

# Beyond the Economic: Farmer Practices and Identities in Central Illinois, USA

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This study examines the reasons farmers in East-Central Illinois continue to use controversial agricultural practices in the context of extreme criticism. Such practices – conventional plow tillage, application of potent agricultural chemicals, farming up to river banks – are attacked from diverse sources as inattentive to environmental conservation. Our results suggest these practices are important undertakings in the realm of constituting farmer identities that too few have realized. These practices, as meaning-laced endeavors, are revealed as performative acts that reinforce sense of farmer sense of self. We conclude that this reality is important to understand if policy is to effectively engage these farmers and their agricultural practices.

*Keywords: Farming practices, cultural identity, best management practices, policy*

**I**n these modern times of unprecedented corporatization in the U.S., small and medium sized corn and soybean farmers in the rural Midwest continue to suffer.<sup>1</sup> This once dominant farmer (an estimated 40,000 people and 7,000 farms in 1950) has dramatically shrunk in the last two decades (National Agricultural Statistics Service, 1998). Population and number of farms has decreased more than two-hundred percent since 1980 (Anderson 1997). At the same time, their agricultural practices continue to be roundly criticized. From diverse sources (the media, environmental groups, municipal planners), farmers have been accused of reckless environmental despoilation (especially overuse of agricultural chemicals, unnecessarily polluting watershed systems, and degrading soil fertility) (c.f. Summers 1993; Neth 1995). The charge, straight-forward, is that they aggressively pursue profit and landscape conquest often inattentive to environmental excesses.

We are interested in the reasons these farmers continue to use controversial agricultural practices in this context. While farm size and patterns of land tenure have continued to change, Midwest agricultural practices have remained remarkably persistent (c.f. Anderson 1995; Illinois Nature Conservancy 1995). Many farmers show no sign of abandoning these practices, i.e., use of conventional plow tillage, application of potent agricultural chemicals, failure to adequately

buffer waterways from farms, and farming up to river banks. Farmer defiance has taken numerous forms, but the most visible is the widespread refusal to acknowledge problem practices or flawed visions of stewardship (Hannon 1999). Recent surveys of these farmers reveal a staunchly dogmatic group intent to continue what they have been doing (McIsaac and Edwards 1996; Graves 1997).

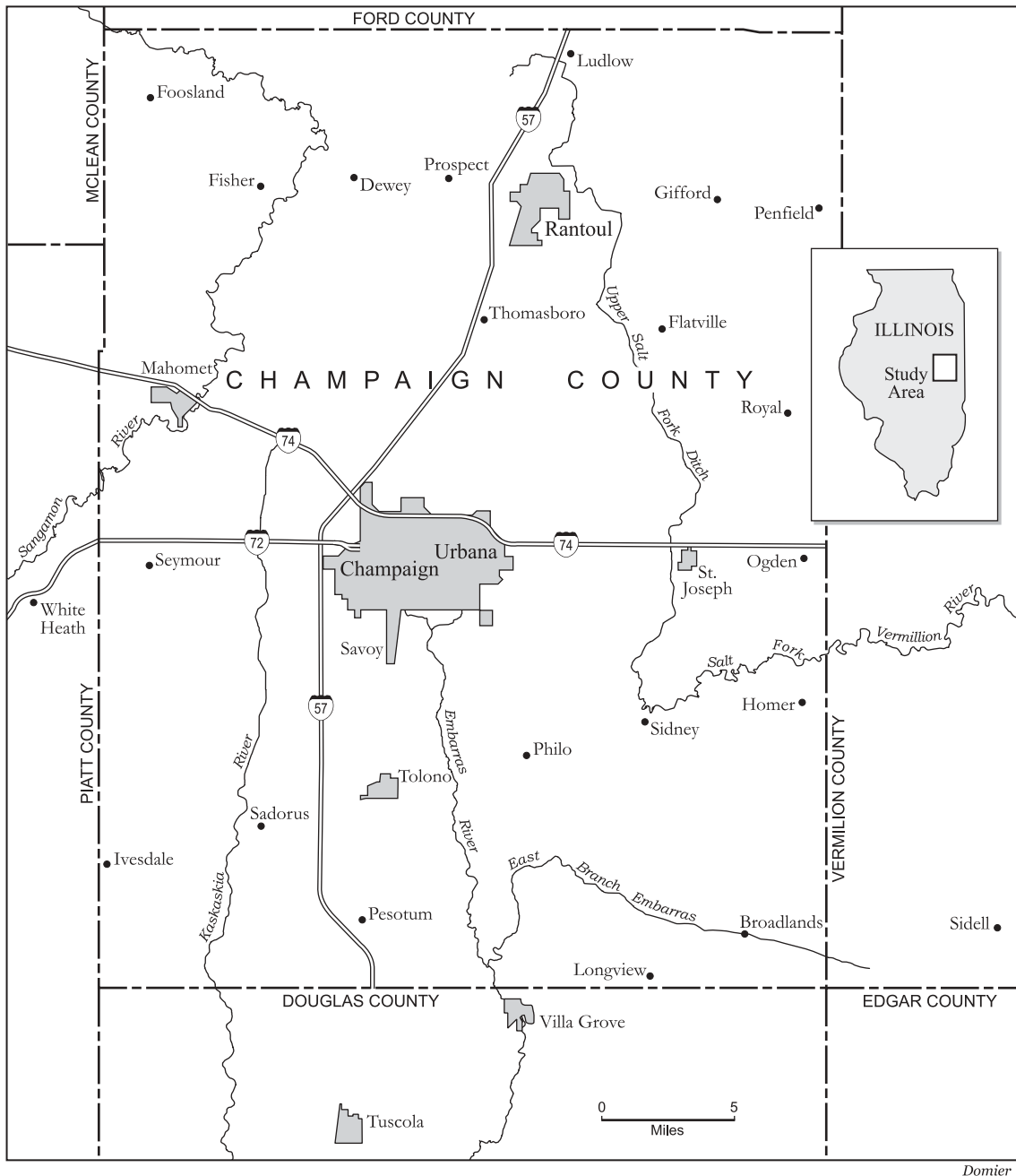
This study presents a different interpretation for the persistence of these farming practices. We build on a growing literature in rural studies that sees such farmer practices in the realm of cultural values and meanings (c.f. Ilbery and Holloway 1997; Gilg and Kelly 1997). This work -- emphasizing the power of "the reproductive" rather than "the productive" to understand such farmers -- highlights the role of these practices in maintaining social orders. These practices, for example, are interpreted as central to sustaining everyday gender relations (Peter et.al. 2000), power hierarchies (Salamon 1992), and political attitudes (Kloppenber 1988a, 1988b) in local life. These practices, as meaning-laced endeavors, "spill out" attitudes and values as performative acts that reinforce and reproduce existing social relations (see Giddens 1984) on the fluid and dynamic relations between such "spheres"). Here local life, farmer values, and agricultural practices constitute a seamless unity that make these presupposing and inseparable.

