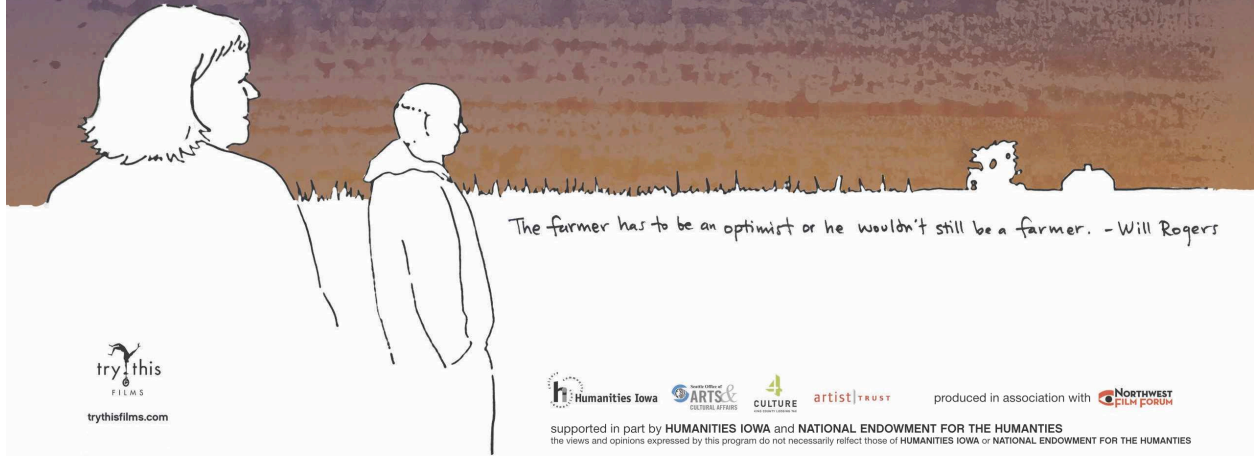


"Like all things truly American...
both celebration and elegy."
- Willamette Week

FIELD WORK A FAMILY FARM

a documentary film by JOHN HELDE
music by TRUCKSTOP SOUVENIR



The farmer has to be an optimist or he wouldn't still be a farmer. - Will Rogers

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a Try This Films production
directed and produced by John Helde
music by Truckstop Souvenir

running times: 83 minutes (feature)
58 minutes

www.trythisfilms.com

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Capsule Synopses

49 words

Fighting a roller coaster economy, Iowa farmers the Swansons struggle to achieve their dream of farming together as one extended family. Along the way, we meet a cast of determined and individualistic characters – from hog farmers to local vegetable growers – all bent on making a living from the land.

91 words

Iowa farmers Judy and Charlie Swanson just want to stay family-size in an era of mega-farms. FIELD WORK: A FAMILY FARM follows the Swansons through an economic roller coaster as they struggle to achieve their dream of farming together as one extended family. Along the way, we meet a cast of determined and individualistic characters – from hog farmers to local vegetable growers – all bent on making a living from the land. Through the lens of one family, FIELD WORK explores where the American family farm is headed in the twenty-first century.

Synopsis

284 words

All Judy and Charlie Swanson want is to farm in Boone County, Iowa with their family. Will Rogers famously said, “The farmer has to be an optimist or he wouldn’t still be a farmer;” but today, hard work and optimism aren’t enough to keep the family farm alive. America is losing a way of life. The dominance of mega-farms, global economic instability, and the flight of sons and daughters to “off farm” jobs all work against families like the Swansons.

In FIELD WORK: A FAMILY FARM, filmmaker John Helde follows the Swansons over four growing seasons, documenting the personal and financial challenges Charlie and Judy face as their three children leave home to start their own families. This next generation of Swansons – Jeremy, Courtney and Kiley – all speak openly about their hopes, fears and dreams. Jeremy, the oldest, purchases his first 80 acres and plants a stake in the ground that few of his generation will ever know. Courtney, who hated farming from childhood, leaves to pursue a degree in counseling. Kiley takes a chance on an experimental high tunnel, opening up a potential new revenue stream for the family. Along the way, we meet a cast of determined and individualistic characters – from hog farmers to local vegetable growers – all bent on making a living from the land.

