

Hoeing the Row Out

More than Three Decades of History

The Kerr Foundation Agricultural Division, Inc. (1965-1985)

The Kerr Center for Sustainable Agriculture (1986-1996)

by Maura McDermott

Nearly 40 years ago, Oklahoma Senator Robert S. Kerr challenged Americans to take good care of the earth's natural resources. He wrote: "It is in our power, under the watchful eyes of God, to determine the physical form of the world in which we live. We can make it a paradise... or by neglect, permit it to become a desert. The choice is ours."

Today we know that the choice of either paradise or desert is one that must be made not once, but many times each day by individuals all over the world.

In one small town in Oklahoma, a nonprofit charitable foundation that bears the name of Senator Kerr is doing its part to help people make the right choice. Since 1986, The Kerr Center for Sustainable Agriculture in Poteau has been working toward a paradise, not in the clouds, but in the country. It's an earthly kind of paradise, a muddy boots-and-farm cap kind of paradise, where the economy is healthy and so is the environment. It's a place where people reap the rewards of hard work and enjoy a kinship with nature, and children inherit a land brimming with life and promise.

The Center's mission is rooted in the conservation ethic of the late Senator Kerr. Kerr was a tall, bold man with a keen intelligence and commanding presence. His life story has all the earmarks of legend, beginning with his birth in a log cabin southeast of Ada, Oklahoma, in 1896, before Oklahoma became a state. He did indeed have a memorable life: He struck it rich in oil during the 1930's, became the first native son governor of Oklahoma during the '40s, and reigned as "the uncrowned king" of the U.S. Senate in the '50s. He even died in a

memorable way, suffering a heart attack on New Year's Day 1963 while telling his doctor a funny story.

At first glance, this millionaire oilman-politician seems an unlikely champion of the earth. However, Kerr grew up on a small farm keenly aware of how Oklahoma, the last wilderness east of the Rockies, was being transformed. Vast numbers of settlers had made the Land Runs of the 1880s and '90s in search of free land. Towns had sprung up overnight with their schools and churches. "But in addition to the good they wrought," Kerr wrote, "the early Oklahoma settlers dangerously sapped the soil of its strength and fertility in their haste to get crops." The "thick layer of spongy soil" that was Oklahoma's treasure began to be lost with the plowing of the prairie. Fragile sandy hills were plowed only to blow away. Even land left unplowed was often overgrazed. In the forested regions of the state, indiscriminate cutting of trees had left hillsides scarred by erosion after every hard rain. Scarcely 40 years after the Runs, Oklahoma has a greater percentage of eroded land than any other state.

Kerr felt called to do something about this state of affairs. He had witnessed Oklahoma's boom and bust cycles and never forgot what his father told him one day as they worked in the cotton fields: "I want you to help refurnish that land that men have stripped and clear the streams they have muddied."

Kerr would have to travel far from home before he could fulfill his father's ambition for him. First as governor from 1943 to 1947 and then as U.S. Senator from 1948 to 1963, Kerr had an opportunity to give back to the state that had given him so much. In Washington, he became a tireless campaigner for Oklahoma, in fact, his zealousness earned him the nickname "Mr. Oklahoma". As chair of Senate Select Committee on National Water Resources, Kerr was the motivating force behind the huge (costing over one billion dollars) Arkansas Basin Project. Its centerpiece was the channeling of the Arkansas and the Verdigris Rivers creating a year-round direct water route from Tulsa to the Gulf

of Mexico. This was a seemingly impossible project; Will Rogers once said it would be easier to pave the Arkansas than make it navigable. But Rogers probably hadn't counted on Bob Kerr.

While lambasted as a boondoggle at the time by some of his political enemies, the channel has had an important economic impact on eastern Oklahoma. But navigation was only one benefit Kerr saw in such water projects- he also saw them as conservation projects.

Kerr used his political power for conservation. He sponsored bills making these water projects possible, not only in Oklahoma but across the nation. He also coauthors the Pollution Control Act that provided money for adequate sewage treatment and water pollution research. And he authored a bill to broaden soil conservation projects.

Kerr made his case for conservation in his landmark 1960 book, *Land, Wood and Water*. Far from being a dull political tome, the book sparkles with Kerr's insight and passion for stewardship. For him, conservation equaled national security. How could America compete if she had to feed a growing population on eroding farmland? How could she meet the housing needs of her people if timberland was vanishing or provide pure water to them if rivers were polluted?

While politician Kerr was orchestrating large-scale conservation measures, citizen Kerr came home to Oklahoma to begin a more personal conservation project. "I had spent years persuading others to believe in the future and to conserve our land, wood and water. Here was my chance to put into practice what I had been saying."