Our thesis extends this work to suggest profound links between the constitution of farmer identities and these practices. We thus propose that these persistent practices have potent repercussions for building and rebuilding farmer senses of self as well as the social orders that circumscribe them. Our thesis follows Allen Pred's (1984) dictum that people's routines are inseparable from reproducing and transforming identity. Such reproducing, to Pred, is ceaseless as people ritualize and mythologize local practices. Diverse social constructionists like Bell Hooks (1993) and Bruce Lincoln (1989) have reinforced this position, further noting that it is often the most disenfranchised and embattled (like shrinking family farm populations) who trenchantly politicize everyday practices in diverse "sites" (home, work, play). To Hooks and Lincoln, such groups frequently bypass mainstream politics (public forums, meetings) in favor of politicizing practices.

Our focus on Central Illinois farmers (small and medium sized) examines the degree to which (1) a shared identity exists among this population; (2) identities are grounded in sense of rebelliousness and distinctiveness from the mainstream; and (3) identities are connected to daily agricultural practices. Of relevance to our study, a wide ranging and rich literature now demonstrates the identity-constituting power of local institutional networks, popular culture, and common communication on people (c.f. Beauregard 1993; McDowell 1995; Hill 1997). Individuals ceaselessly construct themselves through these mediums as both advertent and inadvertent subjects. But this work downplays the constituting influence of everyday practices in the work environment -- of farmers, steel workers, high tech. workers, entrepreneurs, and others. These practices are too often seen to essentially reflect rather than make human identities that typically situates these as simple outcomes rather than constitutive ingredients of human striving.

Central Illinois farmers are an ideal population to investigate connections between ritualized practices and identity constitution of disenfranchised people. Small and medium sized corn and soybean farmers are rapidly disappearing. In 1950 they were an estimated 78 percent of the farm population but had fallen to less than 40 percent by 1990 (Wendte 1998). In 1998 this group constitutes less than 30 percent of the farm population (Wendte 1998). While these farmers have not literally "disappeared," exiting (some gladly) to different occupations or retirement, it is undeniable this shrinking population now feels under siege. A growing corporatist presence in the area (Frito Lay, ADM, Cargill) has increasingly bought out these farmers and either subcontracted land back to them or displaced them. At the same time, resisting no-till farming, applying considerable agricultural chemicals, and the like has made them targets in local newspapers (c.f. Champaign-Urbana News Gazette 1998; Avery 2000). Whether one believes that they have been unduly criticized, these farmers clearly feel threatened.

A caveat to all of this is that the issue of farmer identities is complex (Ilbery and Holloway 1997; Gilg and Kelly 1997). Farmers not unexpectedly have multiple and at times conflicting identities. Like everyone else, farmers are a complex amalgam of ethnic, class, racial, gender, and nationalist sentiments. Many farmers we examined, for example, defined themselves as males,



**Figure 1.** East Central Illinois - the study area

workers, Caucasians, and Americans. To Cahoon (1996), it is more true to say that people have selves rather than a self. People, Cahoon asserts, are never simple unities who embrace totally cohesive and complementary values. At the same time, there are many diverse people who call themselves farmers in this area:

women, children, migrant workers, and racial minorities. This recognized, we focus on a subset of farmers, men. We acknowledge the silence we impose on this category's diversity but select this subset because they are key agricultural decision-makers.

In the patriarchal order of rural Central Illinois, men often determine agricultural practices.