A quiet yet powerful film, FIELD WORK: A FAMILY FARM weaves sweeping vistas and a haunting Americana Roots soundtrack by Truckstop Souvenir to reveal a part of this country’s lifeblood that is often taken for granted. Through the lens of one family, this poignant and personal documentary explores where the American family farm is headed in the twenty-first century.

Director's Statement

When my father died several years ago, I found myself taking over the business management of 120 acres of Iowa farmland. This piece of property had been in our family for four generations. My great-grandfather C.M. Forbes purchased the Boone County parcel in 1909, but my grandmother left Iowa long before I was born. We had no relatives living there as I grew up, so I felt no particular tie to the farm. One family of tenant farmers continued working the land, though, and a respectful owner-tenant relationship quietly continued between our families through the generations. Now, it was my turn to keep up the bank account, pay the bills, and negotiate the lease. Urban-raised, I knew nothing about farming, but I've always been drawn to rural places. The new situation presented an opportunity to learn.

I traveled to Iowa to meet the current generation of tenant farmers. What I found is a rarity in the Midwest today. Judy and Charlie Swanson farm around 500 rented acres and remain entirely family-operated, hiring no outside help. What would have been a mega-farm in 1909 is now among the smallest, in a time when farms have grown to 5000 acres, 10,000 acres, and beyond, in the quest for higher and higher yields. Their dream, the Swansons said, is to bring their two sons into the operation so that they all can continue to farm as one extended family.

I became fascinated with the Swansons' dream, and their commitment to a way of life. I wondered what their steadfastly small model tells us about the American farm today. Can a family farm be successful in the era of mega-agriculture? How do they make it work, at one-tenth or less the size of other farms? Can we go "back" to the way it was, to smaller farms and a more healthy crop variety? Is there a future for young people who want to farm in their parents' footsteps?

Making FIELD WORK: A FAMILY FARM, I followed the Swansons through several crop seasons, beginning with the economic roller coaster of 2008. The Swansons, and a number of their neighbors, welcomed me and my camera into their houses, fields, tractors, and combines. Although several excellent films have been made about the food system in recent years, I had not seen one that took the audience deep into the farmer's life. I've tried to draw a cross section of an American farming community through one family's eyes. My hope is that farmers will identify with the struggles and questions played out in the film; and that non-farmers, those urban-dwellers like me, may better understand the challenges, motivations and dilemmas of those who practice this age-old occupation in the twenty-first century.

-- John Helde

Cast

Charlie & Judy Swanson, farmers

The Swansons are lifelong lowans devoted to family and farming. They work a mere 500 rented acres, while over the last decade the farms that surround them have grown to 5000 or 10,000 acres and beyond. Their dream is to find a way to bring their sons Jeremy and Kiley back into the operation and farm as one extended family.

Jeremy Swanson, eldest son, farmer

Jeremy spent a couple years working for a bank, but that was not the future for this quietly determined farmer-to-be. He left to work as a hired man on a 2400 acre farm handling hogs and running equipment. Now, he's purchased his first eighty acres – a rare move for such a young farmer.

Courtney Swanson, daughter

Unlike her brothers, Courtney hated farming when she was growing up. She traveled abroad to Africa and South America in high school. Now, she works with kids and non-profits, and is pursuing a master's degree in counseling.

Kiley Swanson, youngest son

Like his brother, Kiley only wants one thing in life – to farm. Although his studies are high-tech, the technology he loves best is the tractor. As he pursues a degree in Ag Systems Engineering at Iowa State, he slips back to work the fields any weekend he can. In 2011, he sets up the family's first "high tunnel" to take advantage of the surge in demand for locally-grown vegetables.

Craig Peterson, farmer

Craig took over his family's farm when no other career presented itself. He farms 750 acres single-handedly, purchasing every possible gadget for his machinery and wondering what will become of his operation when he has to retire. He'd love it if his son could farm with him, but he doesn't want him to abandon a banking job for the uncertainty of farming.

