25 YEARS OF SUSTAINABILITY
MISSION
SFA supports the development and enhancement of sustainable farming systems through innovation, demonstration, education, and farmer-to-farmer networking.

ANNUAL CONFERENCE
‘Loving the Land: 25 Years of Sustainability’
Feb. 14, 2015
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St. Joseph, Minn.
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MIDWEST SOIL HEALTH SUMMIT
Feb. 18-19, 2015
Arrowwood Resort, Alexandria
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SFA: There’s a chapter near you!
SFA chapters are active in interesting events year-round. Call or email the chapter contact (page 5) for more information, or visit www.sfa-mn.org.

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A special thanks to all who contributed materials for this special edition.
At 25, SFA Building Vision for All Farmers

Twenty-five years is a milestone in the life of an organization. Some who were involved in SFA in the early days have either passed on, had grandchildren, or had children. Some children of our founders are now adult SFA farmers themselves.

Our movement and our organization have gone through several formative stages in the past 25 years. Early on, the energy and passion around farmer networking created high levels of inclusivity, volunteerism and community. These are founding principles of SFA. One of the keys to SFA’s origination was that farmers of all types could network with each other for better sustainable outcomes on farms, in communities, and for our environment.

The goal then, as it should be now, was to transform agriculture, farmer by farmer, farmer to farmer, together. SFA was founded on the understanding that farmers represent many different political, social, and ethnic backgrounds. However, we all agree on the need for healthy food coming from healthy farms, because that makes a healthy community.

Many of the early practices developed and promoted on SFA member farms and through SFA chapters are now mainstream farming practices. Reduced tillage, integrated pest management, and rotational grazing of livestock are not seen as “sustainable” practices, per se, they are merely what most farmers do now. That’s a mark of success of which we can all be proud: Some of the early issues that brought SFA farmers together, and the solutions our members helped create, have been adopted and promoted by the broader agricultural community.

As a sustainable agriculture community, we are educating and helping to launch new farmers at a high rate. For the most part, those new people are farming in ways we in the sustainability community support: small and mid-sized, community-based, environmentally focused farms.

But there are many more outcomes we should pursue. In the past 25 years, farms have continued to grow in size, and farmers have gotten older and fewer in number. The economies of scale in agriculture continue to drive us toward thinner margins, and competition for access to land and capital is intense. Unfortunately, these economic forces have contributed to a chasm in farming circles. There are many contributing factors, but the result is that there is essentially no dialogue between those of us in the sustainable agriculture world and commodity groups, organizations of large-scale farmers, and corporations involved in agriculture.

We talk of “sustainable” farmers and “conventional” or “industrial” farmers. I’ve done it many times myself. The truth is that there are very few, if any, farmers who seek out opportunities to purposefully damage the environment. Most farmers I know value the land they farm, think about and plan for the next generation, and would like to see farming as a way of life sustain itself indefinitely.

Our 25th Anniversary Celebration

In 2015, SFA will mark 25 years as an organization. To celebrate, we are planning a yearlong schedule of events and publications that celebrate where we’ve been, who we are and where we are going as an organization.

This CornerPost is the “where we’ve been” portion, and we are proud to mark a rich history of sustainable pioneers and exemplary farmer members. Anyone who has thoughts, photos, essays or anything else should still contribute them to history@sfa-mn.org as webmaster Laura Borgendal creates our historical archive.

Our Annual Conference, set for Feb. 14, 2015, at the College of Saint Benedict in St. Joseph, will be the truest example of “where we are” with a special introduction by John Mesko, loads of farmer networking opportunities, and a schedule chosen partially by our members that reflects SFA’s current project focus.

Read more on Page 30.

Next year’s CornerPost will focus on “where we’re going” and include essays, predictions and more.

For now, I hope you enjoy this special edition of CornerPost and have a wonderful holiday season.

— Jason Walker

On the other hand, small and mid-sized farms in the US are often considered too small or not productive enough to really impact the supply of food for a growing global population. No doubt you’ve heard the world population will grow to 9 billion people by 2050. The “9 x 50” narrative is a powerful motivator and supports the things many people in agriculture are promoting. “Sustainable” agriculture purists are often accused of wanting to turn back the clock to the 1800s and farm using antiquated methods. We know this is not true, but it should show us that perceptions are not always reality.

We need a vision for SFA and for agriculture that is focused not on labeling farms as “in” or “out” by our standards. We need a vision that is focused on moving all farmers and farming toward a more sustainable approach and outcome.

SFA’s goal in the next 25 years should be to make farmers of all kinds feel comfortable in our world. We can’t promote better farming practices to farmers who feel like outsiders for whatever reason. There’s an old saying, “You can get more bees with honey than you can with vinegar.” I think it applies here.

Let’s engage with the rest of agriculture and dispel myths about the way we farm. No, sustainable farmers don’t want to turn agriculture back to the 1800s. And, by the same token, we can’t assume a farmer using a chemical is purposely trying to do harm or is a puppet of some industrial giant. We can be honest and clear about what we are doing to prosper food and agriculture, and we can call for honesty and clarity from the rest of agriculture.

By John Mesko
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Volunteer at the SFA Annual Conference on Feb. 14, 2015

Be a part of what makes the SFA Annual Conference great: Volunteer for a couple of hours and contribute to the energy and excitement of the conference. All volunteers will get a newly designed T-shirt. Contact Volunteer Coordinator Gretchen Boyum at boyumfarms@gmail.com or 218.535.1567.
What follows are the 2014 adventures of me, Kent Solberg, the SFA Livestock & Grazing Specialist.

Through the Minnesota Dairy Initiative (MDI), I have had the opportunity to work with 18 producers on various topics from pasture management, forages, new dairy start-ups and farm transitions. MDI is funded through the Minnesota Department of Agriculture and continues to be a large part of my work.

SFA’s Keep Cattle in Minnesota (KCIM) project is funded through the state NRCS office. The focus is on helping beef and dairy producers discover and implement management strategies that help their production and bottom line by making the most of pasture and forage resources on their farms. Since January, we have had five KCIM-related events – plus the Midwest Soil Health Summit – and have reached out to over 250 producers.

We had scheduled two events with nationally renowned cattle-breeding expert Gearld Fry in August. Unfortunately, Mr. Fry has taken quite ill and was not able to travel, so the workshops had to be canceled.

The Pasture Project funded through Winrock International continues to grow. Through this work, we have been able to provide one-on-one consultations with 20 producers and three workshops on grazing and integration of livestock and cover crops. Interest in cover crops is high, and we are in an excellent position to advance a more holistic approach to farm management utilizing diverse crop rotations, cover crops, and grazing to promote soil health, water quality and grassfed beef.

We are into our second year of a three year Minnesota Department of Agriculture Sustainable Ag Grant. The purpose of this work is to show the efficacy of complex cover crops coupled with livestock integration for soil health and profitability.

The first session of SFP Farm Skills 101 was a smashing success. We had six highly energized people complete the program. Participants received 50 hours of intensive one-on-one hands-on skills training in animal husbandry, equipment safety and maintenance, and fence principles and construction. We are preparing spring and fall sessions for 2015, and currently taking applications for the spring session.

Additional outreach work includes presentations at two farm tours, four workshops, one webinar, four sessions at the Annual Conference, the Midwest Soil Health Summit, one radio interview, a podcast and two newspaper interviews.
Building Our Network: Wrapping Up the Development Phase

SFA has been a Farmer-to-Farmer Network™ organization since its inception — an association of farmers, agriculture educators and experts, conservationists, and people who want to support our mission to further sustainable farming in Minnesota. It’s the reason we exist as an organization: providing a structure through which we learn from each other, support each other, and collectively build a stronger, healthier farming community.

The Network Development Program set out a couple of years ago to enhance and streamline the infrastructure and resources of the association, to provide a communications and support system that would be easily accessible to our chapters, board of directors and members; in short, to improve our network. SFA staff, association board, chapter leaders and individual members have worked together to bring about the changes and improvements we envisioned, many of which are already in use, and the remainder will be in place by the Annual Conference.

We’ll have a session at the Annual Conference devoted to giving an overview of the program, answering your questions and taking your comments on how we can improve even more.

WHAT DOES the NETWORK DEVELOPMENT PROGRAM DO for MY CHAPTER?
The majority of Network Development work has been to provide improved resources and infrastructure for the chapters. We now have a single, easy-to-find way to get this wealth of information: the Chapter Resource Portal.

Once inside the Chapter Resource Portal, one of the first things you’ll find is the “SFA Chapter Resources Guide.” Each chapter will have a printed copy of this handbook, and the online version will be regularly updated as things change and improve. In it you find everything you need for effective interaction with the association, resources available to your chapter, and tools and information to help you with all the things that help to make a vibrant and active chapter.

At the Chapter Resource Portal, you’ll also find such one-click-away features as your Charter Financial Reports, Branding and Trademark Guidelines, quick access to Membership Forms, Chapter Charters, and important SFA documents.

Another feature of the Network Development Program that has been available to chapters is assistance in starting a “Signature Event” similar to Garlic Festival in Crow River and internships. The first new statewide intern program is in its second year, the Winter Conference Internships are filled and already working on Annual Conference and Midwest Soil Health Summit.

