Farm in the City

Margaret Christie
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My backyard slopes down past a couple of old farm buildings and through a scrubby field to the Madison Beltline. Since getting a puppy in July, I've spent more time in the field. Recently, we walk a path our landlord made by driving his truck around the edge of the field. He hopes to build a running track, but for now, he's flattened enough of the head-high weeds to make passage easier. The trail leads only in a circle, but following it offers different vantage points on the buildings and the land which give some indication the changing links between this property and the surrounding city.

View 1: Old Farm

About half way around the circle, the view back shows only the house and its outbuildings. They step up the hill: hog house, corn crib, chicken coop, well house, and the house itself. A concrete-walled silo stands next to the remains of a dairy barn, now fallen into a pile. There are signs that these buildings no longer house a farm: the collapsed barn, the lack of animals, and the field itself, full of thistles and burrs. But from this vantage point, the cluster of buildings is reminiscent of the diversified farm that sold meat, milk and eggs to the nearby capital city in the years following the turn of the century.

This view of my house is my favorite. I picture the farm family, raising a wide variety of animals and crops, feeding themselves and the nearby city. On these recent days of changing weather, the buildings are occasionally lit up by sun against a backdrop of dark clouds; the dramatic lighting contributes to my romantic vision of a windswept

farm. A closer look at the buildings and the land around them reveals a more accurate picture of the farm that once stood here, which includes some of the characteristics I imagine, but not others.

The oldest part of the house, my kitchen and living room, is about a hundred years old. In the basement, the stone foundation houses a root cellar, with shelves for canned goods and room on the floor for bushels of potatoes or carrots. On the east side of the house, almost a dozen fruit trees, several long grape arbors, and beds of rhubarb and asparagus testify to the use recent occupants made of the root cellar. Although one of the apple trees recently split in half, even the oldest of them are probably only 20 or 30 years old, but it seems likely that early inhabitants of this farm also grew fruits and vegetables for home consumption.

The newer part of the house was built after the advent of poured cement foundations, but before plywood replaced plank floors in the 50s. This rough dating puts it sometime between about 1920 and 1950, but I imagine that it was put up in the 40s, after war-time prices relieved farmers of the depression of the 20s and 30s. The year of construction of a silo that stood next to the corn crib, 1955, is marked on the cement pad it stood on. Perhaps it accommodated an expanding dairy herd, or a change in the farm's feeding practices.

I can't give even approximate dates for the construction of the other outbuildings, but I find in them evidence to support my picture of a small and diverse farm. I think the various barns were all in use at once, housing their array of occupants--hogs, corn,

chickens, dairy animals, as well as perhaps horses or oxen--because they retain the features necessary for each animal or crop. The walls of the corn crib are still open, allowing ventilation of the used lab equipment and old bicycles my landlord stores in there. Since he bought the place five years ago, he's cleaned the manure and feathers out of the chicken coop, but the roosts are still there. I can't see how the collapsed barn was set up, but the silo next to it suggests that it was used for dairy cows. There's still hay under the fallen roof, and old leather tack for driving or pulling animals.

A farm family changing their operation from one animal to another--chickens to hogs, or hogs to cows--would be likely to convert some of their old buildings to new use. Some of those changes are evident here; at the end of the corn crib, for example, there's an addition with large doors, probably built for new farm equipment. But since so many of the buildings retain strong evidence of their original purpose, I think they were probably all in use at once in a diversified farm operation.

The outbuildings also provide clues about the farm's size. All are bigger than needed solely for home production, but none would house a large number of animals, nor is there room for the equipment necessary to farm large acreages. At moments of farm consolidation and growth--perhaps, for example, when milking machines were adopted on most Wisconsin dairies--this farm did not grow much larger in response to the new technology. Today, the property includes 5 acres. Next door are another 25 that might once have belonged to this farm, but the highway and the expanding city have changed the neighborhood so much that it is otherwise hard to follow old property lines.

View Two: Travel to the Cities

The neighborhood story is that my house is the last in Madison with its own well and septic system. The outhouse still stands in a corner of the yard. When the house was built, all of its neighbors shared this lack of physical connections to the city--not only water and sewer, but gas, electric, and probably telephone lines were absent. Nonetheless, these farms were, if not yet legally within the city limits, already on its outskirts, only five miles from the capitol--although then, as now, skirting Lake Monona added a mile or two to the trip downtown.

