

Farming

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nately benefiting from the growing ag economy. "You are seeing more productivity with ag land," he said. "There are high prices for grain and livestock. You have a stable ag economy here, and our communities are building on it."

FARMLAND VALUES SOAR

Farmland sales activity must be included in any story about the economic impact of agriculture. As noted earlier, farmland values in southeast South Dakota have jumped by 93 percent since 2006.

The new Agricultural Land Market Trends report from South Dakota State University shows an average acre of local agricultural land is valued at \$2,900 in 2011, compared to \$1,583 in 2006. The report further states that non-irrigated cropland in this part of the state is worth an average of \$3,400 per acre, compared with \$1,817 in 2006.

Late last year and earlier this year, a number of Yankton County land sales brought between \$250,000 and \$2.1 million at auctions or in private sales.

People are still talking about a November 2010 farm sale in rural Gayville where two quarter sections sold for a total of \$2.1 million. One of the parcels brought \$7,400 per acre. The other parcel sold for \$6,800 per acre. Those are record-high land prices in Yankton County.

Marvin Girard, of Wakonda, was the auctioneer that day. A member of the South Dakota Auctioneers' Hall of Fame, Girard has conducted over 6,000 sales in the past 41 years. Even with all of his experience, he did not expect the Gayville land to go that high.

"Yeah, I was surprised," Girard said. "That's higher than I thought it would have been, but good land is very hard to come by, and that was top-notch land."

Girard anticipated the Gayville parcels would sell for about \$5,000 per acre, but conditions were in place that day which took the price much higher. There were a large number of bidders at the auction and many of them had deep pockets due to the increasing value of land they already owned.

"You have to have people who have that kind of money, and you have to have some competition," Girard said. "We had a number of bidders and three who were in it right to the end."

Aside from the right collection of bidders, Girard said other keys to high land prices are the low interest rates, good yields and strong crop prices of recent years. If land is going to keep going up, "interest rates will have to stay low," Girard said. "That's probably the biggest factor of anything."

Girard would not predict which direction prices will move in the years ahead. "It will also depend on whether we have good crops and good prices, or if we have a drought or a hail-out," he said. "Those things will all make a difference."

The good yields have been no accident, however. Girard said, "farmers are way better managers now." He also noted how sophisticated the technology used to plant corn has become. "The equipment they have now makes sure everything is spread out just perfectly and planted at just the right depth," he said.

Genetically-modified seed has played a big role in the big yields, as well. "They've got corn now that would almost grow in the middle of a rock," he said with a smile.

Looking at the past 13 years, southeast South Dakota land values have increased every single year. In 1999, an acre of average ag land was worth \$740. Today, it is worth \$2,900 per acre. Non-irrigated cropland in this part of the state shows the same growth rate. It was worth \$866 per acre in 1999 and is valued at \$3,402 per acre today.



P&D ARCHIVE PHOTO

The Excelsior flour mill, pictured here during the Flood of 1881, was one of the many connections to Yankton and regional agriculture. That connection continues today.

Girard said every piece of land he ever sold proved to be worth the buying price over time. "People may think it was too much at that time," he said, "but then, five years later, they'll say that was a great buy."

Will the bubble burst soon? Most don't think so. Eighty percent of the respondents in SDSU's research of market trends expect prices to keep increasing in the year ahead. None thought South Dakota farmland would drop in value over the next 12 months.

THE 1980S FARM CRISIS

In the early 1980s, tight money and high interest rates burst agriculture's speculative bubble. The federal government estimated some farmland values dropped by 60 percent. There was an alarming rise in delinquent loans, alcohol abuse, child abuse, divorce and suicides on family farms.

In Iowa, a farmer killed his banker, his neighbor, his wife and himself. In Minnesota, a farmer and his son killed two bank officials. In nearby Elk Point, a Farmers Home Administration administrator killed his wife, daughter, son and dog before committing suicide. He left a note saying the pressures of his job became too much for him to bear.

Better times were thankfully ahead, but for many local farm couples, holding onto their farm in the 1980s meant one or both spouses had to find work in Yankton to supplement their shrinking farm income.

POLITICS AND AGRICULTURE

For better or worse, government and politics have had a huge impact on the agriculture industry. Critics argue that tax laws and price support programs have always favored large factory farms (owned by corporations) over family farms (worked by the owner-operators).

