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# A Farmer Fears His Way of Life Has Dwindled Down to a Final Generation



Stephen Crowley/The New York Times

**Land and Legacy on the Great Plains** Randall Warner raises cattle and grows wheat on his farm outside Lebanon, Kan., which sits near the geographic center of the continental United States. Mr. Warner's 18-year-old son, Travis, has started college and doesn't know if he will return to work the family farm.

By CHARLIE LeDUFF

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LEBANON, Kan. — The heart of the heartland, the exact geographic middle of the continental United States, is owned by a middle-aged [Kansas](#) man named Randall Warner. He exports wheat, beef and soon his second grown son to the city. He stands in his boots in his field and wonders what's become of his way of life.

“I drive through the city and I wonder what all those people do for a living,” says Mr. Warner, a sturdy, square-faced man. “I see that, and it makes me sad that my children see it too and think that there is something better there for them.”

Lebanon, the nearby town where Mr. Warner learned to read and write, has lost nearly 25 percent of its population over the last 15 years.

Large corporate farmers are taking over. Mr. Warner doesn't understand the ins and outs of the international trade policies and government subsidies that are changing the landscape, only that to make it nowadays "you work harder — sunup past sundown."

Next year, Mr. Warner believes, there will be even fewer farmers here, in part because of fuel costs.

And he wonders what will become of his legacy and his land.

His son Travis, 18, wants to know more people besides his dad and the salesman at the John Deere dealership. The nearest pretty girl is 20 miles away.

He wonders if there isn't something better than stumbling out to the fields with sleep still in your eyes and working past midnight. The summer air here is as stifling as corduroy drapes. Travis hasn't spoken about this to his father, but his father suspects it just the same.

Travis is a state wrestling and hog breeding champion. He is going off to college soon and doesn't know if he'll ever come back. His brother, Dustin, left for good. "I like to work with people, I guess," Travis says. "Be around people. And we come out here every day. It's Dad and myself; that's not working with people."

He says this while sitting in the cab of his blue pickup, a dirty older model, eating the sandwich his mother made him.

His father is far off in the field, unable to hear the gloomy truth of the matter.

“I told my dad he could retire and cash-rent the land to the big farmer, but then what’s he going to do with his time? This is all he knows. Come out here and work daylight to dark.

“I don’t want that.”

The father says he would have to hire an old hand from down the road to help him work his 3,000 acres. He’ll have to do that and, if that doesn’t work, then start selling off the farm in pieces to the big farmer down the way.

This is how a town like Lebanon dies. The old Lebanon bank has caved in. Main Street is a peeling veneer. It’s a common scene across the Great Plains. People are losing their optimism.

Everything about Mr. Warner speaks of work. At 52, he stands erect, with skin as weathered as cattle hide. He is frugal, does not smoke or drink coffee or liquor. His home is average, a stolid two-story ranch at the edge of a wheat field with a barn outside the door. He is hardly ever home, mostly to eat and sleep, taking a half-day off for church. His wife, Linda, complains about the isolation. Is it too much to stop home while supper’s warm? Or go to town occasionally to see a motion picture? His wife talks of throwing it in sometimes too.

“My whole life is wrapped up in this,” Mr. Warner says while baling hay. “To tell you the truth, it can get a little monotonous. I’ve had four vacations my whole life.”

Still, it is a good life, he says. “The best kind of life there is.”

No political party seems to care much about the working man’s life, Mr. Warner feels. Stick [a Republican](#) and a Democrat in a sack, shake it up, pour it out, and the same rapacious thing crawls out. Creatures from a smoke-filled room.

Mr. Warner, a Pentecostal Christian, believes in miracles. He believes in speaking in tongues. He believes that [abortion](#) is taking a life and that gay marriage is an abomination. So he voted Republican.

What crumbs do the [Democrats](#) offer him? Two men in tuxedos on the steps of City Hall with a marriage license in hand? Handouts for those who won't work? Mr. Warner says he could be peeled away from the conservatives if the liberals would talk to him about his values:

"God. Family. Work," he counts them on his fingertips and adds them up. "Heritage."

Do something to stop the corporate takeover of farm country. Give his son a reason to stay and you could have his vote. "F.D.R. was the greatest president this country ever had," Mr. Warner says. "He provided security for the farmer."

Father and son have moved on to spraying fly repellent on the cattle. The sun is going low, the sky is growing golden. The father's gotten to thinking. The boy will soon go away to college.

His voice shows no trace of his natural confidence.

"Do you think you'll come back to rural America? And farm? Raise cattle? Raise pigs?"

He talks obliquely, toward his son.

The son mumbles. "Depends if I find something better in the next couple years."

"What could be better?" the father asks. "What could be better than life on the Great Plains where the wind blows and you catch fresh air every day?"

"That's what I'm going to look for," the boy says.

The boy turns his back. He returns to his work. The father watches after him.