Julie & Scott Wilber, locally-grown vegetable farmers

Scott always wanted to farm but didn't have a family route into the business. He loved growing vegetables on his own time, and he and Julie started selling vegetables at their roadside stand. In 2009, Scott took the plunge and left his day job so he and Julie could pursue farming full time on a mere twelve acres. It was a tough year when all their sweet corn was rained out, but they made it through. Now their Community Supported Agriculture operation, the first in Boone County, is flourishing.

Dave Mickelson, farmer and seed dealer

Jeremy's boss, and a successful family farmer, Dave oversees twenty-four hundred acres and a small livestock operation. He is also sells seed to other farmers, and this part of his business has grown so much he's had to hire guys like Jeremy to handle the farm operation.

Press Clippings

WILLAMETTE WEEK
PORTLAND, OR
NOV. 14, 2012

NORTHWEST FILMMAKERS' FESTIVAL: FIELD WORK: A FAMILY FARM

B+

Field Work: A Family Farm, like all things truly American, is both celebration and elegy. John Helde's documentary about the Swanson family farm in Iowa is quietly dedicated to a small-farm culture that is slowly disappearing from the national landscape as the young move to the cities and the old get older. Around Portland, we're familiar with the names of resurgent farm-to-table operations like Viridian Farms. This film documents a much older culture of corn growers: women who swore they would never marry a farmer but somehow did it anyway, and third-generation sons in agricultural college who want to keep alive what their family has always meant to them. "Pickles! Beets! Green Beans!" says one of the Midwestern farmers featured in the picture. "Why it makes sense to bring up food from California I don't know." But such moments of giddy farm patriotism are few; behind the rootsy Americana music of Truckstop Souvenir is a world of minimal talkers barely hanging on to what they've got. "We don't have the younger generation coming up to keep the small family farms small," says one of the farmers. "It's going to keep on getting larger." But in moving to large industrial farms, it's obvious he believes we'll become smaller as a nation.

- Matthew Korfhage

Quotes

The big guys keep upping cash rents, and landlords see that and want more, and the smaller guys can't afford to pay it. So the big guys get bigger and the small guys get smaller, and if you grow up on the small farm, it's hard to keep going.

The thought of spending hundreds of thousands of dollars on a piece of ground in our first year of marriage – and going into debt that much – pretty ominous deal...

Jeremy Swanson; farmer, newlywed, oldest son

I'd rather be in the tractor than anywhere else. You kinda escape.

In my Mom's generation, all the farm wives helped outside. Now, eighty percent of them work off-farm and they have absolutely nothing to do with it.

I think in high school I knew that's what I wanted to do, but at that time, [a girl] just didn't do that [farm].

Judy Swanson; farmer, wife and mother

I just can't see one person staying at one job through the whole season. I think, "how boring!"

It's a family farm, yet it's still a business. But I don't want our business to become something our family can't handle on our own.

Charlie Swanson; farmer, husband and father

I took a lot of naps in the back of the tractor, I got hauled to a lot of suppers in the field. As I got older I got to throw a lot of seed corn sacks into the back of the planter, and I kind of hated every minute. My brothers loved it. I never ever wanted to be a farmer, and I think probably there were times I thought these people are crazy, who would ever want to be a farmer? And that's all my brothers ever wanted to do.

Courtney Swanson; counselor, graduate student, daughter

Sixty years is definitely a possibility. Keep farming it, mom and dad retire, I think we could certainly make it to the hundred-year mark, which I think would be really cool.

Kiley Swanson; agriculture student, youngest son

I don't want to be at a point where if Honduras has a revolution we can't get any cantaloupe, because that's the only place we're buying cantaloupe from.

Julie Wilber; wife, community supported vegetable farmer

That's what I wanted to be originally was a farmer. But I wasn't bred into it so to speak. Eventually I came to think, you know, maybe I can be a farmer – and it's not the big corn and beans, it's carrots and sweet corn and green beans.