In the '50s, he had discovered the wild beauty of the Poteau River Valley and the Ouachita Mountains in southeastern Oklahoma. The ridge tops and south-facing slopes of these mountains were originally heavily forested with shortleaf pine. Hardwoods such as sweetgums, oaks, and maples thrived on

moist, northern slopes and along rivers. Here he began playing in what he called his “wonderland workshop”.

It was a serious kind of play. The first sawmills had been set up in the area 100 years before. The best trees had long ago been cut as George Phillips, Oklahoma’s first forester wrote “with no thought of the future.” One of citizen Kerr’s first conservation projects was the replanting of pine seedlings on the slopes of Poteau Mountain. “I cannot describe the joy of planting under the sun and the quickly moving clouds,” he wrote. “It gives a new faith in tomorrow... .”

Kerr eventually bought around 60,000 acres of land- from bottomland to rough mountain top- near the town of Poteau in LeFlore County. Looking toward retirement, he built a native stone house on a bluff with one of the best views in Oklahoma. He established the Kermac cattle herd, famous for its 1000 head of registered Angus cattle and its star bull, the prodigious Hyland Marshall, who sired 7000 calves over his lifetime. There was even a poem, “Oklahoma’s Greatest Ranch,” written about the place by an admirer, Sam Scantlan. One stanza describes the idyllic scene:

And the cattle grazing slowly on the glade
Were fat from having nothing else to do,
Except to eat the grass and rest in the shade
And raise five thousand calves, which now were due

It would have been out of character for Kerr to live in lordly isolation from his neighbors. He meant his ranch to be a model for area ranchers. “In this part of Oklahoma, which is so rich in beauty, but so poor for farming,” writes his daughter Kay of her father’s intentions, “he wanted to challenge farmers and demonstrate the potential increases in pasture and cattle production which could come with improving soil fertility, using higher quality breeding stock, and developing better overall management.”

His first efforts at clearing waterlogged bottoms and establishing pastures, however, were greeted with skepticism by at least one old-timer who wondered out loud if he wasn't "a dumb fool, and eccentric, too." This pronouncement did not stop him from talking up his plans with area farmers and learning all he could from them at the same time. Close friends have noted his ability to communicate with all varieties of folk: black and white, rich and poor. His presence and concern gave people in the area a feeling of optimism about their economic future, one businessman remembered years later.

On breaks from the Senate, he stayed at the ranch, overseeing its operations and entertaining. His guests included President John F. Kennedy, Vice President Lyndon Johnson, and Tennessee Senator Albert Gore, Sr. (father of Vice President Al Gore).

Unfortunately, Kerr did not live to retire to his beloved ranch. Not long after his death, a nonprofit charitable foundation, the Kerr Foundation, was established by his widow Grayce B. Kerr and their four children, Robert Jr., William, Breene, and Kay. In 1965-66, after Mrs. Kerr died, the Kerr Foundation's Agriculture Division was established to carry on Senator Kerr's work in conservation-oriented agriculture. It gained a national reputation for its work with animal health, and independent examiners concluded in 1984 that the Agricultural Division had had a "considerable impact on many farms and ranches of southeast Oklahoma and western Arkansas."

In 1986, the Kerr Foundation, which was primarily a grant-giving foundation (except the Ag Division), was divided into four parts. The Agricultural Division became a new, independent organization, The Kerr Center for Sustainable Agriculture, Inc. Today it is the largest private operating foundation dedicated to sustainable agriculture. Located south of Poteau on 4150 acres, The Kerr Center has farm demonstrations, research projects, educational activities, and a farm consultation service.

What is sustainable agriculture? It's often broadly defined as agriculture that is not just economically viable but ecologically sound, too. It is agriculture that is not wasteful or poisonous; that gives back an equal amount or more than what it takes of land, wood, and water (and people) and as such can ideally be practiced forever. In short: It is healthy agriculture. The Kerr Center too has gained national prominence as a leader in what has become a movement for a sustainable agriculture and a sustainable world.

Senator Kerr had believed, number one, in the promise of Oklahoma- the land that his father and mother had settled. He believed it was possible to heal her land and conserve her natural resources. He believed Oklahomans should be able to make a living in Oklahoma and that life on the land had to be a part of Oklahoma's future. And he believed strongly in helping people help themselves. For 30 years these two organizations, the Kerr Foundation Agricultural Division and The Kerr Center for Sustainable Agriculture, have been true to those beliefs.

Let us never forget that the cultivation of the earth is the most important labor of man. Unstable is the future of a country which has lost its taste for agriculture. If there is one lesson of history that is unmistakable, it is that national strength lies very near the soil. --Daniel Webster

With high hopes, the Kerr Foundation Agricultural Division took over 4150 acres of the original Kerr Ranch and bought 526 head of cattle from the Kerr estate. Despite its unassuming name, the Ag Division had big plans. They would establish a research ranch to further the work with cattle and pastures that Senator Kerr had begun. And they would reach out to area farmers through an ambitious farm consultation program. Staff experts would spend time with farmers and provide customized advice. It was a grassroots effort- the idea was to find out what kind of information farmers needed and provide it if possible.