WHAT WILL the NETWORK DEVELOPMENT PROGRAM DO for the ASSOCIATION?
In addition to the resources for chapters, the Network Development Program has provided resources to strengthen the association as a whole through as series of features, including:

• An association-based Volunteer and Intern Program that provides a model for chapters, events and programs that want to increase their level of volunteer involvement or implement a chapter-level intern program. There are also guidelines and policies to help us better manage our volunteers.

“...front on the SFA website: click on the Resources tab, and then on SFA Chapter Resource Portal.”
— Jerry Ford, Network Development Coordinator

WHAT’S NEXT?
As we move out of the Network Development phase, during which we canvassed the chapters and members on what was needed to improve the network and then developed and implemented the resources and infrastructure to meet those needs, we now move into the next phase in which we encourage chapters, members, board and staff to make full use of these improvements. We’ll continue to change and adapt, so keep your suggestions coming as to how we can provide the very best farmer network for Minnesota.
“We have neglected the truth that a good farmer is a craftsman of the highest order, a kind of artist.” Wendell Berry, 1978, “Agricultural Solutions for Agricultural Problems”

A call to support the craft of farming is an inspiration for the SFA Sustainable Food Production (SFP) Program.

For the artist to paint, she must first hold the brush. Likewise, the SFP program aims to put tools in the hands of beginning farmers.

Many of us can reach, nearly instinctually, for the right tool to complete the task: the pliers that hangs from our belt; the justright pry bar in the tool chest; the best fork for pitching hay off a round bale; the smoothest reel for putting up a line of polywire for today’s livestock move.

Imagine an emerging group of well-educated, thoughtful people who’ve never held one of these essential tools, let alone know its most efficient uses.

Nuts and Bolts, Farm Skills 101, and Farm Skills 201 are SFP courses designed to introduce beginning farmers to the tools and techniques seasoned farmers often take for granted. Our method is intensive, supervised, active learning for small groups of highly motivated people.

As an example, Farm Skills 101 is a six-day introductory course for those who are thinking about an integrated livestock operation.

In October 2014, the course was held at a farm near Ashby, Minn. One to two days of the course focused on the fencing skills critical to strategic grazing operations. Students began with a brief lecture on the elements of energized fencing. Next, they analyzed the land in the proposed grazing cell.

Now to the doing.

First, temporary fencing using poly wire and e-netting was constructed to hold animals at bay from the work site. Then students deconstructed an old fence line. After the new fence line was sited, the students used all tools and techniques typical of building high-tensile perimeter fencing.

By day’s end, the students had completed 675 feet of three-strand fence, complete with h-braces and a gate.

Some of the tools that the students learned to use in the process were: shovels, augers, tampers, wire cutters, spinning jenny, post pounder, hammers, pliers, volt meter, crimper, level and a drill. Some of the techniques students learned: leveling a post; hanging a gate; spacing fiberglass posts in relation to land topography; installing clips on line posts; tying fence knots; safely tensioning high-tensile wire; using a volt meter.

An often-overlooked tool is the farmer’s body. Students were instructed in the appropriate use of their hands, legs, and back in doing physical labor. As an example, a highlight of the day was learning to tie the New Zealand fence knot.

Other days of the course focused on farm equipment maintenance and operation, such as repacking wheel bearings and safely operating a power-take-off; animal husbandry; grazing management; and homestead butchering.

As Berry writes, “It is the good work of good farmers—nothing else—that assures a sufficiency of food over the long term.” We’re happy to be part of the team putting those good farmers on our landscape.
A Network Built Effectively From the Ground Up

As we look forward to the 25th year of SFA, I would like to reflect on our past. SFA was born out of a desire to share knowledge and innovation; born of the knowledge that farmer-to-farmer networking is the best way to learn. I hear the term “open-source learning” and know that this is nothing new to farmers. Smart change comes from the people who work the land and share their knowledge. How has SFA changed the landscape in the past quarter century?

Some of the early SFA members were grazers, and not just at the Annual Meeting buffet. They began to share knowledge on rotational grazing, outwintering, pasture renovation, and nutrient management. Over time, folks began to notice. The Universities began to research these practices and found, by golly, that the farmers were on to something. Eventually, the Natural Resources Conservation Service recognized the practicality and benefits of proper grazing and drafted specifications. Then they began to integrate these practices into farm management plans and provide cost-share assistance. The argument was that it is more effective, economically and ecologically, to have animals on grass then fund manure pits.

Open-source grazers were instrumental in this change. Row-crop farmers explored innovative cultivation and planting methods to reduce the need for costly and harmful herbicides. They worked with holistic nutrient management specialists and consultants to find rotations and companion planting methods that reduced the need for harmful fertilizers and pesticides while maintaining yields. Eventually, the Universities and agencies revisited their manuals and changed recommendations. Once again, open-source farmers were sharing knowledge and experience.

Vegetable farmers within SFA were some of the first to explore the concept of getting food to our youngest citizens. They knew that the most effective health care program was through good food. Farm to School is now common in the lexicon of farmers, local food advocates, universities, health professionals, and government agencies. Sustainable farmers were some of the first to realize the value of Community Supported Agriculture. Recently, I learned of an initiative where doctors are writing CSA prescriptions to people in poor health so they can have access to real, healthy, fruits and vegetables. Sustainable farmers, through open-source networking and knowing the value of their product, helped make these changes.

SFA has come a long way in 25 years. It is said that change from the top down is organized but not very smart, and that change from the bottom up is chaotic, but very effective. We have come up from the bottom. A small sector of the whole, sharing what we believe is right and true. Eliot Coleman describes how, upon the publication of an early research paper showing the benefits of organic agriculture, that “it was comparable to the local high school football team shutting out the Pittsburgh Steelers.” We still have a long row to hoe before the majority realize their folly, but our way is clear: Soil health, created through diversity, is the key. We may not have all the details figured out, but as the original open-source, farmer-to-farmer network organization, we are well-positioned to do so. Thank you for your support of SFA and for your continued willingness to innovate and share.

By Jim Chamberlin
SFA Board President
jchamberlin@hugllc.com

Open-source grazers were instrumental in this change. Row-crop farmers explored innovative cultivation and planting methods to reduce the need for costly and harmful herbicides. They worked with holistic nutrient management specialists and consultants to find rotations and companion planting methods that reduced the need for harmful fertilizers and pesticides while maintaining yields. Eventually, the Universities and agencies revisited their manuals and changed recommendations. Once again, open-source farmers were sharing knowledge and experience.

Vegetable farmers within SFA were some of the first to

FROM THE PRESIDENT

UPCOMING SFA EVENTS

End-of-Year Fundraising Drive
Remember SFA in your year-end giving plans.

Stop by the SFA booth and say hello.

SFA ANNUAL CONFERENCE | Feb. 14, 2015
“25 Years of Loving the Land” • Register at sfa-mn.org

MIDWEST SOIL HEALTH SUMMIT | Feb. 18-19, 2015
Gabe Brown, Dr. Allen Williams • Register at sfa-mn.org

Solar Energy Systems
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Widespread adoption of grass-fed beef and dairy operations in the Upper Midwest has significant benefits from both a conservation and sustainability perspective. Knowing this, in 2013 SFA launched its Keep Cattle in Minnesota project, funded by MN-NRCS, to help diversify agricultural operations with a focus on grass-fed cattle production across the state.

Ongoing KCIM workshops and pasture walks focus on grass-fed beef and dairy management options, winter feeding on pasture and crop fields, integrating crops and livestock, and using cover crops to extend the grazing season and keep crop fields in vegetative cover. Local partners including NRCS, SWCD staff, extension, and MN Grazing Lands Conservation Association (GLCA) are very instrumental in bringing local producers to the workshops. Kent Solberg, SFA’s outstanding Livestock & Grazing Specialist, leads the discussions, at which a local grazier discusses their cattle management as well as lead the participants in viewing their operation.

By Wayne Monsen
KCIM coordinator
wmonsen@gmail.com

The KCIM project has been to all corners of the state, including events in Lake City, Redwood Falls, Fergus Falls, Moose Lake, Cromwell, Sebeka and Guthrie. A free soil health webinar (in partnership with the Walton Family Foundation implementing the Pasture Project) was held Nov. 21 and served as an introduction to soil health with Dr. Mike Lehman and Dr. Wendy Taheri. This webinar is now archived at our Keep Cattle in Minnesota homepage at www.sfa-mn.org. Two soil scientists will further the discussions at SFA’s Midwest Soil Health Summit on Feb. 18-19, 2015, in Alexandria, Minn. A KCIM session is also planned for the SFA Annual Conference on Feb. 14 in St. Joseph, Minn. Additionally, a handbook is being developed that will assist new or beginning livestock producers with aspects of maintaining a grass-fed beef or dairy operation in Minnesota.

For questions about the Keep Cattle in Minnesota project, or if you would like to be notified of future KCIM events, email me at wmonsen@gmail.com.

SFA MIDWEST SOIL HEALTH SUMMIT
Feb. 18-19, 2015
Arrowwood Resort, Alexandria, featuring Gabe Brown, Dr. Allen Williams, Jerry Doan, and more.
Register now at sfa-mn.org/midwest-soil-health-summit

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“In Nature there is abundance, with Nature there is success.”
Future Rests on Finding Solid Leaders

Hello, Charlie.

I heard about you earlier in the day. Someone had told me that I should meet a young, articulate leader from the Lake Superior Chapter of SFA. And there you were, at the Food Access Summit in Duluth, standing and telling a roomful of people to contact and count on SFA farmers. You said SFA farmers not only understand your concerns, but are ready and willing to supply healthy foods and wisdom that will take us far into fixing our broken food system.

