might arise in concert with those of elation and anticipation regarding new, postfarming opportunities. While farmers' truth-telling and disclosure are critical to our listening to and understanding their stories, not all stories are straightforward, welcomed, or easy to tell.

Likewise, audiences interested in and aware of local foods are familiar with listening to farm stories that describe the benefits of local food and farmers' intense physical labor, love of the land, contributions to their communities, and other narratives that shape farming as worthy and valuable. Such stories might make consumer audiences feel good about their buying habits because purchasing local food has been framed as an ethical, benevolent act. Since farmers tend to emphasize the positive aspects of farming that some audiences are primed to appreciate, these same audiences might be unaccustomed to farm stories that offer farmers' perspectives on the constraints they face. When such audiences become aware of farms closing, they might assume capitalist understandings of these closures as "failures," oversimplifying the meaning of a farm's end as occurring only because the farm did not make money. Such a singular focus could obscure the impact of the physical toll on the farmers or other factors related to vegetable farming (including competition from larger-scale vegetable producers who hold advantages regarding reliance on exploited labor, public water, and access to subsidized utilities). It could also downplay factors that contribute to any job change, such as burnout, boredom, or a shift in identity.

Further contributing to the disconnect between farmers and their audiences' understandings of closures is that few platforms exist for farmers to describe their decision to stop farming and close their farms. Sarah Mock (2021), a seasoned researcher and agricultural reporter who has studied farms, states that she is always struck by how rare it is to hear from farmers who ended their farms. Mock describes:

It's like we assume they died when the farm died, as if there's no one to offer insight about how farms decline or what lies beyond the end of a farm. But many of these farmers are still around and understanding their experiences can help us make sense of what's happening [on other farms]. (p. 35)

Both the individual and collective knowledge held by former farmers who choose to share their closure stories can be a rich resource that informs a more honest understanding of local food contexts and how they both enable and constrain farmers.

Inviting closure stories can provide context and richness to statistics about farms closing, enhancing representations that emphasize numbers over narratives. Statistics can aid our understanding of farm closures as they accumulate, helping us grasp the impact of broad changes to agriculture. However, they risk obscuring the varied individual circumstances that prompt farms to close. For example, these statistics published in the *Des Moines Register* might alarm readers:

Wisconsin, the nation's second-largest milk producer with 8,304 farms, had 634 fewer dairy farms in October than a year ago, data show. Over the past two years, the [state has] lost a total of 1,100 dairies. Iowa, the nation's 10th-largest milk producer with 1,150 dairy farms, has lost about 80 this year. (Eller, 2018, paras. 12–13)

These statistics reflect the crisis conditions of the dairy industry and are important to know. Such statistically driven stories might cause readers to feel shocked and concerned, but without the personal stories that illuminate the reasons and

impacts, they likely move on to other news stories. Such stories might also help perpetuate the deficit narrative that buttresses beginning farmer programs: that our country is desperate for farmers and that new farmers are answering this urgent call. Statistics-focused reporting that does not center farmers' stories in their own words can also obscure the farmer's perspective regarding the closure. Excluding farmers' viewpoints can lead to assumptions that farmers cannot do the work or are not "cut out" for it. Another risk of these statistics-focused stories, however, is that continuing to tell farm-closure narratives without including the complex contexts from which they arise obscures farmers' complicated decisions, keeping such decisions at the abstract level with big data. Interventions to address such abstraction can include increased opportunities for farmers to describe the complex contexts in which they stop farming. Farm-closure counts can thus be enriched through an increased public reporting of how and why farms close and the combined structural changes and individual circumstances that lead to such decisions. While we acknowledge that there is a purpose for such data-rich narratives, we are confident that they are being told (Farm Aid, 2020; Farm Bureau, 2021; USDA ERS, 2022).