## Data, Methods and Setting

Two kinds of data-gathering procedures were used. First, we conducted archival work on study area communities (Figure 1) to understand local social structure and values and meanings. A content analysis of local newspapers, technical reports, and historical documents was undertaken to gain familiarity with local values, and beliefs. Newspaper editorials, reporting of local politics, and common news stories were especially important in this regard. Second, we conducted intensive open-ended interviews with 85 farmers in 4 watershed areas in Central Illinois between 1996 and 1998 (Table 1). This method was ideal for our purposes. Sensitive open-ended discussion allowed us to excavate rich social data. We were able to discuss a variety of issues and explore each in detail. Each interview ran for approximately one hour.

Our interviews elicited data on four issues: the nature of farm life, the content of farmer identities; farmer agricultural and environmental practices used; and farmer meanings and values in agricultural and environmental practices. At the core

of these questions were (1) how farmers construct their worlds and (2) how farmer agricultural and environmental practices are complex undertakings conceivably compelled by social and cultural foundations. Questions frequently invoked rich elaborations; interviewees sometimes had to be kept “on point.” We tried to allow farmers to dictate terminology and language. To minimize data bias and respondent discomfort, all respondents were guaranteed confidentiality and encouraged to express any feelings of discomfort. Shy or wary respondents often became relaxed and animated with realization that they could control discussion and their identities would not be revealed.

Following Lofland and Lofland (1984), discussions were tape recorded upon receiving permission. This allowed us to take sparse notes and attend to the interviewee and flow of conversation. The tapes provided us with primary data that was supplemented by field notes. Taping conversation can constrict conversation; we offered all respondents opportunities to proceed without recording. Of the 85 interviewees, 23 preferred to talk without recording conversation. Ninety-five percent of the discussions were also conducted in their own homes at a time arranged by them: We requested a time when they were able to openly converse. Our extracting data, following Browne (1976),

**Table 1: Open-ended Discussion Questions**

1. Tell us about what it's like to be a farmer in Central Illinois? The benefits? The problems?
2. Tell us about the past and present of farming and being a farmer in this community in as much detail and time as you like. Was it once and is it a worthwhile and viable endeavor? Was it and is it a kind of life that you would recommend to others?
3. Tell us about what you see as the future of farming in this community in as much detail and time as you like. Do you think it will be a worthwhile and viable endeavor?
4. Tell us about the content and nature of the community that you live in?
5. Are there any people, places, or forces that help foster this community? [IF SO] How do they help and contribute?
6. Are there people, places, or forces that seem to stand opposite to or actively oppose this community or group? [IF SO] How do they operate?
7. How large is your farm? What do you farm? What percent of farmland is owned by yourself? Do you no- or minimal-till, and if so how much? Who owns the farmland you do not own?
8. An agricultural practice that is common in the area is use of conventional plow till. Do you use this practice? How much do you use it? What are the benefits to you as a farmer and person in using this practice? Are there any problems or dilemmas in using this practice?
9. An agricultural practice that is common in the area is the use of agricultural chemicals on the fields. Do you do this? To what extent? What are the benefits to you as a farmer and person in using this practice? Are there any problems or dilemmas in using this practice?
10. Do you plan to stay with these two agricultural practices to the extent that you use them? Why would you plan to continue them or alternatively use alternative practices?
11. Some have said these practices are good but create problems for the environment. Do you agree?

**Table 2:** Characteristics of Farmers Interviewed  
N = 85

Average Farm Size	1,100 (445 ha)
Percent of Farmland Owned By Occupant	68
Percent of Farms Under Corn and Soybean Cultivation	94
Percent of Farm Interviewees Male	98
Percent of farms small to average scale (< 1800 acres)	100
Percent older farmers (55 years or greater)	52

Source: Interviews

emphasized collection rather than interpretation. Only after collecting the data did we sift through its content to arrive at interpretations that were continuously discussed and conceptualized. This allowed us to emphasize “seeing” first and more deeply conceptualize later.

The study area is a remarkably fertile agricultural zone marked by intensively cultivated corn and soybean fields and 4 medium sized rivers (Figure 1). Farms range in size from a few

acres to over 3,000 acres (1,200 hectares). They are typically between 800 and 1,600 acres (320 and 640 hectares) in size and straddle the 4 rivers that serve as drainage outlets (Table 2). Small and medium sized farms, defined in this study as a holding of 1,800 acres (720 hectares) or less in size, constitute about 70 percent of the total number of farms in the area. Approximately 68 percent of farmland is owned by present occupant, 32 percent leased to farmers by absentee landowners (Latz 1997). Nearly 30 percent of the farms hold contracts to sell to corporations, particularly Frito Lay and Archer Daniels Midland. Such contracts, usually seen by farmers as desirable, promise a market and at fixed, agreed-upon prices for their products.

In the last decade, all size of farms have been affected by the dual processes of increased technological use and growing farm consolidation. First, use of global positioning systems, remote sensing, new hybrid corn and soybean types, and more efficient machinery now characterize many farms. Combines equipped with sophisticated technologies are increasingly seen working through fields that are covered with hybrid corn and soybeans. Second, farm consolidation has proceeded unabated that has resulted in the loss in absolute number of farms even as farm size has increased (Dey, 1997; White, 1997). Like the national farming community, this landscape has become more efficient and corporate-controlled via contract farming. Small farmers, proving most vulnerable, have been most dramatically altered (mainly through buyout and absorption).