Many farmers were at the conference, where we launched the Minnesota Food Charter. I was feeling good, thinking that Minnesotans are finally readying themselves to speak in insistent, yet harmonizing voices, preparing to act strategically in the reconstruction of our broken food system, or in constructing another if need be. It’s exciting stuff when lots of the right people are equipped and energized to work together. And there was a leader of SFA’s next generation, at the microphone, speaking. It was a flashback moment for me.

Where were you in 2006? I was at an SFA strategic planning retreat at my home. Not really a retreat, but what do you call it when farmers drive across the state to contribute skills, wisdom, heart and thought? To join with others in creating the agriculture and community of the mind’s eye and our daily work, and it’s really the only thing you’d leave your farm in the middle of the growing season to do? A retreat, I guess, but if you were there, you recall it really was not.

The omnipresent healthy tension between state and chapters, combined with the heavy, heartfelt importance of charting our collective future with agriculture rolling big and fast, over and away from us and threatening the places we love. This board meeting sounded more like a senate filibuster. We were loading flip charts with goals near and far for the environment, the soil, the water, the people and our communities, the cattle, the sheep, and to stop the creep, the policy, the research, the laws and red tape, the government and the grants … though far too few.

We charted pages and pages of much to do, though the resource page remained stubbornly bleak to blank … and then it hit us. Hit us and calmed us right down, as we realized that none of our goals mattered unless there was to be a next generation of sustainable farmers. It energized us, the goal to infuse all goals, the one that really mattered. We began thinking and acting in ways that would direct us to link and learn with our next generation of sustainable farmers.

And here we are. Happy 25th birthday, SFA. I wasn’t there when you were born, but I am grateful to those who birthed you and raised you up through some very rough times, 1990s style. I am happy to have had a hand in helping you grow strong, as did so many of the great souls of the land who taught me to know and understand and feel farming deeply. I am grateful to staff members who gave much more than what a paycheck can even begin to pay, and still do. I love the thought that some of our up-and-coming leaders were not yet born yet when SFA was founded. Arriving leaders, please stand on our shoulders as we fade, then invite the next generation to stand on your shoulders. Repeat as necessary, until we can see that constant pursuit of our values, wisdom, hard work and dreams is healing our land and communities.

Charlie, my apologies, as I’ve now published a full account of not meeting you without yet having met you, as I hope to one day, along with many other young leaders just arriving. In your minds and voices and conversations and spines and blisters and dreams lies the SFA of 2039, my granddaughter’s SFA!

By Mary Jo Forbord

Editor’s Note: It was a happy coincidence that Mary Jo Forbord, former SFA executive director, wrote her 25th Anniversary column in reference to new Vice-Chair Charlie Danielson. We are glad they will finally be able to meet at the Annual Conference on Feb. 14!

Superior’s Danielson Joins Board as Vice-Chair

Charlie Danielson, a farmer from the Duluth area and member of SFA Lake Superior Chapter, was elected Vice-Chair at the SFA Association Board of Directors meeting on Fri., Oct. 24, at the College of Saint Benedict in St. Joseph, Minn.

Danielson, owner of Up North Farm, is a permaculture educator and farmer who works with nature to rebuild the soil while creating a diverse career in creating a more sustainable food system.

“I am happy to help connect our regions around the state in creating a more sustainable and secure food system while protecting the soil and water that we borrow from our future,” he said.

Danielson, who joins the SFA Board as the Lake Superior delegate following the resignation of former Vice-Chair Eric Ament, was unanimously elected to the position.

The Sustainable Farming Association Board of Directors meets three times a year: February (usually the day before the Annual Conference, which in 2015 is Feb. 13), April and October. Board business in summertime is done via phone and email as most members and staff are busy farming.
Courage, Commitment, Conviction in Early Years

As I heard the 25th anniversary of the SFA was coming up, memories flooded me with the people who were there at the very beginning. While I can hardly mention everyone, it was a community that worked in both synergy and conflict to ready the fertile soil for such an organization to grow. I wanted to acknowledge and honor some people who provided guidance, energy, commitment, time and inspiration at the very beginning to make it possible.

In the mid-80s, a group of farmers wanted to create a community where they could share ideas of stewardship and sustainability. The members would help each other and build support for others who were transitioning from conventional to more sustainable farming practices.

My first job was to visit each of these farmers at their farms and explore their vision. I was greatly enamored with the down-to-earth and incredibly innovative people I got to meet. It was a true honor.

Visiting farms and learning the challenges and changes these farmers were courageously facing and making, or the sustainable practices they had quietly (or vocally) been implementing on their farms, was a wonderful education for me. And it didn’t take long, as I visited members of the community, to understand that many of the more conventional farmers in the community saw these practices, such as reducing or eliminating pesticides and herbicides, as threats to their own farms.

Organic/sustainable agriculture, otherwise known as “low-input” at the time, was not a popular concept. It took courage, commitment and conviction for this group of farmers to be exposing themselves in a public way in helping to build a farmer-to-farmer information-sharing network. Farms gave inspiring tours to showcase their alternative practices, but by extension the farmers were also exposed to scrutiny from their peers. There were often hecklers at our events, and people would call on the phone to present arguments and complain about our mission. It also took a lot of work and a number of years to enroll agency people and Extension agents to come to our events, and to offer support to these farmers.

During SFA’s earliest formation in Southeastern Minnesota in 1988, Bob Goss and Mike Lovelien were willing to take on co-chair roles, and Sheila Noordgard served as secretary/treasurer. Other people who pitched in tirelessly on the steering committee were Carmene and Dale Pangrac, Gerald and Margaret Redig, Robert Love, Jerry Wenthold and Ron Keller, who all helped to develop the mission and articles of incorporation.

Eventually, Mike and Jennifer Rupprecht and Dave and Diane Serfling along with countless others contributed their time, farms for events, their efforts, articles and ideas. We had frequent visits from Dwight and Becky Ault, and Brian and Carol Schultz and others who eventually helped set up the South Central chapter. In Western Minnesota, others were organizing, too.

We all spent many hours after milking and feeding or putting up hay – even into the wee hours of the morning – hashing out ideas and principals for our organization, identifying possible members, planning events and developing materials. This was a time before e-mail, and we had no personal computers. Our communications and newsletters were typed, pasted together, Xeroxed, folded and mailed by volunteers and myself. Communications were mostly by phone and visits.

I was blessed to be able to interview wonderful people for our quarterly CornerPost newsletter. As time went on, June Redig volunteered to help with the farmer-to-farmer directory we designed and composed, and she took on the CornerPost.

SFA was mostly volunteer. Other LSP staff – like Audrey Arner and Anita Zelinka, working to help organize a chapter in the Western region – and Ron Kroese, Doug Nopar, and Patrick Moore (just to name a few) all participated in fundraising efforts. SFA was heavily assisted by LSP funding and the experience of their seasoned community organizers in helping guide the organization. We did, along the way, engage support from agencies and the state as evidenced by Mary Hanks and others at MISA and the Minnesota Extension service.

I was blessed to witness and engage with others starting other chapters and served as the State Coordinator as the organization grew to 10 chapters statewide. When my husband and I moved our farm from the Southeast to the Central part of the state, I got to enjoy the development of the chapter there. SFA continued to be a source of inspiration for our own farming operation, which was built by what we learned through SFA and the wonderful mentors we met along our way.

The people who built SFA are fundamental mentors to my commitment to a sustainable food system and food security, and I continue to work for that cause. All of you are dear to my heart and have been great friends and make up a wonderful community.

In memorial, I’m grateful for those who I am aware have passed on from this earth, first Gerald and Margaret Redig, my dear friend June Redig, Dave Serfling, and others whose passing I’ve missed. I continue to see all your faces – committed, engaged and choosing a path that wasn’t easy but has been most rewarding. Thank you for sharing it with me, and thank you all who have carried and passed the torch of SFA.
This timeline is followed by essays from SFA leaders, pioneers and members who have reflected on the past 25 years of the organization and sustainable farming.

We hope you enjoy this special CornerPost feature.
Being tasked with writing a brief history of the Sustainable Farming Association was both a joy and something of a burden. How can a person possibly capture 25 years of such a dynamic and important organization in just a few pages?

In my studies, I pored over SFA archives and dozens of back issues of CornerPost. I quickly learned to eat before reading, as chapter coordinators seem to enjoy waxing on about delicious potluck items over the years. It is quite a unique emotion to lust after a dish served some twenty-odd years ago in a kitchen I’ve never visited.

The early history of SFA in this article prior to 1998 comes primarily from “A New Dawn of Farming: The Sustainable Farming Association of Minnesota’s Formation & Growth,” published in September of 1998 and written by Audrey Arner and Brian DeVore. For those of you interested in an in-depth and detailed look at the organization’s early days I recommend reading through that document, which is available for download at sfa-mn.org/sfa-documents. I will not have enough space here to list the names of all those pioneering people who made SFA possible, many of whom are still active members today.