Scholars have begun to study the complex web of factors that lead farmers to quit farming. Rissing (2019) conducted semistructured interviews with 14 people from 12 farms who quit farming within their initial five years, gathering data that suggest that a farm's "chances of success is a much more nuanced project than even the most precise book-keeping can capture" (p. 156). Rissing (2019) calls for an approach to understanding a farm's likelihood of success that is more detailed and diversified, and goes beyond simply focusing on finances, which are only part of a farmer's ability to thrive. Interpreting farming through a normative capitalistic lens, with its limiting emphasis on profit, does not prepare farmers to succeed in nonmonetary ways, such as in ownership, community, and operations, recognizing successes that could motivate them to want to keep farming. The 2017 National Young Farmers Survey concludes that land access is the top challenge farmers face, and lack of land access is the most likely reason they quit farming.

As the survey shows, this issue involves not only finding and affording land (Ackoff et al.), which can include financial barriers because land is expensive, but also zoning laws that discourage or forbid vegetable farming, and infrastructural boundaries, such as racist loan denials (Bustillo, 2021). Moreover, Goetz and Debertin's (2001) county-level study found that off-farm work increases the likelihood that farmers will stop working in production agriculture, but only after counties begin to experience a net loss of farmers (p. 1010). These results address the complexity of whether counties should invest in off-farm jobs programs that attract farmers when these programs lead to counties losing farms.

Writing for the public, former farmers build persuasive cases for paying attention to the stories of farmers' decisions to quit farming. For example, Weingarten (2016) illustrates the importance of listening to farmers' quitting stories:

However hard it is to discuss, the rate at which farmers are walking away from their farms—whether by choice or by force—may be the most important measure of whether or not our food systems are actually working. Because although farmers' markets are springing up everywhere, the average small-scale farmer is barely surviving. (para. 16)

In this context, Weingarten critiques the pastoral mythos of agriculture promoted by Wendell Berry and other oft-quoted writers who laud farmers who farm for "love"—against all odds. Instead, the shifting contexts in which farmers work need to be discussed and analyzed so that the systems that currently fail farmers can be changed to make farming possible. By contributing to such efforts, farmers can benefit from having a forum to share their stories of farm closure so these experiences can inform the next generation of farmers.

Likewise, Bren Smith (2014) argued for an infrastructural change to make farming possible, detailing the unfortunate truth about how farm-to-table dinners, restaurants serving local food, farmers markets, and other oft-praised contexts lauded by foodie movements seem to uplift farmers, but they often do not. Smith revealed ways that farm-

ers regularly do not benefit in these contexts because farmers market sales are too low, and independent farmers cannot always compete with well-funded, not-for-profit farms. By inviting such farming conversations, we enable greater learning about the constraints under which farmers work and provide opportunities to revise practices so that benefits to farmers can more fully match foodie movements' expectations—or at least revise the benevolent perceptions of these practices.

Methods: Case Study

To build a fuller understanding of farmers' lives and the range of reasons that farms close, this case study offers a microperspective of one farmer, Julia, and her decision to close her farm. As informed by scholarship in case study methods and storytelling (Porter, 2018), in this case study we offer this microperspective toward a better understanding of farmers' choices, the constraints and opportunities farmers face, and how farmers communicate their decisions. We especially take up Porter's (2018) case-study framework in two ways: First, we value the fact that we are authors from both the farmer community and a university to improve the accessibility and accuracy of our project (Porter, 2018, p. 41). In addition, we name that we are each a co-investigator and an actor in the work we are studying (Porter, 2018, p. 41). Throughout this write-up, we refer to Julia more by name since we are writing about her farm and her decisions, but we are committed to a shared understanding from our two perspectives: Julia's as the farmer and Abby's as the CSA customer and academic researcher who studies direct market farmer communication. Porter (2018) defines *rigor* as ethical, emotional, and epistemological. Our ethical stance is that farm closure stories are under-told, and we wish to intervene in increasing their telling. Our emotional position is that farmers deserve the dignity of having their stories heard and respected, as well as the notion that the research process can change researchers (Porter, 2018). We have both been changed by better understanding the emotional depth and vulnerability of Julia's complex decision process and the impact of telling those stories here. Epistemologically, we are committed to telling accurate stories about farmers' lives, a

practice that demands "more inductive listening and analysis, including in setting the boundaries of the case" (Porter, 2018, p. 41) as we have set ours to a single farm, Lacewing Acres.