**Table 3:** Farmer Values

Percent Noting A Distinct Farmer Culture	98
Percent Noting Government too Regulatory	88
Percent Noting Farmers Misunderstood By Society	85
Percent Noting Society too Socially Liberal	81
Percent Noting Society too Dependent on Private Markets For the Public Good	1

Source: Interviews

## The Identity

Our starting-point was an investigation of farmer identities. Our findings corroborate that this eastern sector of the Corn Belt is among the most conservative in the United States (Jakle 1977; Latz 1997). They reinforce a now documented general point: that small- and medium-scale Central Illinois farmers (young and old) have common values and beliefs about themselves and the world (Table 3). S. Salamon (1985, 1992) reveals that these farmers have distinctive identities rooted in foundational economic and cultural beliefs. To Salamon, economic and political values have changed little over the decades. Early patterns of German, Irish, and Scotch settlement implanted a deep pioneer and individualist

value orientation that continues to this day. Because this identity has been ably documented, our review of it is brief.

As economic beings, farmers project themselves as the historic backbone of modern America. They supposedly help the nation stay a prominent superpower by feeding it and providing it with immense export products. America has purportedly grown to be great, and farmers have been at the center of this. But now, in a supposed era of big business and big government (whose starting point was ambiguous), they are under siege by a misunderstanding society (there was also vagueness about why this was the case). There was nothing grey or nuanced about this conception of government; it is a coarse monolith that looms ominously over them.

The script meets the requirements of positive self projection and easy transmission. In a context of making themselves good guys, the virtuous and the evil are simplistically delineated. The modern world, they contend, is now filled with endless consumers and consumption (much of it excessive) that is supported by their enabling activities. Area farmers “work with [their] hands .. to produce an essential societal resource ... give food and basic sustenance to people ... work the soil that allows society to survive” (farmers in Broadlands and Villa Grove). But in this crucial role, they are under-supported and objects of intense scrutiny. To a farmer in Pesotum, “despite our unparalleled support of this country, our continuous production of food, our political power is weak.” “Meddlesome politicians, “Washington,” and “institutions,” to him, “damage our economic pursuits.”

These ideas are not surprisingly rooted in a strong sense of local place and geography. Farmers repeatedly present themselves as tapping and applying a rich vein of local knowledge to drive agricultural practices. To a farmer in Sidell, “nobody knows this place like us .. it’s a subtle and complex landscape .. we learn everyday about farming in Illinois.” This rurality is a “place of difference where farming requires a lot of ingenuity.” Area-based scientists and technicians (University of Illinois, Purdue) “too often give advice but tie their ideas to labs and test plots.” Alternatively, to a farmer in Pesotum, “we [farmers] farm in the real world of poor drainage and clay soils.” Making it through the season, this farmer proclaims, “is not an academic exercise but a real-world battle to survive.”

In the cultural realm, farmers similarly stake out common values that mark them as distinctive and different. Here again is defiance, reductionism, and creative construction. Farmers offer themselves as producers and followers of a proud and grounded rural individualism that has supposedly been all-but-lost in society. Distinctions again offer positive self projection and easy transmission: They live by “traditional agrarian values .. in a state increasingly dominated by Chicago values ... take responsibility for their actions in a nation losing this [sense], live simply but with dignity in a society that has lost this ...” (farmers outside Ivesdale and Sidney). Lifestyles of farmers are supposedly unique and fitted to their distinctive economic task, tilling the soil. Lives pivot around “appreciation and love for the soil” that “nurtures, punishes, and is fair-weather friend” (farmer in Champaign).

This self-identity is reinforced by their presentation of a new ominous force: society. In general terms, this is a changing entity, one that once nurtured them but rapidly changed (see Bonanno 1987). Particularly to older, small-scale farmers, the outside world now “contains a righteous and aggressive liberalism” with daunting characteristics: “moral looseness,” “disrespect for rural tradition,” “cultural relativism,” “a non-stop speed in daily life” (farmers in Champaign and Homer). Its emissaries -- environmentalists, EPA officials, Corps regulators, regional planners -- persist in seeking to change rural areas. In a veneer of benevolence and paternalism, these people “hammer away at [rural] ways to pursue management and control” (farmer in Broadlands). Against this construct, farmers position themselves to resist through drawing on their greatest resources, common sense and grounded individualist values (e.g., “timeless actions,” “rural Illinois traditions”).

This notion of society is marked with prominent beings: villains, victims, ominous forces, and salvationists. This cast is projected as “the real world of people” that affects them daily. Notable villains are the “Army Corp. of Engineers,” “government,” “Washington,” “urban lifestyles,” “EPA,” and “self-proclaimed environmentalists” (farmers in Champaign and Villa Grove). These are the people, institutions, and values that purportedly stand opposed to them, offering destructive “rules and regulations,” “anti-farm propaganda,” and “destructive systems of living” (farmers in Pesotum and Ivesdale). These people and institutions are said to portray farmers as



**Table 4:** Farmer Responses to Tillage Practices  
N = 85

Farmers using deep plowing as major tillage type	51 (60.0%)
Farmers noting minimal and/or no-till farming counters farmer aesthetics	60 (70.6%)
Minimal- or no-till farmers that note this refined notion of environmentalism	22 (25.8%)
Minimal- or no-till farmers that note a distrust of its scientific content	18 (21.2%)

“environmental pillagers,” “soil degradationists,” “crude people,” and “unsophisticated political thinkers” (farmers in Broadlands and Philo). Here is the supposed antithesis of farmers that are threats to their way of life.

