A Nebraska Farmer at the Athens of the Cornfields

Ed Cole
Grand Valley State University

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Several years ago, Professor Christine Rydel, then director of the college honors program, prevailed upon me to deliver the final lecture of the year, traditionally presented at the Honors Convocation. I must admit that I was reluctant to accept, inasmuch as the faculty possessed any number of more prestigious and learned scholars than I. But in the end Professor Rydel had her way, which she obtained in the most devious manner: she bribed my car-pool, the famous "A-1," upon the services of which I utterly depend.

Several months thereafter were spent in blissful procrastination, but eventually it became necessary to supply a title. In some haste I came up with "A Nebraska Farmer at the Athens of the Cornfields," a choice I came to regret as soon as the notices were posted around the college. Several colleagues, who knew of my pathetic attempt at backyard gardening, sardonically inquired about my agronomy lecture. The coffee-room puns were worse than usual. As the day of the lecture approached, I was offered straw hats and various implements of tillage. One mordant fellow relished informing me that the pioneer faculty (the senior chiefs of all committees having to do with promotion, grants, etc.) had resented the description of the infant Grand Valley as "The Athens of the Cornfields," an appellation employed by scornful critics.

By the time that I rose to speak, any fanciful plans I may have had for the lecture had been scrapped in favor of the hope that I might make a credible explanation of that ill-conceived title. Although I was raised in Nebraska, and am well-acquainted with farms, farmers, field-work, livestock and so forth, I would not presume to represent myself as a Nebraska farmer, for a Nebraska farmer is a very special individual. One such once put it this way to me: "Farming out here," he explained, "is like casino poker, with the added risk that your winnings may be eaten by grasshoppers." And when he spoke about grasshoppers, my friend did not mean that delicate little insect known here in Michigan. The Nebraska grasshopper is a big, mean critter - almost a form of poultry. I pity the chicken-hawk that ever tries to take one on. Some irreverent people have referred to the plains grasshopper as "the Nebraska State Bird," rather in the same spirit that the Coors beer can is the roadside flower of Colorado.
And there is also the harshness and the challenge of the land. The Great Plains were the last of the lower forty-eight to be settled in a meaningful way — the western frontier just leapt over Nebraska and went on to California. Later on, after technology had progressed a lot farther, they came back and filled in the big blank space in the middle. Even today most Americans know the state only as a long stretch of road between Iowa and Colorado. I think that is too bad, for I love my old home state, but I must admit that life out there is somewhat tenuous. Only the very toughest Indian tribes ventured into the place, in search of the incredibly hardy buffalo. Sometimes I come upon a science-fiction novel in which the author tries to describe life on the moon or some other, even more remote planet, and every time I read such a thing, I say to myself: “That’s it! That’s the old home state!” The land out there is very good, some of the best in the world, but there is hardly any rain. To wrest a living from that country is a heroic task, and one which I would never attempt. I’ve never felt up to the challenge of casino poker, even with grasshoppers.

The Nebraska farmer I had in mind was one whom I met about a quarter of a century ago, one fine spring afternoon at the University of Nebraska. The class in question was Eighteenth-Century German Literature, given by Professor William K. Pfeiler. This professor was one of those you never forget, and indeed, there exists now a reading room in his name at the University, donated by his grateful students. Professor Pfeiler was a greatly learned man aptly described as *mens magna in corpore magno*. He had a heavy German accent and liked to describe himself as the only Nebraska professor who had fought “to make the world unsafe for democracy,” an allusion to his youthful service as one of the Kaiser’s conscripts. It was said that, after the war, on the strength of a class in Shakespearian English, he moved to London. How he survived using heavily-accented Shakespearian English is anyone’s guess, but somehow he made it, and years later established his home with us, beyond the wide Missouri.

On this particular occasion, in one of his surprise moves, Professor Pfeiler had an unusual assignment for us. “Please,” he requested, “write for me an essay, explaining to a Nebraska farmer why his taxes should go to pay for our class in Eighteenth-Century German Literature.” We dutifully copied out the assignment in our notebooks. After a moment, a student in the back of the room raised his hand and asked, “Professor Pfeiler, when is the assignment due?” And then, with a smile of ineffable wisdom and wickedness, Professor Pfeiler answered, “You will be lucky;” he replied, “if you finish it in your lifetime.”

This then, is the Nebraska farmer I had in mind. Each of us who was in class that afternoon has carried the skeptical Nebraska farmer with us ever since. He usually appears in my thoughts once or twice a year, demanding his explanation for the Ger-
man literature course. Nebraska farmers, as you may imagine, take a keen interest in their taxes, and it is not always easy to explain such things to them.

Of course Professor Pfeiler really did not want us to think about specific farmers and specific literature courses, but about a larger question. He did not want us to take our education for granted, but to think about its value. The good professor was really asking us to think about the purpose of higher learning and about why tough hombres like the Nebraska farmers had seen fit to establish an institution of universal knowledge in the midst of their hard-won cornfields.