In this case study, we describe Julia's farm, Lacewing Acres, and then disclose Julia's approach to telling people she planned to stop farming. We contextualize Julia's story in the broader context of farmers' decisions to stop farming and close their farms. This story is framed by expected narratives, such as Julia's farm-origin story, as well as the message she used to communicate closure in the letter presented below. Having established that framework, we summarize the strategies Julia used to inform her fellow CSA members and farming mentors that she was ending her farm and then analyze the themes that surfaced in responses from these audiences. We aim to broaden the understandings of farm closure stories and responses to them, and encourage increased opportunities for farmers to communicate such stories.

The catalyst for this collaborative case study is Abby's interest in farmers' rhetorical strategies and how they bridge divides between their work as farmers and their nonfarming audiences' understandings of agriculture. Abby moved to Julia's town, Ames, Iowa, in 2011 and signed up for Julia's CSA in 2014, Julia's second season of farming. As Julia and Abby became friends through the CSA relationship, Abby learned more about Julia's farm operation, the benefits and risks of farming in that community, and the complexities of the choices Julia made as an independent farmer. When, after a long process of decision-making, Julia decided to end the operation of Lacewing Acres, Julia asked Abby for advice on how to communicate this information to CSA members and others, noting that doing so felt awkward, complex, and personal. As Julia and Abby talked about how Julia would approach her messaging about an oft-silenced farm story, Abby proposed a collaborative research study to analyze the context together and write about it to engage broader audiences in the opportunities and challenges of telling farm-closure stories.

Our collaboration on this case study began when we strategized how Julia would tell her mentors and CSA members that she was ending Lace-

wing Acres. Once Julia knew she was ready to announce her decision, she consulted with Abby to consider options for communicating her farm closure to other CSA members and people who are invested in her farm, including mentors and those who had supported her farm in the past. Julia drafted messages she planned to email to these audiences, and Abby provided feedback regarding tone, organization, and other considerations. Julia wanted these audiences to hear the news from her directly. Like many farmers who sell their crops via CSA, Julia was accustomed to writing to members about what to expect in their CSA share each week, addressing challenges facing the farm, such as weather conditions, and offering recipes to help members use vegetables that might not be familiar to them. Writing to them about the end of her farm would initiate the end of their farmer-customer relationship and include other details, such as brief information about her reasons for stopping farming and the future of the land on which she had farmed, as well as about how they might find their next CSA. As we discussed, the letter should be brief, forefronting the important details and anticipating the immediate questions that CSA members would ask.

Reproduced in full below, the letter Julia emailed to her 148 current and past CSA members included the announcement and relevant details. She organized her closure story in two ways to see what responses were elicited. Seventy-six of the recipients received a version that began with a message of pride and gratitude about Lacewing, and the other 72 recipients (with five of those emails bouncing back undeliverable) a version that began directly with the closure news. In the end, the two different message openings did not elicit dramatically different responses, likely because Julia's recipients were most interested in her and her personal future, as they had become invested in and connected to her through her farm. We include only one of the versions below since the responses were so similar. We detail our analysis of these responses in the results and discussion section.

As Julia received responses to her email and had conversational interactions with recipients of her email whom she saw around town, she noted the general themes of the responses. Only Julia

read the emails and had the conversations, which she then summarized and told Abby about in person during their meetings. Because we were interested in the general themes of recipient responses and did not intend to quote from these responses, we have generalized that information thematically, not quoting from the email writers or individuals with whom Julia had conversations about her closure. We met in person to discuss the responses Julia was receiving and decided in 2019 that audiences interested in local food producers and the decisions they make about closing their farms would be invested in Julia's story and her experience of deciding to close, as well as in how she communicated it. We thus began writing up this case study and researching how it fits into existing scholarship on farmer storytelling and closure. Having analyzed Julia's generalizations of the responses together, we began writing about what we had learned through our analysis.