This identity-reinforcing script also offers salvationists. These are the institutions and people that struggle to preserve sense of farmer ways. Hard working farmers, the County Farm Bureau, Drainage District Commissioners, select local banks and creditors are on the front lines of the conflict. They strike out to thwart the likes of “meddlesome agricultural regulations,” “environmental mandates,” “government influence,” and “city values” (farmers in Pesotum and Lillian). The struggle is to protect farmer lives: their values, beliefs, norms, and traditions. “Some may not like our politics and ways,” one farmer in Sidney contends, “but we know who we are and who our allies are.” In this reductionist reality, people tend to be positioned as either allies or adversaries.

In this context, the central salvationist is the idealized, grounded farmer that purportedly continues courageously on in Central Illinois. “His” values and persistence are offered as the model for farmer civility that speak louder than words. This idealized Table transcends societal preoccupations with wealth, commercialism, and obsessive consumption as the reserved but knowing “grass-roots guy.” He knows “community norms,” “farmer ways,” “rural values,” “moral sentiments,” and the need to preserve these (farmers in Philo and Villa Grove). Preserving

farmer ideals preoccupies his civic concerns. He knows that “Illinois family farms are threatened and need to be protected” (farmer in Sadorus). “The sensible farmer around here,” a farmer in Broadlands notes, “knows what’s goin’ on; what threatens us and needs to be done.” This savvy pragmatist, in common thought, knows more than the frequently misguided hordes of regulators, environmentalists, and politicians that intervene in local rural affairs to improve conditions.

This constructing of the world and identity ultimately establishes farmer cohesiveness. It clarifies a coherent rural farmer identity that can be strongly felt and rallied around. Exclusions and oppositions sculpt a believable unity. This

constructing, anything but a simple embellishing or aesthetic exercise, is a politics that forges a sense of a monolithic center for farmers to revel in. This identity becomes a window onto the world that unifies “a people.” It provides lives with meaning and opens up patterns for logical thought and action in the everyday. As the next section details, understanding this identity is crucial to comprehending the reasons for these farmers selecting and re-selecting controversial agricultural practices.

## Agricultural Practices

Our findings reveal that farmer agricultural practices are highly ritualized, profoundly meaning-infused, and constitutive of identities in unexpected ways. Two dominant farmer practices best illustrate this: use of plow tillage and application of agricultural chemicals. These controversial practices – purportedly hastening environmental despoilation of land and water -- persist in the face of controversy. In this process, as we document, farmers endow practices with attributes that signify both who they are and who they are not. These undertakings, as kinds of performances, immerse identities in “properties” and distance them from others that clarifies the production of a pure self. A unitary identity in this sense is produced and maintained through active inclusion, exclusion, opposition, and hierarchical coding.

## Use of Plow-Till Farming

The first commonly used agricultural practice, use of plow-till farming, still dominates in Central Illinois. Sixty percent of the farmers interviewed continue to deep plow, totally spurning or only nominally adopting no-till farming (Table 4). This traditional planting method disturbs top soil with seeds embedded in the ground. Seeds in the spring are “disked” or implanted in soil with “stubble” cleared from fields in preparation for fall harvest. The dilemma (and source of controversy) is that plow-till has been shown to promote soil erosion. Its disturbance of soil is seen to deplete valuable topsoil and facilitate substrate nutrient loss. In contrast, no-and minimal-till farming (“stubble” is left on fields as an anti-erosion agent) buffers and stabilizes soil, and is strongly encouraged by area agencies (notably the Soil and Water Conservation Service and the University of Illinois Agricultural Extension Service) (Makowski 1990).

These farmers continue to spurn no-and minimal-till farming for multiple reasons. First and foremost, conventional plow tillage is seen to be as effective and efficient. Plow tillage is heralded as a mainstay of area farming, ensuring a sufficient level of soil nutrients, adequate level of soil aeration, and crop harvest. This technique is also seen as responsive to changing short-term climactic conditions: bouts of intense rainfall, unexpected cold weather, and heat and dryness. Embedding seeds in the ground, the heart of this tillage type, is perceived as a key process. Farmers know this technique, (particularly conventional plow tillage), can vouch for its effectiveness, and see no reason to replace it.

In this context, no-and minimal-till are strongly associated with government intervention, oversight, and a pattern of long-term “outside” control. Many farmers distrust government actions and operations, and look to reject their programs and policies when they can. Thus, to farmers in Tuscola and Villa Grove, no-and minimal-till “is forcefully encouraged by an insensitive and meddlesome government.” This “bureaucracy,” to them, “has damaged farming across the area: I’m wary of government making suggestions and recommendations.” “No-till,” to a farmer in Sidney, is a government directive, we all know that, and it does effect our decision to use it.” No-and minimal-till are recognized as tillage types, but also as interventions” and “government initiatives.”