By the late 1980s, the largest four percent of U.S. farm operations produced 50 percent of the food. That trend has continued over the past 25 years. A more recent report from the United States Department of Agriculture shows 91 percent of farms are classified as "small family farms," but that 91 percent produces only 27 percent of U.S. agricultural output. Meanwhile, about 80 percent of all federal farm payments go to the largest 10 percent of farms.

Large feedlots became a point of conflict in Yankton County in the late 1990s. The county was one of few in southeast South Dakota that had not yet been zoned. When plans were announced for a 20,000-head cattle feedlot north of Yankton, the debate began.

Proponents argued that partially or totally-enclosed high capacity livestock facilities were necessary to keep young people involved and invested in agriculture. Most cannot afford today's expensive farmland, they said. Opponents were often neighboring landowners concerned about the odor these feedlots can produce, as well as the environment's ability to handle the animal waste.

Taking turns in the local headlines were a hog confinement near Lesterville, a proposed hog confinement near Mission Hill and, especially, that large feedlot north of Yankton. Emotions flared. Special elections were held. Public hearings went on for hours. Lawsuits were filed. Court decisions were handed down. And finally, a Yankton County Zoning Ordinance was adopted in 2003 (and amended in 2008).

That ordinance was a product of compromise. It allows feeding operations ranging from 1,000 to 10,000 animal units in Yankton County, but requires they be located anywhere from a half mile to four miles away from municipalities and zoned residential areas, depending on the number of animals. It also requires that animal waste be transported no more than five miles away from the point of its origination. The document seems to have provided some direction and rules that have helped bring peace to this issue.

TWO-HORSE TEAMS AND SUPER-TRACTORS

After the Homestead Act of 1862, farming became the biggest industry for white settlers in Yankton County. Those original family farms broke the Yankton area's prairie soil with single-blade plows pulled by teams of work horses, oxen or mules. The valuable animals also powered planters and threshers, and pulled heavy wagons that hauled a corn crop picked by hand.

The vital importance of farm animals is illustrated in a tale from my own family's local history. My paternal grandparents — Bernhard and Mary Hunhoff — had been married 14 years when he died from cancer in 1927. My grandmother was left alone with nine young children and a stack of medical bills from her husband's illness.

A farm sale was ordered to pay off the debt collectors. Prior to the sale, my grandma took the family's prized possessions — two fine work horses called Tom and Jerry that her late husband raised from colts — to a neighboring farm. They were hidden there until after the sale. Those two horses were a priceless help as

her two oldest boys, aged 11 and 12, began to work the farm.

That Hunhoff "home place" where I was raised is now farmed by my brother Mark and his son, Kevin. Kevin and his wife, Jill, reside there with their two children — the sixth generation of Hunhoffs to live on that Central Township spread which has now been in our family for more than 130 years.

Mark and Kevin also operate the Mark's Machinery farm implement business in Yankton — an industry that has seen fast and endless change since the days of horse-drawn equipment. The early 1900s saw the arrival of steam-powered tractors that began literally putting farm animals out to pasture. By the late 1920s, gasoline-powered tractors were pushing the steam-powered "iron horses" aside. Tractors and farm equipment have been getting bigger, faster and more powerful ever since.

The John Deere 4020 was a popular tractor in the 1960s and '70s. It featured power front-wheel drive that gave it the traction to do about anything a farmer needed. A new 4020 sold for \$10,345 in 1972. Today, the average Yankton County farmer owns about \$125,000 worth of farm machinery and equipment, according to Census reports.

In the 1990s, it was common to see farmers driving 150-horsepower tractors with power steering, air-conditioned cabs, automatic shift and hydraulically-controlled implements.

Today, major implement companies are producing "super tractors." This spring, Case IH released the Steiger 600, a 670-HP machine with record-setting fuel efficiency, "built for the toughest conditions a farmer can encounter."

These ever-more enormous tractors are equipped with swivel seats, CD-players and high-tech computer monitoring systems. They pull 24-row planters and nutrient applicators that can cover up to 60 acres per hour.

In those early farming days on the South Dakota prairie, corn was harvested by hand. My dad remembered picking corn in below-zero weather because it often took several weeks in late fall to bring the crop in. That was one time of year when country pastors did not frown upon a farm family who worked on Sunday.