As the remainder of this case study shows, our analysis has led us to argue that farmers like Julia, who tell their farm-closure stories, do not fit into normative, pastoral narratives of farming because their stories destabilize bucolic agrarian myths and potentially put at risk consumers' understandings of supporting local farmers as a common good. This latter point—that local food systems are so vulnerable to consumer whims that transparency about farm decision-making and closure stories puts them at risk—deserves further attention because ignoring the complexity of a farm's "success" props up the monolithic agrarian, common-good story affirmed by obscuring the circumstances of farm closure. But the former point is the one we want to amplify through this case study—that destabilizing agrarian myths to show how they are incomplete and oversimplified can be productive for showing the complexities of farming experiences, which cannot be fully told through statistics and big data trends. We thus join with researchers such as Janssen (2017) who call for an inclusive and thorough approach to understanding the local producers' diverse and contradictory experiences. Listening to such stories is important because doing so invites farmers to describe the complexities of their decisions and can inform consumers and community members about the com-

plications of food systems and the unique constraints of farming as a job and lifestyle.

Case Study Context: The Process of Deciding to Stop Farming

Unlike farm-closure stories, the farm-origin narrative is a well-established genre, as we have identified, and we reinscribe it here with a particular emphasis on the farmer that shapes this case study. Co-author and farmer Julia Slocum opened Lacewing Acres in 2013, when she was 28 years old. Julia has a bachelor's degree in international studies and Spanish and worked for three years in Washington, D.C., for a nonprofit. Before opening Lacewing, Julia worked on three farms in New Mexico, Wisconsin, and north-central Iowa, including a goat dairy and creamery and two diversified vegetable farms. Julia gained access to land to establish Lacewing Acres by bartering with a local couple who operated a small cattle farm west of Ames. With them, Julia tilled about an acre (.4 ha) in the fall of 2012 to get it ready for spring, and she planted garlic that same fall. Spring 2013 was Julia's first season of farming on her own, having about an acre and a half in production. Starting with a 24-member CSA, she did home deliveries in her town. That first season she also sold vegetables to a retirement home, a technology company, and at the downtown farmers market every Saturday, as well as cucumbers to a coffee shop to use in their cucumber lemonade.

She moved her farming operation closer to town starting her third season. From the third through the seventh seasons, Julia sublet farmland from a friend who was growing 40 acres of organic corn and soybeans. The farm was also located adjacent to a vineyard. In addition to growing these crops, Julia's friend/landlord opened a brewery on the land he was renting that was adjacent to the land Julia was farming. This friend/landlord and her first landlord both played active roles in her support network because they had more growing experience and other resources they made available to her, including equipment and storage facilities. The land where Lacewing Acres was located does not have a home structure, so Julia lived in town (about five miles away). For five of the seven years, Lacewing was Julia's primary source of income. As

Lacewing grew and evolved, Julia continued to be the sole operator and decision-maker. In the seven years of running her farm, Julia grew over 40 varieties of vegetables and herbs.

Julia considered many co-occurring events as she considered the future of Lacewing Acres, a process that we chronicle here. To weigh the closure decision, she spoke with farm mentors and her friends who were currently farming or had farmed in the past. Julia had thought about stopping farming off and on over the years, specifically in the context of pondering what she wanted to do with her life. Especially in the winter, when Julia was not fully occupied by the day-to-day activities of keeping the farm going, she would think about her goals beyond farming. Over time, she came to realize that achieving those goals became increasingly unlikely if she continued to farm. In 2019 she finalized her decision to close the farm and announced that she would stop farming.

The decision process began much earlier, however, as Julia began to seriously consider closing Lacewing Acres in 2018. Her motivations to change what occupied her time accrued, including her growing interest in moving to a different community and achieving other personal and professional goals, such as shifting to a career focused on mental health. In addition, she briefly experienced a back injury, and her knee had begun to cause more discomfort from farm labor, which prompted her to reflect on the long-term impact of farm labor's relentless, repetitive motions. Specifically, when she had near-miss moments during farm work—including slipping off the tractor, hitching up an implement imperfectly, or an having an awkward movement with a harvest knife or power tool—she became more acutely aware of how much her operation relied on her physical wellness and how incredibly vulnerable that made her continuation. This vulnerability was wholly connected to the farming model Julia practiced, where she was the sole decision-maker, farm operator, and laborer. Even when she had part-time help harvesting or doing other farm work, no one else contributed to managing the overall farm or the business. Thus, Lacewing Acres relied entirely on her physical body and mental acuity.