What follows is a timeline of highlights of SFA’s 25 years. The examples and stories are not meant to be events or experiences that have been judged more important than others; rather, to give readers an example of the breadth of SFA’s reach and experience in the Minnesota farm community. SFA’s current work is detailed in staff reports elsewhere in this edition.
A New Dawn of Farming: The Early Days

The history of the Sustainable Farming Association starts with the Land Stewardship Project. In 1987, LSP launched a Stewardship Farming Program comprised of 25 farm families who were interested in sharing and learning sustainable farming techniques. The farmers in this group also met with researchers from across the state to develop research plans and data regarding sustainable farming practices. This group of family farmers became well-known, and the benefits they were reaping from this farmer-to-farmer network became apparent to other farmers. “A New Dawn” states that “It became clear there was a need for forming some sort of permanent venue that would bring people together in a farmer-to-farmer information sharing type situation.” In the winter of 1988, Tammy Keith-Wellstone was hired to begin organizing a farmer-to-farmer network.

A steering committee for this new network had its first meeting on March 23, 1988. They settled on the name the Sustainable Farming Association of Southeast Minnesota. Their goals were to publish an area newsletter highlighting local sustainable farming, sponsor summer farm tours in individual counties, and hold an annual winter meeting and workshop, among other things. They began with 30 dues-paying members.

In 1988, the second SFA chapter, Western, was created with 41 dues-paying members. The following year, SFA’s Articles of Incorporation were submitted to the Minnesota Secretary of State, and in March 1990 the bylaws were adopted – SFA was “officially” born as a distinct organization. By 1992 there were four chapters: Western, South Central, Central, and Cannon River.

By 1991, SFA began to move toward becoming a statewide organization. A teleconference with representatives from six chapters convened on Aug. 29, 1991. Shortly thereafter, a chapter handbook was developed to assist farmers in creating their own chapters of SFA, and chapter coordinators began meeting on a quarterly basis.

Individual chapter control was a key component, and “... that structure was no accident,” Ralph Lentz, one of SFA’s founders, said at the time. “The organization’s ability to make inroads into university, government and local communities during the past decade is a significant achievement. And it’s been done through an organizational structure that allows individual chapters to remain as independent as possible from the statewide umbrella.” Right from the get-go, SFA was designed to give each chapter the freedom to make their own decisions and create their own identity.

March of 1992 saw the first SFA annual meeting with over 100 people in attendance. Each chapter elected two people to serve on the statewide board. This would not change until 2007 when the bylaws were amended to elect only one member from each chapter. In addition, the bylaws would allow for no more than four at-large members with the goal of recruiting people with expertise and knowledge in financial, legal, or marketing areas to increase organizational capacity and fundraising abilities.

By the early 90s, LSP continued to work with SFA chapters, though the relationship was more formalized through the use of contracts between the organizations.
“I am privileged to make my living as a farmer. The farmer-farmer networking, education opportunities, and outreach provided by the SFA is invaluable. I believe that sustainable farms will continue to grow and prosper throughout any economy because they are using farming practices based on good ecology, good soil management, clean and humane animal husbandry, and the safe and fair treatment of human workers.”
Rae Rusnak, 2009

“The networking is inspiration to keep pursuing farming as an occupation and lifestyle. Being in the position of still trying to find a farm and establish a business, sometimes the call to action in the larger framework of sustainable agriculture is daunting because we’re spending so much time and energy just trying to get started. However, the two go hand in hand and we’re excited to be an active part of the movement to further sustainable agriculture in our local community and the larger community. There is no time like the present to get involved.”
Joan Olson, 2010

“There is something satisfying about producing eggs for friends and family that everyone is proud of and likes to eat. We as farmers have an emotional connection with food. Both the production and the consumption of it are appealing to many an aspiring farmer. It is a form of sharing our heart with someone else that large agribusiness can never attain.”
Jeremy Lanctot, 2005

LSP staff worked on chapter boards, handled grant writing and administration, fostered planning processes, developed promotional materials, and handled many of the nitty-gritty details that come with community organizing.

A New Dawn states, “As LSP began to wrestle with the policies of government programs and private corporations, the organization inevitably became controversial, making some people uneasy.” By 1995, LSP and SFA were struggling with indistinct roles and responsibilities and a general confusion by the public of the difference between the two organizations.

As Mary Ellen Frame wrote in the Spring 1995 CornerPost: “SFA has so far most definitely steered clear of taking a political position. What we are about is sharing of information, ideas and methods. We feel that taking a definite stand on political questions could interfere with our ability to attract a wide spectrum of farmers. My understanding is that LSP, having launched us like a good parent, has worked itself out of a job, as far as SFA is concerned.”

According to A New Dawn, “The work of LSP was still ethics, stewardship talk, and policy work. But a sharing network was needed that transcended political boundaries.”

1992: From the Network News to CornerPost

In August 1989, the first SFA newsletter, the Network News, was published. The publication known as CornerPost was the newsletter distributed by the Southeast Chapter, and by August 1992 there were various editions of the CornerPost being published by individual chapters. On Oct. 21, 1992 the first state-wide CornerPost was mailed.

The first CornerPost editions included then, as they do now, a wealth of information about upcoming SFA events, community events, and educational opportunities. Issues dating to 2003 are available on the SFA website.

That first issue was dedicated to the late Gerald Redig. Throughout the issues of CornerPost, there are many articles in memory of those farmers who have been our mentors and friends that we have lost over the years. Going through the old editions while researching this article, I find myself above all thankful for the chance to get to know these folks, even if it is just through the pages of a newsletter. I was consistently touched by their dedication to the next generation of farmers by caring for their land and generously sharing their knowledge. As Mary Jo Forbord said in a 2008 issue of CornerPost, “Let this be the season when educating and mentoring young people is the crop that you add to the diversity you already sow. It’s a crop that just might reap rewards beyond what you could imagine.” I smile to think of the conversations we would have with these people now, and how we could walk with them through their fields and ours to see how much has changed for the better.
1994: Harvest Festival

The Lake Superior Chapter (formerly known as the Northwest Chapter until 2006, when the name was changed to reflect the many producers and consumers from Wisconsin) launched its premiere event in 1994, the Harvest Festival. For over two decades, the Harvest Festival has served to connect Duluth producers and consumers. Each year at the Bayfront Festival Park in downtown Duluth, the festival features live music, education exhibits, family activities, and, of course, food. The festival and its vendors are all locally sourced and grown. In 2014, the festival partnered with the Twins Port Bridge Festival for an even grander event that drew in upwards of 5,000 people, a new record!

The Harvest Festival was just the start of great things for the LSSFA chapter as soon to follow was “Farmers Take the Stage,” a family oriented evening of music, storytelling, contests, and overall entertainment showcasing the many hidden talents of farmers usually kept between themselves and their livestock. As a spin-off, “Farmers Take the Stove” started in 2004, a fundraising dinner grown and cooked by chapter members. “Farmers Take the Stove” provides an opportunity for community members to truly taste how darn good local, seasonal produce can taste, particularly when it is cooked by our neighbors. In 2005, LSSFA launched yet another successful program, the Urban Farm Tour, which demonstrates the opportunities for farmers at any scale to grow food whether they are backyard chicken coops, community gardens, or miniature orchards.

As if that weren’t enough to keep LSSFA busy, they also work in partnership with LSP to facilitate the Lake Superior Farm Beginnings program. Long time organizer Cree Bradley explained in an 2008 issue of CornerPost, “The LS Farm Beginnings program is a farmer-taught educational training and support program designed to help people evaluate and plan their farm enterprises. Students of farm beginnings are involved in hands-on learning focused on practical skills in sessions taught by successful farmers.”

SFA has taken under its wing a similar program: the Sustainable Food Production (SFP) program. SFP was initially a one-year diploma program through M State Fergus Falls but was tragically discontinued after three short years. Thankfully, SFA took the program under its umbrella in 2013, and the program offers often sold-out short courses on topics like Deep Winter Greenhouses and small ruminant husbandry as well as an intensive Farm Skills 101 semesters. Read more about the SFP Program on Page 8.

1998: Minnesota Dairy Initiative

The Minnesota Dairy initiative was launched in 1998 under longtime SFAer Jeremy Lanctot, with the goal of assisting organic and grass-based dairy farmers in making well-informed decisions to enhance their farm’s profit, quality of life, and benefit to the environment. SFA Livestock & Grazing Coordinator Kent Solberg continues to work with MDI as a regional coordinator, working with producers to answer specific operational questions and serve as a resource to other coordinators. SFA’s role in MDI focuses on providing resources and information to start, transition to, or improve any aspect of grass-based and organic cow, goat, and sheep dairies.
“It seems to me that SFA is a forum where possible strategies can be discussed and compared. When experienced farmers and people who have a fresh outlook come together the kernels of ideas get the moisture and light they need to grow into solutions we can all share in.”

Mary Ellen Frame, 2012

“In industrial agriculture, raising a crop or an animal is uni-directional, one way. There are only inputs from the human or the crop or animal. Nurturance from the crop, the soil, the rain, the sun, back to the farmer is not part of the industrial agriculture equation – except as a minor sidebar.”

Tim King, 1996

“That which grows around us has a natural way of being best for us.”

Julie Bloor, 2003

“Let this be the season when educating and mentoring young people is the crop that you add to the diversity you already sow. It’s a crop that just might reap rewards beyond what you could imagine.”

Mary Jo Forbord, 2008

“SFA is part of a cultural change in motion. Among these priorities we need to keep our eyes on the future to help create farmland preservation programs, to attract minority groups into farming, to develop more marketing connections between producers, consumers, retailers, and restaurants.”