Scott Wilber; husband, community supported vegetable farmer

It's like gambling. It's like playing a slot machine.

I got one son, he wouldn't mind farming. But there's a lot of people out there who are ready to pay whatever to get this land. So I'd hate to have a son leave a banking job that you know what the income is in that, and start farming, and we don't know if he'll make any money the first few years.

Craig Peterson; family farmer

We've got an older population of farmers out here, and when they retire it's going to be fewer younger ones that want to take over. We don't have a lot of the younger generation coming up to keep a lot of the small family farms small.

Dave Mickelson; family farmer

Filmmakers

JOHN HELDE is a director, screenwriter and producer. He got his start with the New York documentary-makers Maysles Films (*Gimme Shelter*, *Grey Gardens*), and as an editor on numerous feature films including *Sleepless in Seattle*, *Little Buddha* and *Smoke Signals*. As a film editor, he worked with such notable directors and producers as Alan Rudolph, Robert Altman, Steve James, Julia Sweeney and Chris Eyre. John has directed numerous dramatic short films; his most recent, HELLO, starring Eric Stoltz and Susanna Thompson, is now on Hulu.com and repped by Cinetic, the leading independent film sales company. HELLO won the IFP Spotlight Award production grant and the CSA Artios® Award for Best Short Film Casting. John's films have been awarded grants from Independent Filmmakers Project (IFP), Humanities Washington, Humanities Iowa, 4 Culture, Artist Trust, and the Seattle Office of Arts and Cultural Affairs, and have played festivals around the world. MADE IN CHINA, John's debut feature documentary, received critical acclaim including a 3.5- out of 4-star review from the *Seattle Times*, and John was short-listed for *The Stranger's* Genius Awards. MADE IN CHINA is currently available on Netflix, The Documentary Channel, Hulu.com and SnagFilms.com. FIELD WORK: A FAMILY FARM, his latest documentary, will be released in 2012. John is at work on a new feature comedy/drama he wrote and will direct entitled OPEN DOORS.

ROSS LAING, editor, is an award-winning film and television editor and art photographer. His work has been shown in New York, Ethiopia, Toronto and Hong Kong. He currently lives in Seattle, Washington.

DENNIS JAMES and **LAURYN SHAPTER, composers**, the songwriting duo of **Truckstop Souvenir**, have been performing their unique brand of original American music around the Midwest since making southeast Iowa their home in 2006. Drawing inspiration from the rural American landscape and the open road, as well as from the musicians who traveled the highways and back roads before them, they create a sound that is at once familiar to old time country and modern Americana. A slice of the American landscape that often yields the best of keepsakes, Truckstop Souvenir is pure and honest music, music with a rare intimacy that cuts right to the heart of what it means to be human.

DR. PAUL LASLEY, advisor, is a humanities scholar, chair and professor of the Sociology and Anthropology Departments of Iowa State University. Lasley has been an ISU Extension sociologist since 1981. His research focuses on the organization of U.S. agriculture, trends in rural culture and what these trends suggest about the future of rural communities, families and social organizations.

Credits

Director/Producer/Camera
John Helde

Editors
Ross Laing
John Helde

Music by
Truckstop Souvenir:
Lauryn Shapter
Dennis James

Featuring
Judy Swanson
Charlie Swanson
Kiley Swanson
Gordy Swanson
Lowell Swanson
Craig Peterson
Rich Wrage
Alison Swanson
Jeremy Swanson
Dave Mickelson
Paul Lasley
Julie Wilber
Scott Wilber
Courtney Swanson Walter
Jason Walter
Karl Haglund

Audio mix
Dave Howe
Bad Animals

Color grading and HD finishing
Sam Atkinson
Lightpress

Title Design
Tania Kupczak

Camera equipment
Acme Production Services

FIELD WORK: A FAMILY FARM a documentary film by John Helde

Audio equipment
Rocket Sound Road Productions

Print Design
John Chamberlin
Rhombus

Legal Services
Lance Rosen
Rosen Lewis PLLC

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4 Culture

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Adam Singer
Cheryl Walsh

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