Julia's decision to stop farming was also related

to the size of her farm business and how it positioned her in a capitalist system that poorly compensates agricultural workers such as vegetable farmers. She felt caught in an awkward phase of the operation: The farm was too small for her to make a living wage, but she was both unable and unwilling to increase production or add employees to try to make more profit. Julia found herself in a cycle of working all summer on the farm and then doing various other jobs all winter, an unsustainable combination that came with financial insecurity even though she was working off her farm a great deal. Coupled with this cycle were the pressures of increasing anxiety about needing Medicaid and the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). One contributor to such anxiety was the complex and intrusive paperwork required for such programs that scrutinized her life, as well as the offensive materials included with her SNAP mailings, such as information promoting the financial benefits of marriage. Julia felt guilty because she knew that farming was a choice for her and she was entirely capable of doing different work for which she could make a living wage. This guilt only heightened the complexities of needing such resources while also working long hours.

Julia's status as a single person also contributed to her decision-making process about closing Lacewing Acres. She was discouraged by how few single people were farming. On one hand, nearly every other single farmer she knew had a partner with an off-farm job, had come to farming with savings to live on, or was farming on family land. Knowing that other farmers had such financial and land-based infrastructures undergirding their operations made her feel both overwhelmed and isolated, as if she were one of the only farmers in her community who was farming under these intense conditions as a single farmer responsible for all the work, decisions, and risk. On the other hand, she knew the strain farming together had on romantic and business partnerships. Farming alone meant she did not have those challenges.

That said, Julia's intense pride in her accomplishments as a farmer was also directly connected to her independence in farming on her own. She had been drawn to farming initially, in part, in the way other people might take on marathon training

or some other lofty goal to challenge themselves—she was not sure she could do it, so her motivation to try increased to prove that she could. After five years, Julia had shown herself that she could do it, so she had accomplished her mission and removed any doubt that she was capable of running her own farm. While farming enables farmers to learn new skills and experiment with unpredictable outcomes, she began to crave a different set of challenges that would test her in unfamiliar ways. Increasingly, she had a sense that there were other skills and questions that were more personally urgent and relevant to her. Such questions included considering what helps people be emotionally well and how to listen and question ourselves and one another to cultivate this wellness. Julia became drawn to focusing her efforts in that direction rather than on the day-to-day problem-solving around managing the farm.

Julia was also inspired by former farmers in her community and friend network who had recently transitioned to other occupations and several non-farming peers who were making life changes and embarking on new career paths. These friends were going to graduate school, changing professional fields, and moving to new places. She was curious about the possibilities such a shift could bring for her.

Considering her community of farmers also contributed to her decision in other ways. Mock's (2021) description—that farmers disappear or “die” when their farms end—resonated with Julia. She acknowledged the mental obstacle she faced when considering whether to stop farming: feeling like she would essentially die to her community when her role changed from farmer to former farmer. Because her community of customers cared about her as a farmer and supported her in her labor of growing their food, she anticipated that their care and support would disappear when her farm no longer existed. In addition, her community of fellow farmers was rooted in their shared occupation, and Julia was concerned that she would lose her closest friend network that had grown out of her farming community.

Julia's farm created immense social security for her. Having a tangible, desired thing to barter with for labor, repairs, food preservation, and more was a massive nonmonetary benefit she did not want to

sacrifice. Moreover, the social connections created many opportunities for additional income through odd jobs (childcare, house-cleaning, house-sitting), as well as a sense of communal support. She knew that this network would support her in her goals. For example, in 2017, she took a trip with Witness for Peace to meet with small farmers in Oaxaca, Mexico, to learn about how U.S. economic policies affected their farms (Solidarity Collective, n.d.). Thanks to the community she had cultivated through Lacewing Acres, she raised over US\$3,000 in less than 48 hours to support this trip. That demonstration of support helped her feel that despite the financial insecurity of the farm, she had other forms of security. Julia found it challenging to face stopping farming, then, because she felt like she was walking away from this social safety net that she was mutually invested in with her community members. Thus, the closure considerations Julia made came with complex understandings of self, community, identity, and role.