The answer, of course, would have been a lot easier if the question itself had been raised in a class on animal husbandry or general agronomy. Utility is the easiest answer to any question about the value of education. No Nebraskan, including Professor Pfeiler, would ever challenge the value of teaching things which are useful. Useful subjects, especially those with an immediate practical application, are obviously needed by individuals and society. But Professor Pfeiler had introduced us to the Nebraska farmer in the context of a liberal arts class which could have no immediate or direct impact on the economy of the state. He seemed to be asking why we should not just scrap all the courses in psychology, political science, art, poetry, literature, history, philosophy, theoretical science, advanced mathematics, languages and so forth. Wouldn't it be more faithful to the needs and desires of the Nebraska farmers if we got rid of all such seemingly useless courses? Now as it happened, such courses, commonly called the liberal arts, were my favorites. But I also had considerable affection for my kith and kin back home, and hated to think of perpetrating some kind of fraud upon them. Therefore, when I went home for the summer, I raised this question on a number of occasions, just to see what real Nebraska farmers thought about it.

The farmers I knew back home were the direct descendants of pioneer families who arrived from the Midwest in the late 1870's and early 1880's. Their fathers and grandfathers had begun life out there in sod houses and primitive dugouts. Somehow they had survived the incredible loneliness and unbelievable challenges of the Great Plains to build up their farms. They had sent their relatives off to two great wars and several small ones, and they weathered the great depression of the 1930's. You might expect such people, to whom heavy labor from dawn to dusk was a way of life, to be about as skeptical as anyone imaginable on the subject of the liberal arts at the university. But to my surprise, this was not the case.

As I talked to my relatives and neighbors, I slowly began to discover an interesting fact. They were very much interested in raising the general tone of their communities. After all, their fathers had not come out to Nebraska just to found and perpetuate a nation of dugout dwellers. To them the improvement of the minds of their children was as important as the drainage of the prairie clay, for they were real gentlemen, and you were expected to be able to read books. Seventy-five years of living in the small towns and villages made it obvious to any farmer that the subjects of politics, and the English language, were the parlor, even for the sons of the sharecroppers. The sharecroppers would paint for them, and they would read Shakespeare. They did not expect not to meet a stranger with something interesting to say, even if it was about literature.

I also discovered a certain expectancy concerning the future. They expected their children to obtain a certain level of knowledge and techniques for treating their own illnesses. They expected that a farmer's knowledge in a ridiculous situation such as were on the lips of that professor would be expected that they might eventually have been human nature. A farmer, after all, was not to be so foolish as to think that education was to be obtained from the maids. My uncle Alfred, a farmer who had his tractor, argued that his work was under the Nebraska sky, that the right there in the open field was his or even from the field.

So as you can see, we did not fare so badly when we came back home.
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Specific farmers do not want us to profit, as if the professor was not tough, but why tough on the university?


the Nebraska had not just education but not just the future, history, and so forth.

farmers if we the Nebraska. You were often surprised to find really good collections of good books. Several writers of note, and one or two of national stature had emerged from the small towns and farms of the state. My prosperous uncle Artie was positively envious of anyone who had obtained a higher education. His particular interest was politics, and he subscribed to the Congressional Register, which he read religiously in the parlor, every night after chores. My uncle Joe, on the other hand, was a poor sharecropper, whose landlord would not allow him electricity, indoor plumbing, or paint for the outside of his house. Nevertheless, on my eleventh birthday uncle Joe and aunt Pearl gave me a new book about Elizabethan England in the days of Shakespeare. My son owns it today. Although not everyone had such interests, I did not meet a single person back home who did not congratulate me sincerely for having the opportunity to go to college and learn whatever there was worth knowing, even if it was found in the pages of an eighteenth-century German writer.

I also discovered another side of their interest in higher education. They had certain expectations of people who came back from college or the university. Of course they expected that we should know our specialties. Anyone, for example, who had obtained a degree in veterinary science was expected to know the very latest techniques for treating livestock. But there was even more: the farmers back home also expected that an educated young man or woman would not talk foolishness or behave in a ridiculous manner. Although they never used the words, the folks back home were on the lookout for signs of poise and sophistication. My relatives and neighbors hoped that their college graduates would come back to them knowledgeable about human nature and about the world at large. And they knew that this kind of knowledge was not to be gained by veterinary science alone. They know that if the next generation was to be more interesting and better prepared for general responsibilities, there would have to be a search for wisdom in addition to the acquisition of useful knowledge.

My uncle Art was a farmer through-and-through. Indeed, he died at the wheel of his tractor, and they found him on it, going around and around in magnificent circles under the Nebraska sun. But uncle Art knew that a man had not seen all he needed, right there in Webster County. Not everything could be learned at the barbershop or even from the radio.

So as you see, Professor Pfeiler's Eighteenth-Century German Literature class did not fare so badly among the Nebraska farmers after all. At least the rural people in my home community regarded such learning as necessary for the cultural improve-
ment of their society, as something worth having, in and of itself.

Therefore, when I came here fifteen years ago, I was pleased to hear Grand Valley described as “The Athens of the Cornfields.” The people who described it in this manner probably did so sarcastically, but then they had not met the Nebraska farmer. Fifteen years ago there really were cornfields on this campus, and big barns, which have now all been torn down. But something of their magic remains, and this college is still a place where students may withdraw to concentrate on the challenge of higher learning. I think that Professor Pfeiler’s farmer would be pleased to find a place of universal knowledge in these beautiful cornfields.

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