

# **Legends of Freeborn County**

## **How could you best describe a farmer?**

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**What is a farmer?**

**According to Grant Wood, a farmer is a bald man in bib overalls, standing in front of his white clapboard farmhouse with his pitchfork and his somber, aproned wife.**

**According to the old Ma and Pa Kettle movies, his life is primitive and humorous. According to today's television advertising, he wears a seed corn cap and stands beside an unidentifiable piece of equipment.**

**According to the history books of the dust bowl years, he is lean and gaunt, driving away from the farm that can no longer produce a living for his family, driving toward a life of migration and near starvation.**

**According to the movie Oklahoma, the farmer is successful, proud of his crops and his sheep, and willing to defend them against the cattlemen and their open ranges.**

**According to Minnesota history books, he is the Scandinavian immigrant whose family lives in a sod hut while he plows those virgin plains and plants his first crop.**

**In a recent conversation with some metro visitors, I found that their stereotype was completely blown away by Freeborn County's college educated farmers and their technological know-how required to run today's agribusiness's.**

**What is a farmer?**

**My mother doesn't think that farms look like farms anymore. The farm with a barn and a silo, a machine shed, a granary, a chicken house, a hog house, a corncrib, a well house, and an outhouse is a part of history. (Actually, if you can find a farm that fits this image, it probably is eligible for the National Register of Historical Places where the criteria specifies buildings that are at least 50 years old with uncompromised integrity. I challenge you to find one like this in Freeborn County.)**

**Whether my sentimental attitude about these issues stems from nostalgia or lack of practicality, really makes no difference, but I'd like to tell you a little about a conversation that I had with some organic farmers recently.**

**Those people have built their lives around natural growth. Their crops, their homes, and their life styles are all focused on the health of their families and the health of their land.**

**Our evening meal contained no creams, or sauces, or deep-fried foods, or cholesterol-laden coatings. Conversations ranged from non-use of chemicals to Appalachian folk dances, and from organic gardening to homes that do not have a television set.**

**I visited with a woman named Lois, who shared with me the story of her career minded daughter who lives in Minneapolis. The younger woman has a lovely home, a successful husband, and two children who take piano lessons and swimming lessons and dance lessons. Their annual family vacation is of the Disneyland type. As Lois talked I realized that she couldn't figure out why her daughter chose to live that way. Lois felt that what looks like the all American dream family was only a life that was too busy to appreciate a beautiful sunset or to enjoy the smell of home baked cookies.**

**When she said to me "I don't know what there was in my daughter's upbringing, that would make her choose such a life-style." I at first thought she was joking. She wasn't.**

**In thinking about it later, I realized that she too had gone through the period where all of these things were important, but she had found something more meaningful. Twelve years ago she sold her television set, re-established her priorities, and found a simpler life-style.**

**All of this is in direct contrast to the ag-related ads I watch on television and hear on the radio. It 's in direct contrast to the expensive equipment and the metal pole buildings that we see on today's farms.**

**What is a farmer?**

**At some future date historians will look back and say "Remember the discussions between the advocates for organic farming and the farmer who strives for the high yield awards presented annually by chemical companies?"**

**What is a farmer?**

**Which method is right? How can there be a stereotype when the role is continuously changing, when at any given time, the life-styles are so different?**

**Will the farmer of the 1990's and the 2000's be remembered for his concern for longevity of the earth or his support of technology to the max? Will future historians find that the answer lay somewhere in the middle?**