Another factor that shaped Julia's decision to close the farm was how much she missed nonfarm outdoor time in natural areas. Exploring parks and hiking trails is important to Julia, but her farm demanded all her time in the spring, summer, and fall, confining her to one outdoor space with constant work. While she found Lacewing Acres to be beautiful as a landscape, and she had chosen farming for its outdoor setting, she craved other views as well and wanted to go camping, kayaking, and hiking to witness other landscapes. While initially she had planned to work the farm during the growing season so that she could travel a bit in the winter, she ended up cleaning houses and doing other wage labor in the winter to stay afloat financially.

Julia's identity as a farmer also played a significant role when deciding to stop farming. She realized that she wanted to disconnect her personal identity from her identity as a farmer, an identity she had taken a long time to cultivate and embrace. Since she had not grown up on a farm, she began Lacewing Acres with a strong sense of imposter syndrome—feelings of inadequacy and self-doubt—which lasted the first few years. Then, when she eventually felt comfortable calling herself a farmer, she pondered her decision to stop farming, prompting her to wonder what was left of her

identity if she no longer farmed. Letting go of the identity she had worked so hard to embody took time and deep personal reflection.

When Julia began to feel comfortable talking to farmer friends about how she was considering closing her farm, she received reassurance from a fellow beginning farmer that their friendship went beyond their shared occupation. Knowing that ending the farm would not end their relationship as friends helped Julia, assuaging her concern that quitting farming would cause her to become socially isolated. Because farming is so encompassing, and Julia's social community was centered around farming, she was concerned that the community she had invested in and played a major role in building would vanish as her identity shifted from that of a farmer. Because it was scary to risk severing her ties to her community, such concerns delayed her decision to quit for a long time.

Julia started working at her town's public library in 2018, a job she still holds, and this job also contributed to her decision-making because it eased her transition into new professional and community roles. Because her job is customer-service oriented and she works with other library staff members, she began to meet new people. Julia found getting her paycheck to be "magical," and even though her new medical benefits plan is expensive, the emotional relief of not needing to rely on Medicaid remains considerable. Additionally, Julia pursued career counseling, which reinforced her confidence that there were other professions that would allow her to draw upon her multiple strengths in other contexts.

With these many factors in mind, Julia decided to announce her decision with a letter she emailed:

Dear past and present CSA members,

At the end of this year it will have been seven full seasons running my own small farm, and two seasons apprenticing before that. That's over 5000 CSA boxes delivered to the Ames community! Some of you have been with me since the beginning! It has been an incredible, empowering, and humbling experience. Thank you so much for your support!

After almost a decade of vegetable farming, I've had a growing desire to explore some other interests, diversify my skill set, and take better care of myself. I've been planning to let you know for a couple of months now that I have decided that this will be my last season running Lacewing Acres. I'm looking at going back for graduate studies, but we'll have to see how things unfold.

You are welcome to contact me with questions, though my response may be a bit delayed given the time of year.

The folks at Alluvial [the brewery owned by Julia's landlord/friend] and I were all eager to find someone to continue farming on the ground I'm currently renting, and are in conversation with another local grower who is considering starting their own operation next year. I will share any possible 2020 CSA information as soon as plans firm up. One reason I wanted to tell you early in the season is so that you'll have the opportunity to keep an eye out for other CSAs in the area, and maybe even talk to some of the farmers at farmers' markets to get to know them and learn more about their farms and growing philosophies. Some resources for finding a CSA in 2020 include Iowa State's CSA directory, PFI's [Practical Farmers of Iowa] local foods directory, and Local Harvest.

Wheatsfield [a local food co-op grocery store] also hosts an annual CSA Fair in January or February, so stay tuned for that. I hope you'll find another CSA home in 2020 and in the years to come. Your support of local food and local growers is needed and appreciated.