David Hopkins, 2008

2005: GrazeFest

The first official GrazeFest was held Aug. 13, 2005, at Mary Jo and Luverne Forbord’s Prairie Horizons Farm. It should be mentioned that while 2005 was the first official GrazeFest, workshops of the same ilk had been held since SFA’s birth. GrazeFest was “... designed to help educate farmers and consumers about the benefits of grass-based production practices” (CornerPost 2008). Over the last ten years, SFA’s GrazeFest has evolved into a series of events that bring together conservationists and consumers for learning and ideas exchange through workshops, field days, bus tours, and demonstrations, all with the goal of equipping graziers with the foundations they need to provide the nutritional and environmental benefits of pasture-raised foods.

GrazeFest began as a two-day workshop hosted by three families but has since expanded to be an on-going series that includes topics such as farm profitability, stockpiled forages, outwintering, and soil fertility. A highlight each year is SFA’s annual appearance at the Mill City Farmers Market in Minneapolis, where the urban community gets a chance to meet farmers raising pastured livestock. They are able to learn directly from the farmer what the benefits of these grass-raised products are. Visitors also enjoy delectable samples prepared by Mary Jane Miller and even had the chance to rub elbows with the likes of then-Minneapolis mayor R.T. Rybak, who stopped by for a visit in 2009.

In June of 2012, SFA received a grant from the Pasture Project at the Wallace Center to continue the development of GrazeFest. Ever striving to embrace the most up-and-coming practices in rotational and management intensive grazing, SFA continues to expand its related programs. In 2012, SFA co-hosted a workshop specifically for veterans in Minnesota that featured the use of draft animals in a profitable farm operation. 2014 saw the first-ever Midwest Soil Health Summit, a two-day cutting-edge soil health conference that featured renowned soil health experts Gabe Brown and Richard Bieber. Over the years, SFA events have brought some incredible cattle, grazing and soil health speakers to Minnesota including Greg Judy, Joel Salatin, Allan Nation, Jim Gerrish and Gearld Fry.

2005: Farmer Emeritus Award

In 2005 SFA began presenting the Farmer Emeritus Award, which “is not about what a farmer did last year, today, or what he says he’ll do tomorrow. Instead it’s about a lifetime of learning, patience, commitment, stewardship, and passion for the land and farming.” (CornerPost) “Emeritus” in this case certainly doesn’t mean retired or retiring, despite the fact that some award recipients have been well into their 90s. In fact, I was once told by an SFA member that, “Farmers don’t retire. We just die out in the field and then they throw some dirt over us.” The first award was presented in 2005 to SFA founding father Ralph Lentz and continues to help SFA recognize the incredible achievements of the farmers in our community.
2006: The Garlic Festival

Not only is 2015 the 25th Anniversary of SFA, it is also the 10th Anniversary of the Minnesota Garlic Festival. It seems impossible to think that prior to Aug. 12, 2006, Minnesota didn’t have this funky-smelling celebration. Festival founding father Jerry Ford said in a New York Times article that garlic “… has funk value. An onion’s an onion, but garlic is like the Grateful Dead of vegetables.” The Garlic Festival does indeed have funk value, from the delicious smells of garlic cooked in various dishes at the Great ‘Scape Cafe to the entertainment with musicians ranging from Mu Taiko Drummers to bagpipers. The Peculiar Pragmatic Promenade did not join the festival until 2009, but it is difficult to imagine the festival without it. The Garlic Festival is above all a family-oriented event that uses ”stealth education” (as Jerry calls it) to teach folks about sustainable agriculture by connecting the people to their food and their farmers. In its first year, the Garlic Festival drew 700 people to the Wright County Fairgrounds, the first home of the festival. The festival has since changed locations to its current happy home at the McLeod County Fairgrounds in Hutchinson and continues to grow in popularity, as last year 3,200 people attended. It is not unusual for vendors to sell out of garlic, which can happen early as I have personally witnessed festival-goers sneaking in before the official start time, only to scurry away moments later with huge grins and 30 pounds of garlic clutched to their chests.

My first year at Garlic Festival I found myself enjoying a bowl of garlic ice cream while having a very serious conversation about mycorrhizal fungi with a person dressed head-to-toe as a goat (as part of the Narren of New Ulm). If that isn’t an accurate description of the Garlic Festival experience, then I don’t know what is.

2009: New Executive Director

After serving as the Executive Director of SFA for six years, Mary Jo Forbord retired in 2009. It was a joy to read through the many articles she published in CornerPost over the years. I met Mary Jo for the first time just two summers ago at the memorial service for Chuck Waibel. She spoke humbly about her work with SFA. State Board member Chris Kudrna said, “Mary Jo was SFA’s first Executive Director and very successfully created order out of chaos over the past five-plus years. She has been an excellent representative and advocate for our organization and has led with grace and aplomb.” (CornerPost 2009)

After Mary Jo’s retirement, the state board undertook the mammoth task of hiring a new captain of the SFA ship. The board received and reviewed 37 applications for the position, which resulted in the hiring of current Executive Director John Mesko.
2010: Rebranding

Under the leadership of a new Executive Director, in the summer of 2010 SFA began a rebranding journey. “The presence, image, and appearance in the sustainable farming world impacts everything we do, from how potential members perceive us to our fundraising capacity and grant-writing success,” Mesko wrote. Anne Borgendale, the branding and communications coordinator in 2010, and webmaster Laura Borgendale took on the task of bringing our website into a new decade.

CornerPost also saw changes in 2010 as it dropped from quarterly publications to one issue annually. Not wanting to lessen our communication but still save on costs, a new and improved version of our e-newsletter, SFA Connect, was launched for bi-weekly delivery to keep members in the loop.

2012-today: Adjust 2015 and more

Thanks to an NCR-SARE grant, a new three-year project, “Adjust 2015: When Farming Reality Doesn’t Match the Business Plan” was launched in October of 2012. The goals of this project are to increase the preparedness level of beginning farmers as they face challenges in their early years of farming. Dozens of interviews with successful and established farmers have taken place over the last year. The hope is to improve beginning farmer education programs by emphasizing realistic and flexible business plans. Basically, we asked our interviewees, “how have you planned for the unplannable?” Risks are inherent in farming and at best we often have to roll with the punches. Adjust 2015 is about equipping beginning farmers with the right tools, wisdom, and foresight to meet those challenges on their feet. With the interviews completed, SFA is in the latter stages of compiling the information gained in this study into a curriculum for beginning farmers.

Also ongoing are our Keep Cattle in Minnesota project (read more on page 10), Network Development (page 7), New Crops, and Farm Transitions.

Conclusion

These past projects and milestones represent big moments in the history of SFA but they only tell a few pages of our story. The real milestones in SFA are not the things listed here, but things you all have witnessed on your own farms and in your own communities. Ruminants rotationally grazed in thoughtfully installed fencing, cover crops improving your soil tilth, Festival of Farms, community partnerships, friends new and old at the dinner table. “A New Dawn of Farming” tells us that SFA’s original mission statement was written up by Mike Noble who, struck by inspiration in his milking parlor, scribbled it down on a scrap of paper in 1993. Twenty-two years later, that little milk-made gem of magnificence is no longer our official mission statement, but it still rings true: “The Sustainable Farming Association recognizes the wisdom within ourselves and our communities to find ways of farming that are economically viable and ecologically sound. In the spirit of cooperation we offer mutual support and fellowship to strengthen our families and communities. Our diversity enhances the sharing of resources, new ideas, and approaches to farming.”
A history of innovation and fortunate connections paints a clear picture of the SFA Central Chapter’s shining star: people. Three of our chapter’s longtime members shared a bit about what SFA has meant to them over the past 25 years.

Marcia Rapatz of Snowy Pines Reforestation in Browerville primarily markets her tree and wood products directly or through the farmers’ market. She credits the farmer-to-farmer network as one of the most valuable SFA features, citing relationships she’s been fortunate to build in our area with sustainability-focused folks like Kathy Connell and Chris Barnier.

“If I was out there by myself, believing the things I believe, I would be here all alone. I’ve met so many like-minded people through SFA.” Over the years, she attended many SFA conferences and events in the area where she learned from fellow members, both through sessions as well as the one-on-one opportunities that arise through breakouts and conversations. “That’s what SFA is – it’s people.” To a young or beginning farmer, her advice is, “Go to the meetings and connect with people. If you don’t go, you will never know who’s there, already in your community.”

Glen Borgerding of Ag Resource Consulting in Albany also recalls a 25-year history thick with farmers getting together to learn and mentor out of necessity.

“Extension wasn’t as prevalent, and we didn’t have nearly as many information sources as we do now. It was an era when agriculture was going one direction, so a group of farmers doing any alternative agriculture thing got together to use each other as a resource. Today, dialogue about sustainable farming is much freer.”

To a person new to the Central Chapter, one characteristic that is still strong today amongst membership is the fact that small vegetable producers or back-to-the-landers with a fair amount of ambition can still set themselves up for a livelihood today.

Board member Sister Ruth Lentner of the Franciscan Sisters of Little Falls highlighted SFA’s affinity for innovation as something she’s cherished over our 25-year history.

“SFA has always been an organization of people who aren’t afraid to do things differently. And they question things, seeking out solutions that are profitable yet serve our communities’ needs.