My dad said "a good man" could pick 80-90 bushels of corn by hand if he worked a 12-hour day. That might be a span of about four acres, "depending on the yields."

Today, John Deere Co. sells a combine with a 12-row corn head that can harvest up to 200 acres for a farmer who puts in a 12-hour day. Figuring 150-bushel per acre yields, that farmer can harvest 30,000 bushels of corn in one day. Imagine what our ancestors from the late 1800s would have thought of that.

THE HARD OLD DAYS

Many would agree a Yankton County farm is a great place to live, but farming here has rarely been an easy way to make a living.

Our tenacious forefathers on the Yankton County prairie endured brutal winter storms with no advance warning. The blinding white nightmare known as "the children's blizzard of 1888" dropped five feet of wind-driven snow in a 14-hour span. The vicious conditions froze many school children to death as they blindly tried to find their way home. Temperatures had dropped to 20-below with a wind chill much lower than that.

Other years, it seemed like the snow would never stop falling. Eleven feet accumulated in the winter of 1880-81 with steady snowfall and no thawing from mid-October through mid-April.

That long winter led to the great flood of 1881, which claimed at least 10 Yankton County lives. Constance Fagerhaug recalled in the Yankton County History Book that, "flood waters tore through the area as every creek became a raging river. The rivers became more like fast-moving lakes. The whole Missouri bottom

became one vast and roaring sea."

The Missouri was flooded 10 miles wide where it joined with the James River valley. Famed Sioux chief Strikes the Ree later wrote, "It is now some 80 winters that I have seen the snows fall and melt away along this Missouri River, but I never saw a winter of such snows and floods as these."

Blizzards and floods were not the only ferocious conditions survived by early Yankton County settlers. They also prevailed in the face of insects, drought, dust storms, hail and extremely-contagious livestock diseases such as anthrax.

The Yankton County History Book refers to Aug. 2, 1864, when "a terrible army of grasshoppers" swept through the area, stripping trees and mowing fields and gardens into stubble on the ground.

In that same book, Annie Bak of Irene wrote memories of the 1930s. "We had terrible dust storms, so dusty at times the day was dark as night." Others described those dust storms as "black blizzards."

ENDLESS ROWS OF BEANS

My own farm youth in Yankton County during the 1960s and 1970s saw some harsh winters and scorching, bone-dry summers. But they seem mild in reflection after reading about the terrible weather endured during the first 80 years of this county.

The chores from my farm upbringing do not compare to the back-breaking, morale-cracking labor our ancestors performed, but I do remember plenty of physical work. We walked beans, threw hay bales, milked cows by hand, and — nobody's favorite — pitched manure out of the hog barn.

I also remember watermelon never tasted as sweet and crisp as the slices you would devour after a July day in the alfalfa field. Ice water never went down as cold as those drinks you would gulp at the end of a bean field row. And swims in the lake were never more refreshing than after a day of pitching manure from the back door of our hog house into the manure spreader parked outside.

When walking the soybean fields, we could use corn knives to chop down stray corn stalks and wild sunflowers. Thistles and cockleburbs were a different story. Dad expected us to firmly grab those noxious weeds close to the ground and pull them out by their often impressive roots. It was hot, sweaty work. When we started a new field, the task ahead always seemed endless.

I am the youngest of eight brothers. Our milking "operation" was down to only a few cows by the time I was old enough to squeeze those teats, but I was kicked at or stepped on just enough times to know automatic milking machines must surely be a better alternative. The only fun thing about milking was occasionally squirting a stream of milk sideways into the mouths of our hopeful, waiting barn cats.

I remember hearing about farmers who had begun using Bobcat mini-loaders to clean their hog houses, but we never had one of those. Nor did we have tractor-powered bean-buggies that allowed riders to sit back and spray the noxious weeds in relative comfort.

I don't recall that dad ever put a cab on our biggest tractor — an International 656 — but he did agree to mount a radio on it so we could listen to the Minnesota Twins on WNAX while plowing or disking. What a treat that was!

Of course, my brothers and I knew we had it easy compared to dad's rugged childhood on that same rural Utica farm. His father died when he was 11. He was the second-oldest of nine children. By the time he was 13, he and his 14-year-old brother were steering a plow pulled by horses; and picking cornfields clean with their bare hands.

"You don't know what work is," he told us more than once with a knowing grin.

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