Sincerely,

Julia

Julia's announcement begins with an enthusiastic tone, describing both her accomplishment in the amount of food she has been able to grow and her gratitude for the support that her customers have provided. Then in the second paragraph, she transitions to the important message of the letter,

her farm closure. She describes how the end of her farm means the beginning of other opportunities. She also discloses that she has taken time to make this decision, implying that she is not open to readers trying to change her mind. She ends by striving to secure her readers' commitment to the CSA model, hoping that the end of their relationship with her farm will not mean the end of their investment in a local farmer.

Responses to her closure letter came to her email inbox as well as through in-person interactions when a recipient saw her around town before responding to her email. All responses were encouraging and enthusiastic. They reflected the community that Julia had created around Lacewing Acres, as several email respondents offered invitations to get together at the end of the growing season. Two individuals separately asserted in-person to Julia that making a living as a farmer was too challenging. Since Julia does not mention the economic context of farming in her message, these interactions that mentioned "making a living" reflect others' external reasoning for closure, not Julia's own reasons she describes. During in-person conversations, Julia was more likely to be asked for more information regarding the "why" of her decision, questions that sometimes happened unexpectedly. These people seemed to want to acknowledge Julia's announcement, at times apologizing for not having responded to the email. Julia's email announcement also prompted recipients who had moved away from her community to reminisce about her CSA and its abundant size and great variety, and praise her farming skill and express support for her decision. One reader asked for her advice on making farming more sustainable, acknowledging that Julia probably did not have time to answer such a broad question but positioning her as an expert who could provide such answers. Several recipients also brought up the physical intensity of farming and the toll that such physical labor takes.

Results and Discussion

People want to understand the complexities behind why farmers quit farming. We can conclude from recipients' reactions to Julia's closure letter that nonfarmer audiences can understand that a range

of reasons contributes to a farmer's decision to stop farming. Further, these recipients showed eagerness to stay in touch with Julia even though she was no longer growing food for them, illustrating that the farmer identity that Julia so carefully built and presented to this group of mentors, fellow farmers, and CSA members created relationships that existed outside of farming and food sales.

Julia's closure story, with all these contributing factors and considerations, discloses the complexity of her decision-making process, which took into consideration both the structural conditions of a small-scale farmer as well as her own personal circumstances. She had to consider financial and physical challenges, the ways in which being a farmer eclipsed all other elements of her identity, the long-term effects of being unable to balance farming with desired hobbies, the ongoing tension between feeling very accomplished as a farmer and feeling like she could not handle farming, her desire to pursue new challenges, and her realization that her skill set and interests could also be suited to other careers. While farmers might feel pressure to tell stories of their farms that are simple and easy to understand, Julia's decision to close Lacewing Acres is complicated and cannot be reduced to one or two reasons, such as the intense physical labor required of vegetable farmers or the difficulty of "making a living" as a vegetable farmer in a corporate capitalist culture. To do so is a disservice to farmers and their audiences because such singular narratives oversimplify the complexities of farm decisions and their high stakes for farmers' lives and identities. The causes of farmers' closures are varied, messy, and evolving, but unless their stories are told in all their complexity, people will never grasp the bigger picture of why many farms end.

The reasons for telling these stories are varied. For example, telling such stories opens up consideration of whether small, direct-market farms are the answer to the challenges posed by weaknesses in the U.S. food system. Perhaps these farms are one answer to having a resilient local and regional food system, but their operators should not bear the weight of solving comprehensive food-systems problems. As a farmer friend of Julia's once told her, the path to being "successful" with a small

vegetable farm is narrow, as there are limits and boundaries to these farms' success.