This influence of government on adoption rates of no and minimal-till sounds extreme, but Central Illinois farmers profoundly distrust government and external authority (see Jakle and Wilson 1992; Summers 1993). This has been exacerbated by recent fluctuating economic times and the accelerated loss of small farms (i.e., recent increases in small and medium farmer buyouts and displacement). This is the case even to more successful and larger-scale farmers, whose values are also embedded in this rural setting. To one such farmer in Homer, “the countryside is changing .. the competition is intense, and it seems to be more controlled by fewer and fewer people .. Government could try and do something but they don’t .. Family farmers have a right to be here and should fight to stay put.” He says “given the world and who government supports now, some farmers I know can’t even encourage their kids to be farmers, they say it wouldn’t be fair to them.”

But there is another reason these farmers spurn no-and minimal-till: they are widely seen to rub abrasively against their sense of aesthetics. Farmers in Central Illinois have a well defined sense of farmstead aesthetics, a finding that is well chronicled for U.S. farmers elsewhere (c.f. Nassauer 1988, 1989). A geometric, highly modified notion of beauty is at the center of this “feeling” (Table 4). Deviations from this are, not surprisingly, disliked. Aesthetics, to them, is an everyday resource and treasure that must be preserved. It lies in their landscape, the result of their hard work and cultivating of landscape as something produced but also natural. It is this beauty, their appreciation for one sense of the intrinsically attractive, that helps grounds them in a sense of rurality.

The dilemma is that no-and minimal-till leaves a residue of corn husks and stalks (“stubble”) on fields: this is seen to dirty the rural landscape. It is seen to intrude on the beauty of fields as it strews farm residue in its wake. And this residue, left to decay, makes fields a kind of mortuary to the dead and dirty of agricultural refuse. As a result, it is commonly identified as “trashy” and “ugly” (farmers in Ivesdale and Villa Grove). “This trash farming makes the ground just ugly to look at,” to a farmer in East Villa Grove. “We work hard to produce our crops and create a place that is attractive,” he notes. “I don’t want to see my efforts go up in smoke. I’m not bound to dirty-up my fields in a kind of tillage I don’t like anyway.”



These farmers see this “trash” in the context of passionately striving to produce and consume sense of beauty (see Nassauer 1995). They, like other people in different walks of life, strive to cultivate and embellish a respected and nurtured beauty. Farmers describe beauty in the landscape as “... tidy rows of crops easily seen ... fields with no weeds and attractive fences and flowers nearby ... rivers that look attractive. Rivers with a sense of scenery and appeal ... tall and noble stands of corn .. the order of columns of corn ready to be harvested” (farmers in Longview, East Villa Grove, Tuscola). Clearing the fields of “debris” is seen to nurture beauty. This promulgates a kind of “wholeness in the fields” and “visual completeness” (farmers in Urbana and Philo). Clearing fields, to one farmer, “is the natural way to do things – it looks right” (farmer in Longview). To another farmer, “it is this removal of the dirty that makes our world look pristine and right.”

Discussions reveal that the simple agricultural practice of plow tillage is part and parcel of this. “I love to farm, it’s my life,” one farmer in Sidney said, “growing things .. planting .. but it’s also a cultivating of and love for landscape.” “Farming has been in the family for generations,” to a farmer outside Ivesdale, “we’ve made this landscape, put a lot of work into sowing beauty and a healthy harvest.” To this farmer, “beauty is all around here – it’s in the row of corn, the tidiness of the fields, the neatness of the countryside” that working the ground helps produce.” One farmer in Sidell put it most bluntly: “scratching the soil and digging deep into it is an art, a kind of craftsmanship, that produces a gentle landscape.” This scratching and digging, to him, is at the heart of rendering a desirable landscape.

We suggest this cultivation of aesthetics is a time-tested process that has been indelibly connected to conventional plow tillage. Following Joan Nassauer (1995), everyday agricultural rituals like this can be seen as creative forays into building desired landscapes. Such practices become tools to sculpt environments that illuminate beauty and a personalized sense of accomplishment. In this context, Central Illinois farmers extend into their everyday work settings the dominant North American belief that neat, orderly landscape is attractive. Work becomes a way to build a physical reality that pleases, displays, and reinforces the construction of self. These farmers note ...”beauty is in the end result of our work, the ordered stand of corn .. I see beauty

in my field after a hard day’s work has been done ... clean rows of beans and corn I’ve cultivated are my idea of beauty on the farm” (farmers in Sadorus and Broadlands).

But set against these forces, a subset of farmers in Central Illinois do adopt no-and minimal-till: it is important to also understand this. This is the other side of the coin where the benefits of these tillage types are seen to outweigh its costs. For this subset of farmers, a powerful overriding issue propels adoption: sense that this practice promotes and illuminates environmental conservation. These farmers are the ones more concerned about being seen by others (particularly “outsiders”) as environmentalists. They, often relatively young and more technologically sophisticated, more often see themselves as environmentalists and strike out to demonstrate this. In this context, adoption of no- and minimal-till is a way to communicate this. This, to them, is a potent signifier that can communicate for all to see who they are and what they respect. “Yes I am an environmentalist,” one such young farmer in Pesotum notes, “and no-till is a wise choice in this day and age.” “I farm with preservation [of soil and land] in mind, and no-till does the trick.”