Conventional agriculture says to use lots of chemicals, but sustainable agriculture says here’s a different way – which is better for the land, people and animals.”

She credits our novel ways of thinking that led to growing an expanded array of crops, such as flour corn and other grain crops, to meet a growing demand now that people have developed intolerances to wheat. Graziers, too, demonstrated that veering away from feeding just grains and silage could also be profitable. She recalls a time when our chapter, funded by a wealth of grant sources, tried out inventive ideas that formed into realities with economic and social benefits for our communities, such as the Whole Farm Co-Op for farmers seeking an alternative way to sell their produce, and the Windy River Fair, an annual event where farmers could show off some of the innovative things they were doing.

It is members – people – who made our Central Chapter – along with all the other SFA chapters – work for them as farmers, for our communities, and for our land over the past 25 years. We look forward to the next 25.
Cannon River: The Early Days (and Late Nights)

In 1989, I was getting my little farm going and building a house on it, near Northfield, Minn. One day, when I was shopping at the (then) Co-op in town, I met a young man who told me about an organization that was all about farming sustainably, which was also just getting started. There was to be a meeting in Faribault soon. I might have forgotten about it or been hesitant, but he called me a couple of days before the meeting to remind me of it, so I did go. (How glad I am!) It was held in the upstairs office of the Land Stewardship Project in downtown Faribault. I don’t remember exactly who was at that first meeting; they all seemed to be farming in various ways and looking to make changes in the way they were farming, toward more sustainable practices.

It was encouraging to see that there was a good representation of women in the group, who were partners with their husbands and a few like me, who were farming on their own. Some of the group were doing commodity crops, some dairying, beef, hogs, sheep, goats or vegetables. Some had very diversified operations. There was also quite an age range. What we all shared was a love of farming and the desire to find better ways of doing it than the conventional corn and beans, supported by petrochemicals.

I kept going back to the monthly meetings and got to know, like, and admire these smart, hard-working people. As I recall, we had to be out of the building by 9 or 10 p.m., but there was so much to talk about that we’d often be standing on the street, huddled in the 20-below dark, for another hour or two, exchanging ideas and experiences. And some of the people had to get up and milk in the morning! Initially, June Redig was our coordinator. She came from a dairy background and hoped to have a farm of her own eventually. She had an enthusiasm that was inspiring and was full of ideas, ready to learn. It was a huge loss when she, her partner, and one of her three sons died in a car accident.

June, Linda Noble and I were a committee to write a logo which would state our goals and principles; I remember meeting in the Faribault office one evening. What we crafted was: “The Sustainable Farming Association recognizes the wisdom in ourselves and our communities to find ways of farming that are economically viable and ecologically sound. Farm visits offer valuable opportunities to exchange information and learn from each other.”

In the winter we held workshops and had speakers at our annual meetings. In the growing season we held field days when we visited each others farms, seeing how different systems were put into practice. One of the central ideas was to find ways to decrease the “inputs,” which would save money and decrease the amount of chemicals that would end up in the soil and groundwater. Another was management-intensive rotational grazing for ruminants. This really caught on, and became widespread with those who had animals.

Dan French discovered that, with rotational grazing, and grassfed, he could get rid of much of his farm machinery. Ralph Lentz had a field day which demonstrated the advantages to water quality of allowing his beef herd to have access to a trout stream for a brief time once a year. I remember visiting Dennis Rabe’s farm; he had become dissatisfied with crate farrowing, so he converted an old barn into a loose farrowing house with deep bedded straw. In the summer the sows farrowed in the pasture in small huts.

As the farmer-members put into practice the new methods we were learning about, their production increased and the quality of what they produced improved as well. However, it became evident that finding markets which would pay for this better quality was necessary. Mike Noble told how he had a truckload of fine hogs, but the slaughterhouse wouldn’t accept them because they didn’t fit their requirements for uniformity of carcass. Big Ag had no room for products that didn’t meet their standards of “efficiency” and low price.

Another problem was gaining acceptance from bankers, extension agents and so forth. We held a workshop for some of these professionals, trying to establish the legitimacy of these new ways of farming (a free lunch was part of the bait). At this point we began to realize that, in addition to learning from each other, we needed to inform, educate and persuade consumers about the value of eating locally grown, pasture-raised food that was free of herbicides and pesticides; that’s it’s not only better for our
personal health but better for the health of the earth. We made concerted and individual efforts in this direction. This was happening not only here in Minnesota, but also nationally. We became part of a real movement, a tide of change. It was thrilling to see publications and other media paying attention to these issues. It seemed our efforts were bearing fruit.

Gradually, our members created innovative ways to go more directly to consumers. Dan and Muriel French, with a couple of other families, formed Pastureland Co-op which made butter and cheese, selling to co-ops, stores and individuals. Lori and Alan Callister set up an E-2 poultry processing plant in the old barn. Flo and Dave Minar built a milk processing plant and store on their farm, pasteurizing and bottling their organic milk in glass bottles; they even had home delivery to people in New Prague. Ahead of their time, Gary and Maureen Vosejpka started a Community Supported Agriculture vegetable enterprise, in addition to selling at the farmers market. Not enough members signed up at that time, but now it’s prospering. Bruce and Diane Milan and I also sold produce at the farmers market. Mairi Doerr made goat cheese on her farm. Mike and Linda Noble, along with their son, Dylan, established themselves at the St. Paul Farmers Market, and still bring their “Farm on Wheels” to Northfield once a month. David and Laurie Hougen-Eitzman have a CSA pickup in the Cities as well as at their farm.

As many of our original members were putting their time and effort into marketing and building their new enterprises, they had less time or need for going to meetings. Early in this century we seemed to be going through a fallow period. However, after just a few years, a whole new generation of farmers came along, with new energy, excitement and ideas. Many of the older members have solidly established businesses now. Of course there are still challenges, difficulties. Big Ag is always putting pressure on the small, diversified farms, sometimes in subtle ways. There aren’t enough small meat processing plants that are either USDA or E-2 and organically certified. The high price of farmland and the consolidation of land by big farmers is a real barrier to beginning farmers. There’s been some recent movement toward aggregating small farmers’ products to satisfy institutional needs for large quantities. At least now many schools, restaurants and other providers are willing to make an effort toward finding local products.

There are so many people that I’ve left out of this account, and so many stories I haven’t space to tell, especially of more recent members and developments. The people I’ve known through SFA and the work that’s been done has made a difference in the world. All these people have taught me so much and enriched my life wonderfully.

Cannon River Current Update

The board met Oct. 21, and did preliminary planning for our annual meeting, which will probably be Jan. 23, 2015 – watch for possible change of date. We also tentatively planned get-togethers for November, February, March, April and May. When all are settled, announcements will be made.
Western: Exciting Connections Make SFA Special

The Sustainable Farming Association has its roots in the Sustainable Farming Network, an initiative in the late 1980s led by the Land Stewardship Project to help support and share on-farm-based, collaborative research. This initiative was being undertaken by organizations in several states, including the Nebraska Sustainable Agriculture Society, the Kansas Rural Center and Practical Farmers of Iowa.

At that time, research on agriculture was almost wholly in the hands of land-grant research universities. These institutions would disseminate their research to farmers, who would then be expected to replicate it on their own farms. This was also an era where the University of Minnesota Extension was urging specialization in agriculture and biodiversity was disappearing from the rural landscape. The purpose of the Sustainable Farming Network was to help farmers identify their own questions that they wanted to solve, whether that be around weed management, fertility, breeding, etc.

Farmers could apply to be part of the SFN and receive funding for their own on-farm research. However, not every farmer who applied was accepted. Starting in Southeastern Minnesota, farmers were asking for another way to research, learn and connect with each other. Subsequently, SFA was born – first in the southeast in the spring of 1988, and in western Minnesota in the fall.

Some of the things we take for granted now are the connections that make SFA special. In rural communities in the late 1980s, farmers had a much harder time meeting other like-minded farmers. They knew their neighbors, people from their faith communities or their kids’ schools, but they lacked the means to connect with other innovative farmers in their region.

There was no Internet. There was no grazing conference or Minnesota Organic Conference or Minnesota Institute for Sustainable Agriculture. This vital interconnection did not always exist – it had to be built.

In the winter of 1988-89, Audrey Arner and Anita Zelenka were working for LSP’s Western Office in Montevideo. Part of Audrey’s job was to catalog and convene farmers in the Upper Minnesota River Basin who had an ethic for the land and want to learn more about these newfangled “sustainable agriculture” practices. “Sustainable” and “agriculture” were two words that most people had not heard used together before. There were also folks who were afraid of the term “organic.” This region was just coming off a season of drought that had seen a very bad grasshopper infestation. Most distressingly, this was also the era of the farm crisis, and many farmers were facing financial troubles.

Embracing the technologies available in 1988, LSP procured a computer for the Western Office to create a database of this group of farmers. They also initially connected everyone through conference calls. Most of these farmers (or most people for that matter) had never been on a conference call before.

By Anne Borgendale & Laura Borgendale

Annette and Kay Fernholz with some of their young helpers. Photo courtesy of LeeAnn VanDerPol.

Jim and LeeAnn VanDerPol’s oldest grandson, Jake, at a field day in the 1990s. Jake, who is almost 20 now, is studying agriculture at Willmar and wants to be a farmer. Photo courtesy of LeeAnn VanDerPol.