Another reason why these stories matter involves a broader social issue about farming as a public service. An increasing interest in this public service aspect—and its growing importance over economic value and profitability—can be found in the work of scholars such as Michael Symons (2020), who claims that economies of food must be reconceptualized; to do so means "reimagining people as wanting not rational gain but table-pleasure, not rewards and expenditures but complex communities, not disposable resources but a precious world" (p. 46). In this line of argument, small-scale farmers have an essential role to play. Like other public service workers who perform skills and expertise that are fundamental to our society and thus are thought to not need to generate wealth (e.g., teachers, social workers, healthcare workers in a nonprofit context), farmers do work that needs to be done and, therefore, should be supported as a social resource. A move in that direction could alarm those farmers who resist regulation and training requirements, since those requirements can mean the loss of some kinds of "freedom" that they see as core to their farming identity and occupation. A move to new models that subvert capitalist drives to profit comes into focus when listening to farm-closure stories because they expose how small farms cannot solve all food-systems problems. Telling closure stories can contribute to having more honest conversations about the human costs and true sustainability of this sort of local and regional food system based on small producers that the local food movement advocates.

Another reason for listening to closure stories might be to normalize closure. Audiences can consider whether it is acceptable for farming to be a job that a person jumps into and does for a decade and then moves on to something else, rather than being a lifetime career. Such a revised understanding of farming as perhaps a temporary job prompts considerations of how our country needs more structures in place to accommodate this model, such as community farms that hire farmers as employees for an operation in which the land, equipment, and support network are all provided

upon hire. Such a model, however, could also lead to less independence for farmers, which many would resist or find unattractive. Overall, then, the reason for better understanding the complex stories of farm closures is because they reflect how U.S. policy and agricultural infrastructure make small producers vulnerable in ways that might be revised infrastructurally so that individual farmers are not held accountable for factors they cannot change.


Conclusion

In 2014, a few days after Bren Smith's op-ed advocated for systemic change that would make farming more accessible, the *New York Times* published four letters to the editor in response to Smith's article (Letters to the editor, 2014). These writers disagree with Smith and reject the notion that farmers face infrastructural barriers that necessitate destigmatizing farmers' quitting. One writer claimed to be "heartbroken" about Smith's essay, and others asserted that off-farm income should be normalized so that farming is not understood as a primary source of income. These writers' responses attempted to reestablish positive outlooks for agriculture, illustrating how invested in the promise of farming many continue to be as they reject Smith's experiences and proposals for change. While it might not be surprising that resistance is prompted in response to Smith's truth-telling and assertions that farming is systemically broken, these reactions call for the need to tell more narratives like Julia's and to create opportunities for a richer, more diverse range of stories reflecting the circumstances and challenges of farming. We invite more revealing stories to better enable understanding of the complexity of farm closures.

This case study offers an invitational counterpoint to the statistics-rich accounts of farm closure common in reporting agriculture trends in the United States. Our goal is to contribute to an awareness of these stories' grace, subtlety, humanity, and sensitivity and create opportunities for more complex farm stories to be told. We ask farm publications to consider publishing more sensitively presented closure stories, perhaps including one closure story per issue that features multiple beginning farmer stories or publishing several blog

posts per year that invite closure narratives.

Similarly, beginning farmer organizations can actively maintain contact with farmers who have stopped farming to invite them to tell their stories in their own ways or to serve on the organizations' boards or lead workshops. During one of our conversations, Julia mentioned that none of the farm organizations to which she had belonged as a member has contacted her about her decision to stop farming, a potentially missed opportunity for them. Willing former farmers like Julia could be included in a database of farm mentors for other farmers, and such organizations that support beginning farmers could develop other pathways more actively for new and current farmers to connect to former farmers to benefit from their knowledge and support.

Of course, some former farmers would not want to participate in such relationships or publish their closure stories, but creating pathways for those who do could be built into the normative activities of organizations that support farmer networks. Such networking communities that bring together current and former farmers would likely develop more creative approaches for telling complex closure stories. We hope for a future that invites the telling of farm-closure stories robustly in the complicated and nuanced ways they deserve to be told. A more complete perspective on the broad landscape of agriculture in the United States that encompasses a complex spectrum of closure stories can illustrate how former farmers came to their decisions, as well as the unique factors that impacted their farming, and, in turn, can counter oversimplified narratives about why farms end. Overall, inviting and amplifying closure stories contributes to creating a more accurate picture of farmer experiences and normalizes a process that is now too often stigmatized. 

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