An image bothers this subset of farmers: that of the irrational, eccentric farmer. Many identify a stereotype of the area farmer -- one who is conservative, crusty, anti-societal, and anti-environmental – and strive to smash it. This image, to them, is at best a crude caricature. Society, they contend, should see them as more responsible citizens in the face of how they actually are and tend to the soil. In this context, to one such farmer in Sadorus, “most farmers in the area know what environmentalism is and what it takes to accomplish this.” “In the haze of stereotype,” to him, “too few people know us as environmentalists and caretakers of the soil.” Many outside of the farming community harbor misconceptions about us, he contends, “this has to change.”

Use of no- and minimal-till farming, in this conceptual setting-up by farmers, powerfully assert the values of these farmers to themselves and critics. These practices, as meaning-infused signifiers, seek to satisfy the demands of both. Adopting these, farmers strive to empirically refute the “anti-environmental” label they believe is commonly applied to them but do this on their own terms. This is the raw evidence that “farmers,” in their words, “are misunderstood ... treated like

society's enemy" while "they continue to act "responsibly" and "care for the land" (farmers in Homer and Sangamon). Two farmers near Tolono and Longview note, respectively:

"I tend to my farm as an environmental steward. I no-till more than 800 acres [of land]. It is more environmentally sound, regardless of how the media or the newspaper portrays me. I do my job well and preserve a resource for the next generation, something that outsiders often refuse to acknowledge. My actions can show everyone what I do and stand for. I minimal till over 600 acres that has to count for something in their [society's] eyes.. that's the fact."

In sum, the practices of no- and minimal-till serve as a complex signifier. Reasons for their acceptance or rejection are complex and strike at the heart of farmer identity in diverse ways. Embedded in these practices are a dense network of meanings and references that powerfully constitute values and beliefs. It is situated in and made to be a part of a lifeworld that stakes out farmer identities and beliefs. No- and minimal-till's contradictory symbolism, with farmers embracing and spurning them for different reasons, is hardly unique (see Danbom 1979). To Norris (1982), the symbolic practices of an allied population are rarely internal unities. They are more often than not, to Norris, paradoxical disunities whose conflicting symbolic content play uneasily against each other.

## Application of Agricultural Chemicals

The second dominant controversial agricultural practice Central Illinois farmers routinely engage in is the intense application of agricultural chemicals. This heavy use has a long and controversial history in Central Illinois. Reviled for its destructive effects on habitat and water systems, it continues unabated (Illinois Sustainable Agricultural Network 1994). Every farmer interviewed uses large doses of agricultural chemicals, particularly Roundup (on soybeans) and Atrazine (on corn) to kill weeds and pests. The dilemma, to critics, is the magnitude of application. To Suzanne Smith (1999) of watchdog agency Salt Fork Partners, "excessive chemical use dumped on farms across Central Illinois generate significant runoff [into rivers]." "Lessened use," to Smith, "would be as effective and help conserve the environment."

The context of values, again, is critical to understanding this practice's durability. First and foremost, 95 percent of respondents believe that applying chemicals is absolutely essential

**Table 5:** Farmer Responses to Application of Agricultural Chemicals  
N = 85

Farmers that note current doses of agricultural chemicals essential to continued farm productivity	81 (95.3%)
Farmers that note the role of government in pushing chemical use	69 (81.2%)
Farmers that note sense of landscape conquest	65 (76.5%)

for controlling and managing yields (Table 5). They contend that this usage is essential to any meaningful agricultural endeavor without which farming would be destructively inefficient. At issue, they note, is the constant struggle to overcome a host of potentially debilitating problems: cut-worm infestation, insufficient aeration, excessive weeds from no-till plots, foxtail, nematode, and grass infection. Weed and insect infestation, most troublesome to these farmers, is dealt with through intense levels of chemical application. Both major agricultural staples in Central Illinois (corn and soybeans) and cover crops are said to be susceptible to these.

At the same time, 81 percent of farmers interviewed (as in the previous practice) see in recommendations about chemical use the lurking hand of government and outside authority (Table 5). This, to them, is not merely a possible farming strategy but one pushed by a distrusted source. In the process of rejecting these suggestions, sense of government and outside authority as morally repugnant is again bolstered. In this context, like villains whose character has to be constantly reinforced, such rejection consolidates a central negative identity in their lives. It identifies and invokes the negativity of a person for farmers to see and feel. The antithesis of who they are and what they stand for ultimately becomes embodied in a people and force (government); an enemy is successfully reproduced.

In this context, farmers told us "these recommendations are from outsiders and environmentalists, and it's still government at work" (farmer in Sadorus). To another farmer, "why should I trust some environmental regulator? I know what I'm doing ..

Them? They often seem to fail and mess up what they're supposed to do" (farmer in Shilo). One farmer said "the rules, the oversight, the monitoring, it just sounds like government to me (farmer in Pesotum). One farmer summed up prevailing sentiment: "they are getting so darned many rules any more, you cannot do this, you cannot do that. I think it [the land] will eventually go back to swamp .. Some of them [government people] seem to think it is better" (farmer in White Heath).