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Everyone had to learn the basics, such as who talks, and
when. Although these seem like funny and quaint anecdotes now, such tools were instrumental at the time. These new technologies, along with traditional face-to-face meetings, brought farmers in the region together. Through potlucks and field days, a chapter was born.

Many farmers in the region were very excited about the newly forming SFA (though it was not actually called that yet). For some, it was a relief to have an organization that was focused on ethics, the environment, and farmers helping farmers as opposed to just the financials of farming. There were meetings on growing crops with less fertilizer and chemicals, ridge till farming, catch crops and cover crops (this was a few years before grazing and holistic resource management were really introduced). There was a feeling of being at home with farmers who weren’t only thinking along the standard lines. Farmers were sharing ways of farming better, not just bigger. Perhaps it wasn’t revolutionary, but it was exciting: a new way to learn about agricultural methods.

The first Western Chapter Annual Meetings were held in 1990-91 in Appleton and Morris. They were quite well attended, with 60-70 people for a chapter event. A few of the folks who were active in those early years included: Audrey Arner and Richard Handeen; Kurt Arner; Charles Cornillie; Ann Fernholz; Carmen Fernholz; Kay and Annette Fernholz; Dan and Lyle Glenfield; Stan Hennen; Marshall Herfendahl; Ken, Lyle and Paul Koenen; Tom and Joe Molitor; Linda Maus; Craig Murphy; Dale and Betty Noordmans; Vicki Poier; Mary and Gerard Radermacher; Bill Rois; John and Bev Sluss; Jim and LeeAnn VanDerPol; Terry VanDerPol; and Anita Zelenka.

One point of pride within the early organization was the role of women. Women were chapter board members and welcome, active participants from the beginning. They weren’t just thought of as the “farmer’s wife” or the person who serves the coffee.

We should also be reminded going forward that SFA is unique. Not many states have organizations that have the primary purpose of connecting farmers with other farmers. It truly has enriched the farming community of western Minnesota for the past 25 years.

A special thanks to Audrey Arner and Jim and LeeAnn VanDerPol for their recollections about the early days of SFA.
The Western Chapter seemed to be the center of things for us as the Sustainable Farming Association came into being 25 years ago. From a start with small potluck meetings and lots of excited talk, we blossomed out into summer field days and a winter annual meeting that drew perhaps several hundred people right from our area. Most of the emphasis in those early years was organic and sustainable cropping; we had field days on cultivation of organic row crops, on crop rotations, and on cover and catch crops for weed control.

Soon, the Land Stewardship Project, which created the SFA at the outset, began running introductory courses in Holistic Resource Management, an idea that got many of us who were interested in livestock thinking about grazing and really managing land and livestock together. There were fence-building field days and regular pasture walks. And soon, there began to be a divide in our chapter between the grazing side and the organic cropping side. It seemed to us on our farm, standing with one foot, as it were, in each area, that it was difficult to conceive of anyone in agriculture not being excited about what was happening in both arenas, and especially about the opportunity to take responsibility for our farming. Our neighbors mostly didn’t see it that way and kept right on farming as they had been.

The Cannon River and Southeast chapters began to take center stage. Heavily emphasizing dairy and dairy grazing, they were a real presence at the state annual meetings, providing in the next years most of the excitement in the state group and most of the leadership of the organization.

Meanwhile in the Western Chapter, our meetings and field days began to shrink in turnout. At first we thought it was because organic croppers and graziers couldn’t get along or had nothing in common. Certainly, in spite of the fact that SFA has always tried to be a “big tent” kind of organization, never touting an exclusively organic agriculture as an example, it was plain that it would be difficult for graziers and organic croppers to be comfortable with one another simply because graziers, under the influence of Allan Savory, were thinking of a perennialized agriculture, radically different from an annual cropping approach. Many graziers at that time were thinking of their entire farms in grass and no cropping at all.

The Central Chapter started to come to the fore. Encompassing land that was neither prairie nor rolling Karst geology, but was rather widely varied in type and productive capacity, Central brought with it an inclusiveness of many different approaches—from small-scale grazing to vegetable operations of many types, some small dairy, sheep and goat operations, and farms incorporating forestry and wood products into their operations. Central provided strong state leadership for many years.

Now lately comes the Crow River Chapter and with it a strong emphasis on linkages between consumers and producers. With the success of the Garlic Festival and a regular presence at the Mill City Farmer’s Market, SFA is committing itself to maintaining an ongoing relationship with the eaters and users of our farm products. Lake Superior Chapter is doing similar work in the north with its Lake Superior Harvest Festival in Duluth each September.

By Jim VanDerPol

Editor’s Note: At one time, VanDerPol wrote the popular “Conversations With the Land” column in the CornerPost. He later compiled his columns and other writings in a book, also titled “Conversations With the Land.” It is available for purchase at their farm website, www.pasturesaplenty.com.
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Today, the Western Chapter is fairly subdued, along with Lake Agassiz and Coteau Ridge. This perhaps reflects the fact that midsized crop and diversified farms are in trouble in the fertile corn belt and Red River valley soils. Large farms in any production area do not do sustainability. They place no value on it other than the usefulness of the word in advertising.

SFA made a slow change over the first 25 years from a mid-sized farm focus to an emphasis on urban and customer involvement and especially changed with the development of the vegetable enterprises, sometimes on very small acreages. That shift in focus was both necessary and also good for both the organization and especially the idea of sustainable agriculture in the state. Market gardening, farmer’s market-based marketing, and community supported agriculture involve many more people in a close connection with agriculture than does a system built completely around mid-sized farms. And it tends to be younger people who are finding opportunity there.

Typically a farming venture based on profits from produce will be closer to the markets than one based on meats and livestock will need to be. It is essential both that we supply people’s needs from a regional source and that we are in evidence nearby, for this demonstrates for people who are or may become customers the possibility of a different rural and urban life, one less anonymous, one populated rather with connected individuals, people who can care for each other as they care for the land. A new vision begins to bind people together.

Spinach from Delano really is different from spinach imported from California, and not only because it is nurtured in different soils, but because it reflects a different understanding of the meaning of human life on earth. The same can be true of a hog raised in western Minnesota or a calf dropped in the middle of the state. Knowing the farm and its original conception of farmers helping farmers. Our circle has widened to include eaters, and we are the better for it. We look forward to the annual convention!

“IT WAS SFA’S IDEA THAT FARMERS WERE MORE THAN ECONOMIC BEINGS AND THAT LAND WAS NOT ESSENTIALLY A PROFIT-MAKING MACHINE THAT DREW ME TO IT IN THE FIRST PLACE.”
—Jim VanDerPol

Chapter Update: Crow River Annual Meeting is Jan. 31

The Crow River SFA started off 2014 with our Annual Meeting in January. This year’s meeting focused on the topic: “Local Foods: The Next Step – Expanding the Breadth and Depth of Eating Local.” The Annual Meeting brought together chefs, farmers, educators, and food processors to examine the “Eat Local” movement and assess its progress and impacts.

July brought the Festival of Farms, which featured three farms in the Crow River SFA area: Living Song Farm in Howard Lake (beef, onions, potatoes, raspberries, and, of course, garlic); The Farm of Minnesota in Hutchinson (CSA vegetables, fruit, and more); and New Story Farm (permaculture, livestock, and perennials), also in Hutchinson. These diverse farms are very characteristic of the farms in our region—a mix of new and experienced farmers partaking in a variety of farm enterprises.

In August, we hosted the ninth annual Minnesota Garlic Festival in Hutchinson, and it was a stinking good time. More than 3,000 people came from near and far to celebrate local food, small farms, and to try the garlic ice cream, of course. As always, the event was made possible thanks to the work of countless volunteers and the word-of-mouth of our faithful fans.

The Crow River SFA board is currently planning its 2015 Annual Meeting, scheduled for Sat., Jan. 31, at the Buffalo United Methodist Church. This year’s meeting will focus on education, asking the question: How are we educating youth and consumers to use local foods? The event will feature innovative thinkers in the education and culinary arenas, and it will inspire farmers to invest in education as a primary marketing strategy. Learn more and register at sfa-mn.org/crow-river.
SFA Has Far Reach, but Local Effects Still Matter

My first memory of SFA is one of the early meetings, around 1990 in Little Falls, where I live. DeEtta Bilek organized it, and it struck me that this new organization really had something going for it. The concept of local groups of farmers meeting as equals to explore sustainable agriculture was new. The resources were meager, but there was a lot of passion.

SFA members were kind of cultural loners. The idea that agriculture was better off based on biological balance instead of simple man-made chemistry was not popular. The early SFA members banded together to explore and reinforce their ideas with each other. The discussions always had a strong link from agriculture to human nutrition and human health. But it was under the very real shadow of conventional agriculture.

I liked learning about farming methods that I could put to use on our place. Some of those early topics, like rotary hoes and tine weeder harrows, are not heard today because those tools are commonplace and there’s new knowledge to discuss. It was reassuring to meet others who were trying to learn how to do sustainable agriculture, and many have become good friends, even though we don’t see each other very often. My service on the chapter and state boards expanded my ties to my peers, and I have to salute all our dedicated board members and leaders across the state. No surprise, I received more than I gave.

By Chris Barnier

What I like best, however, is our annual Central Chapter meeting. The group is small and the venue modest, but we are always glad to see one another, and we’re pleased to have speakers come from a distance on a cold winter Saturday.