When I drive into Madison, I take the Beltline, built to give quick access from south, east and west to the city's downtown. As I leave my back door, I can see the highway and its billboards. Once I walk down the hill into the field, tall weeds block my view of the traffic, but I can hear it everywhere. The proliferation of highways makes tracing the route that farmers from my neighborhood took into town with their produce more difficult. Roads end abruptly at the Beltline or Highway 51, just a mile west, only to reappear in what now seems to be an entirely unrelated neighborhood. This house stands about 30 feet from Femrite Drive, which was probably plenty far enough from a muddy wagon road. Not long after the house was built, however, automobiles, trucks, and tractors began to replace horses and wagons. Broadway, which now comes to an ignominious end against the Beltline's fence, used to travel the highway's course to Cambridge, providing an important route into the city from the southeast. The noise of traffic may not be new to this farm.

Many of the agricultural goods taken from here into Madison probably did not end their travels there. By the time this farm was built, most farms did not market their products directly to a retailer, even if they were as close to a city as this one. Some products--eggs, perhaps--may have been sold directly to consumers or grocery stores, but many were purchased by a distributor of some kind, who sold the combined products of many farms. The butter, cheese, or live hogs or calves from this farm probably travelled from Madison by railroad to Chicago and beyond. Standing in the street in front of my house, looking east, I can see Interstate 90 cross Femrite Drive. This neighborhood still displays its connections to Chicago, but here the automobile is king.

View 3: New Agriculture

Only by positioning myself in the right place in the loop around my field can I look back and see only my house and its outbuildings. From most places on my walk, other buildings intrude into my farm picture. After dark, the view is dominated by Liquid Carbonic's dry ice plant, whose lighted tower swirls in steam or smoke in the night sky. In the daytime, I can look through the weeds along the east side of the field at the metal buildings and noisy machinery of a construction firm next door.

Since I moved here 9 months ago I've watched the newest change in the neighborhood skyline. Across the street, beyond 5 acres of abandoned pick-your-own raspberries and a pond and marshy area which attract migrating geese and flocks of redwing blackbirds, there's a construction site on the top of a hill overlooking the

interstate. The sign I pass at the corner on my way home proclaims that the World Dairy Center is going up across the street.

Despite the proliferation of small houses and light industry in my neighborhood, agriculture remains an enormously important part of the Wisconsin economy. The World Dairy Center sign sits at the edge of a cornfield, and the west edge of my weedy field, 5 miles from the state capitol building, borders another 25 acres of corn. Only a mile or two further out Femrite Drive, farms replace the factories and warehouses altogether.

Wisconsin's agriculture department, the Department of Agriculture, Trade, and Consumer Protection, is building the World Dairy Center. The name of this new building, its site on a hill overlooking one of the major routes to Chicago, and the name of the department it will house, reveal something about the industry they are intended to promote. Wisconsin agricultural products are not grown to feed Wisconsin, but to feed the world. Just as the meat and milk leaving this farm in 1900 probably travelled to Chicago and beyond, Wisconsin agricultural products are today promoted and sold all over the world. The corn grown next door will be fed to cows down the street, but the cheese made from their milk might be sold almost anyplace.

Corn was grown on my back field until only five years ago. The neighboring farmer who used to rent the field stopped putting in corn when my landlord requested that pesticides not be sprayed here. He tried growing Sudan grass for forage, but he hasn't found time to cut it or to bring his cows here to graze, so the grass has been invaded by thistles, burrs, and even cattails in these last two wet summers. He's coming

over this week, though, to cut the field for a young farmer who will grow vegetables here next summer. The farm's newest farmer plans to compost the weeds cut off the field, mixed with lake weeds and leaves delivered by the city. He hopes to supply vegetables to 15 Madison-area families, who will pay in the spring for weekly produce deliveries throughout the season. The arrangement, known as community-supported agriculture, is intended to help consumers support local farmers by sharing the risks of crop failure and agreeing to buy their vegetables locally and in season.

There's not much evidence of this new farming venture as I walk my puppy on our loop around the field, only a few orange flags put to mark the edge of my garden so the last tomatoes and late broccoli don't also get mowed down. Probably the older farming ventures, the corn next door, the cows down the street, won't be here much longer. The arrival of the World Dairy Center can only contribute to neighborhood's rising property values, making it more difficult to farm here. Surveyors were in my front yard the other day, planning for an expansion of Femrite Drive for the increasing traffic of commuters coming out to the industries and businesses along the road. The acre of vegetables which may be here next summer won't change the view much, but the flow of families, coming once a week to pick up vegetables, maybe to help out with the harvesting or packing, will be a small shift in a long-term traffic pattern.