But there is more at work in this sustained application of current chemical levels. This practice, we discovered, also taps a deep seated sense of taming and dominating the rural landscape (Table 5). At the core of this farmer identity is sense of landscape conquest, the domesticating of a turf to extract a fruitful harvest. This landscape imperative, Nassauer (1988) notes, has always been at the center of Midwest farmer beliefs that tenaciously clings to sense of self. This imperative has been embedded in ritual, practice, and tradition that registers deeply with farmers. Since initial settlement, when a poorly drained, mosquito infested land stood seemingly "unconquerable," farmers toiled to wrest a living from this environment (Anderson 1995). Here was, from their perspective, underutilized and fallow land standing in the way of progress and development. This land could yield a tremendous agricultural bounty but first had to be mastered and disciplined.

Today, as before, farmers see themselves as caretakers and superiors of the soil who rightfully subordinate landscape. Lives center around "tussling with nature," "learning its mysteries," and devis[ing] ways to control its bounty" (farmers in White Heath, East Villa Grove). "Nature throws obstacles at us," a White Heath farmer notes, "we solve these." For all the love and care for nature and landscape, these need to be disciplined. And disciplining requires "taming" the landscape that rationalizes appropriation and mastering. So established, taming and disciplining become vehicles to justify and accomplish conquest and domination. Farmers in discussions identify themselves in numerous ways as society's rural conquistadors with a mission and purpose. "This country was settled by us and carefully worked and managed. Our fathers in this area set us up through hard work to have good lives working the land. It was gradually shaped, through flooding, bad weather, mishap, but now serves us" (farmer is Sidney). "The work is hard, but honest. We get to

go out everyday and tame the soil. There are obstacles and its hard. Man, it can be real difficult. But there is nothing I would more rather do" (farmer in Pesotum).

Yet the dynamic is more complex. To Joan Nassauer (1989, 1995), landscape taming also involves appreciation of nature. Farm maintenance, an act of will, is also an act of understanding and appreciating landscape. Rituals of dominating landscape exude concern and care that cannot be dismissed as insignificant. This "other side" of landscape is widely mentioned by farmers, and allows them to frame their conquest of landscape in paternal landscape nurturing. "I wean the fields for a bountiful harvest," one farmer near Ivesdale notes, my use of fertilizers is essential to this." Another farmer said "she has to be cared for and diligently worked; high yields require the use of chemicals." In this framing, conquest and domination are made to proceed thoughtfully and respectful of the rights and qualities of the subordinated object. With domination needing to proceed, it is done judiciously. Farmers this way make themselves wise stewards who benevolently dominate landscape.

This sanitizing of landscape proceeds by offering this as a subordinate object. This involves a host of maneuvers: feminizing landscape through nickname and story, inscribing it as maternal bearer, and casting landscape as turbulent and needing assiduous monitoring and care. Metaphorically reducing landscape to women, children, or needy people is strategic. Chemical usage deftly connects to this, illuminating a restorative people who boldly replenish a struggling and in-need object. They are compelled by love, concern, care, and functional realities. Farmers in this walk the border between the unspoken and the clearly articulated. Rather than participating in openly brutish discourses of domination, they deftly affix the object an inferior. Landscape this way is primed for taming and conquest, an element made better by farmer benevolent concerns.

## Discussion and Conclusion

These results suggest that farmers of small and medium sized operations in Central Illinois help build their identities through participation in everyday agricultural practices. A shrinking and discordant population constitutes and re-constitutes its values, beliefs, and politics as "process participants" in the unbroken

flow of local rural life. They, in the process, simultaneously accomplish economic goals and make and reaffirm defiant minority identities. We conclude that these farmers routinely practice their craft and make worlds that position themselves at its center. Farmers progress through time-space, from project to project, and continuously replicate their sense of self. Their practices elicit meaning whose integration into awareness of self forges an inseparability between agricultural production and reproduction of identity.

We believe these findings to be significant. Research has only tentatively explored how these embattled farmer identities are built up and maintained and has under-examined the identity-constituting role of everyday agricultural practices. Such practices, e.g., use of minimal and conventional plow tillage, use of agricultural chemicals, for too long have been interpreted as simple economic endeavors driven by desires for profit. Farmers have been rightfully seen as locked into competitive struggles to survive; this is difficult to deny. But we suggest their practices are multi-purpose and complex. Farmers thus constitute their identities not merely through conventional cultural practices – attending church, participating in local politics, drawing on social custom – but also through rituals of common vocational conduct.

Most surprisingly, this ongoing process of constituting identities is found to be conscious and willful. While much research identifies identity constituting among other populations as dimly cognitive and essentially inadvertent, our results suggest otherwise. Many Central Illinois farmers near-militantly cling to an entrenched sense of self and flagrantly link agricultural practices to notions of who they are. They often flaunt in cutting, descriptive language the symbolic qualities they embed in agricultural practices and their implications for their identities. With minor difficulties, field work was able to unearth this insight. Whether this finding is applicable to farmers in all circumstances and geographic settings is unknown; future research will answer this. But these Central Illinois farmers, like Dianne Brunner's (1998) description of marginalized populations, revel in a sense of outlier status that fosters the politicizing of practices.

NOTE:

1. For purposes of this study, we define the rural Midwest as a distinctive physical and economic landscape. Following Jakle (1977) and Jakle and Wilson (1992), this landscape is identified

as dominated by farming as a physical and economic feature that is reflected in its patterns of land use and employment.

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