Sharing homemade food and helping clean up the kitchen afterwards builds friendships.

There have been negatives. Way too many hours spent arguing the meaning of the word “sustainable,” some members who became disappointed and left, and perhaps some who gave too much.

SFA has really evolved. We now reach out with assurance, no longer cultural loners, but builders of a new culture. We have energetic young members who did not grow up on farms, and we embrace vegetable growers, food customers, chefs, and even the agricultural establishment. These are great additions to our founding group of crop and livestock farmers.

I think we have an exciting future. People are more interested in their food, health, and landscape, and sustainable ideas will become more accepted, just as other cultural shifts have occurred in our nation’s history. I used to think that sustainable agriculture’s role was to convert those in “conventional” agriculture, but now I believe that the sustainable/organic/biodynamic growers need to stand ready to put wise methods in place when industrial agriculture starts to visibly crumble. Notice that we are confident enough to call it industrial agriculture now instead of conventional.

The new knowledge in soil biology and cover cropping is revolutionary. We could soon have real, practical solutions to Midwest row crop monoculture, and we could go a long way toward capturing enough carbon in the soil to keep the planet mostly habitable.

A Tribute to the Women of SFA Western Chapter

I admire the strength, courage and vision of the women in the sustainable agricultural movement. My own farming journey with my husband and family has been an adventure beyond what I could have imagined. Because of like-minded others, we’ve gained friends throughout the state and far beyond Minnesota’s borders.

My introduction to the SFA was through Audrey Arner and some early workshops and meetings. Audrey encouraged me to join the Western Chapter board, where I soon found myself as chair and later the coordinator. Our group was active, and times were exciting with the growth of this new movement. It became the seed of a new direction of farming, which has now taken some of us into new markets. My sister-in-law, Terry VanDerPol, who also raises beef with us, is one of those working on a food system connecting farmers to those who want healthier food.

There were other women who came into my life during the first days of SFA. Mary Radamacher, Linda Maus, and Annette and Kay Fernholz shared their talents by serving on the board for several years. DeEtta Bilek and Mary Jo Forbord led our state group for a number of years and both have moved on to other positions working for better food systems. Carol Ford, along with her late husband, Chuck, had the vision to build a winter CSA. They shared their knowledge at conferences and wrote a book about their greenhouse.

There are others of you who have had the courage and vision in your work to sustain the people, animals and farmland of Minnesota. Though I can not name you all, thank you! With our vision, together we can “pay it forward” to future generations.
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Regional Sustainable Development Partnerships

**UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA EXTENSION**

University of Minnesota Extension is an equal opportunity educator & employer
Our upcoming Annual Conference, “Loving the Land: 25 Years of Sustainability,” is all about the Minnesota sustainable farming community. We received lots of input on what sessions you wanted, and we’ve designed the content of the conference primarily around that very thing. Then we took recommendations from association board directors and chapter leaders on what they thought was needed. And, finally, we are including sessions driven by our ongoing projects. This has resulted in an intense schedule of sessions, most of which will be “discussion format”—led by a couple of experts, but focusing on the wisdom and needs of the community. Here’s a roster of the sessions as of Nov. 25, 2014 (subject to change). To register or for a complete, up-to-date schedule, visit sfa-mn.org/conference. You may also register via the form on Page 31.

**Member-Generated Sessions**

- “Better Than California: How to Grow Fabulous Greens During Deep Winter in Minnesota” with Sue Wika and Tom Prieve—Growing a tasty variety of greens in the depths of a northern winter is a real possibility. Learn about the culture, science, and technology of deep winter growing utilizing passive solar with underground heat storage.
- “Fencing Systems” with Kent Solberg of Seven Pines Farm and Fence
- “Salvaging, Adapting, Repurposing Equipment & Buildings” with Josh Reinitz and Dan Zetah
- “Integrated Crop and Livestock Systems” with SFA Livestock & Grazing Coordinator Kent Solberg
- “Post-Harvest Vegetable Handling: Quality Produce from the Field to the Box” with Lisa Baker
- “Food Hubs in Minnesota” with Joe Domiere with MN Valley Action Council, Mankato; and Arlene Jones of Sprout MN, Brainerd
- “Small Dairy Resources” with SFA Livestock & Grazing Coordinator Kent Solberg
- “Sheep Farming Basics” with Wayne Martin
- “Legal Issues Q&A” with Jambor Heyman

**Culinary Track**

Mary Jane Miller, Chef, Recipe Consultant and Garlic Fest Chef Wrangler, again leads this popular feature. Look for plenty of tastings! New in 2015 is that we have moved all culinary sessions into the same building as the rest of the conference, the Gorecki Center.

**Also in 2015**

- Seed Swap returns
- A Deep Winter Greenhouse Networking Group organizational meeting with Carol Ford
- The Friday night social event returns to Minnesota Street Market in St. Joseph. Bring your instrument and get ready to jam
- A kickoff to our Youth Conference
- A Network Development session, “Resources for SFA Chapters” with Jerry Ford

**Budding Farmers**

Art and science projects, cooking lessons and more—the Budding Farmers program is coming to the Annual Conference. Led by SFA member Monica Irwin of Northfield, Budding Farmers works to ensure kids know where their food comes from and why they should be eating healthy food.

Registered children will complete art, science and cooking projects, and move around playing imaginative games. Also, each child will go home with fun activity pages and materials, including a seed-sprouting kit. Registration for children’s programming is just $10—Budding Farmers students will return to their parents for lunch, and parents may want to pack snacks and drinks for their students to have during class time. Children attending must be between 3 and 12 years old and potty trained; kids under 3 are welcome to attend the conference but are the responsibility of their parents.
Annual Conference Registration Form

YOU MAY ALSO REGISTER ONLINE AT SFA-MN.ORG/CONFERENCE

Note: This year’s conference is Feb. 14 at the Gorecki Center, College of Saint Benedict, St. Joseph, Minn. Lunch is not included with your registration. Please take advantage of the St. Ben’s cafeteria or the local-food restaurants in St. Joseph, or bring a sack lunch. Again this year is the special Leaders Breakfast on the morning of Feb. 14; an extra admission ticket is necessary to attend the breakfast. After Feb. 1 and at the door, registration is $65. Family Programming is returning so that the entire farm family can come enjoy our farmer-to-farmer showcase. Admission for children ages 3-12 is just $10 and includes programming by Budding Farmers, while kids under 3 are free but are the responsibility of their parents.

COST: SFA MEMBERS: $55 THROUGH JAN. 31 • NONMEMBERS: $65 • AGES 3-12: $10 • UNDER 3: FREE

First Attendee
Name __________________________________________________ Email ___________________________________________________
Address _____________________________________ City ___________________ State____ Zip ______ COST ___________________
Leaders Breakfast? Yes (add $12.50) No

Second Attendee
Name __________________________________________________ Email _________________________________
Address _____________________________________ City ___________________ State____ Zip ______ COST ___________________
Leaders Breakfast? Yes (add $12.50) No

Third Attendee
Name __________________________________________________ Email _________________________________
Address _____________________________________ City ___________________ State____ Zip ______ COST $ _____________
Leaders Breakfast? Yes (add $12.50) No

Fourth Attendee
Name __________________________________________________ Email _________________________________
Address _____________________________________ City ___________________ State____ Zip ______ COST $ _____________
Leaders Breakfast? Yes (add $12.50) No

TOTAL ENCLOSED: $ __________________ Make checks payable to Sustainable Farming Association

To register more than four people from the same household, copy this form or register at www.sfa-mn.org/conference

Mail completed form and payment to SFA, Box 192, Princeton, MN 55371

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Midwest Soil Health Summit
Feb. 18-19, 2015 • Arrowwood Resort • Alexandria, Minn.

The Summit will convene some of the most innovative farmers and researchers in the Upper Midwest for two days of networking, speakers, panel discussions and breakout sessions – all geared at improving the health of your soil.

The keynote speaker will be Gabe Brown of Brown’s Ranch in Burleigh County, N.D. Brown is a pioneer in diverse cover cropping, having used no-till techniques for two decades. His family ranch encompasses 5,400 acres, all managed sustainably and with the goal of building ideal soil health conditions. Brown will present soil health sessions for both the experienced and novice.

We are also proud to welcome Dr. Allen Williams, a champion of the grass-fed beef industry as well as a leader in cutting edge grazing methodology. A co-project leader at the Pasture Project, Dr. Williams is also founding partner and president of Livestock Management Consultants, a founding partner of Grass Fed Beef and chairman of Association of Family Farms. Other scheduled speakers include:

- Jerry Doan, farmer from Black Leg Ranch in Burleigh County, N.D., a multi-generational family farm that emphasizes soil health
- Dr. Michael Lehman, a research microbiologist whose studies include evaluating soil microbiological responses to agricultural management
- Dr. Wendy Taheri, a research microbiologist who specializes in the study of arbuscular mycorrhizal fungi (AMF)
- Kent Solberg, SFA Livestock & Grazing Specialist, will discuss Designing Complex Cover Crop Blends
- John Mesko, SFA Executive Director, will lead a program on Soil Science Basics
- Ian Cunningham, a cow-calf producer and veteran cover cropper from Pipestone County, Minn.

Also planned: The return of “Gab With Gabe,” an International Roundtable, networking tables, trade show, film screening and more!

$125 for SFA members and $175 for nonmembers • Register at sfa-mn.org