Five short years before Kennedy had challenged Americans to “ask not what your country can do for you- ask what you can do for your country.” The division’s efforts epitomized that spirit.

The Ag Division was a pioneering organization. It was (and still is) unusual for a private charitable foundation to support agriculture rather than the arts or humanities; such work is generally the province of the Cooperative Extension Service. It would be operating far from the large farms of wheat, soybeans and alfalfa in Oklahoma’s central and western red dirt flatland in a part of the state that was considered something of an agricultural backwater.

Southeastern Oklahoma’s farming history, however, is long. Some early agriculturists were the Spiro Mound people who built a grand city on the northern edge of what is now LeFlore County in the Arkansas River valley around 1000 A.D. They built their advanced civilization on corn, the miracle grain of the New World. After the Mound Builder civilization crumbled and dispersed, Caddoan-speaking tribes lived in the area. They also lived lightly on the land, growing corn in the river valleys and hunting for plentiful game in the vast pine-oak-hickory forests of the uplands and hardwood bottomlands. In the 1830s, the Choctaws were removed from their home in Mississippi to southeastern Oklahoma. They too practiced small-scale subsistence farming, though some Choctaws, usually mixed bloods, owned slaves and established cotton plantations farther south along the Red River.

This was ostensibly Indian Territory, but after the Civil War non-Indians of all descriptions- outlaws like Belle Star, itinerant laborers, and especially tenant farmers- began moving into the area. The Choctaws began to lose control of the land after the federal government forced them to break up their common holdings into individual allotments in the late 1800s. At the dawning of the twentieth century, there was heavy immigration into the area and much of the land passed into non-Indian ownership. For these new settlers, Oklahoma was the Promised Land, their last chance to prosper on their own land.

Sadly, the promise was short lived. Prices fluctuated wildly, and there was too much pressure on the land: the soil was overworked, topsoil washed away, and hopes of self-sufficiency were dashed. Farmland all over Oklahoma was consolidated into the hands of a few. By 1930, the majority of farmers again were reduced to sharecropping.

Almost as quickly as they came, these farmers began leaving. The outmigration that began in the '20s slowed somewhat in the '30s. By then the typical farm in LeFlore County was about 70 acres, half of it in crops, such as corn, sweet sorghum cane, and notably, cotton. The family typically had a horse, two mules, four head of cattle and calves, and three or so head of swine.

This typical farm was destined to pass by mid-century. During the '40s and '50s the area experienced another rapid decline in population- 40 percent or more in some areas. Families moved to urban areas (often in California) in search of jobs. By 1960, three-quarters of the country's agricultural jobs were gone.

In the '60s manufacturing began to replace these agricultural jobs, and the tide of outmigration slowly turned. Attracted by its beauty, retirees also moved in, often onto small "dream" farms. With Senator Kerr as an example, farmers became ranchers- knocking King Cotton off his throne and installing instead, Queen Cow.

This new rancher differed considerably from his predecessors. He typically owned his land and ran small herds of cattle on rough, unimproved pastures. He juggled full-time employment with part-time ranching or farming in an attempt to make the land pay for itself. When surveyed by the Ag Division these farmers said what they needed the most was information on how to manage their herds and pastures.

In response, the organization made pasture improvement its main thrust. On the ranch's 2,530 acres of pasture, bermudagrass, a highly adaptable southern forage, was deemed to be "the basic pasture grass". Staff specialists studied how this warm-season grass adapted to different soil types and tested varieties. They

also did research on another grass, tall fescue, a cool-season cultivar from Kentucky.

Noting that the soils of eastern Oklahoma had been depleted of basic nutrients of phosphorus and potassium, specialists advocated a one-time application or applications over several years of these two nutrients in order to make the top soil productive again and to increase farm income. After that, the challenge was to maintain productivity without the continued application of these two minerals, which are slow to build and accumulate under natural biological means.

They also cautiously approved the judicious use of herbicides to save pastures from brush and undesirable species of weeds that had resulted from overgrazing. Using proper management, marketing and production practices, specialists predicted that the farmer could see his production double. The division's livestock specialists also advised ranchers to invest in higher quality breeding stock. They started a bull lease program for those who wanted to upgrade the bloodlines of their herds. On the Kerr Ranch, specialists did herd management studies with the registered Angus.

The division wasn't concerned solely with cattle. Specialists also experimented with swine production, small fruits like blueberries, and other horticulture crops. On the conservation side, they designed projects to appeal to the sportsman. They experimented with managing pastureland for game birds like quail, ducks, and other migratory waterfowl. In cooperation with Langston University, they also looked into increasing fish production in farm ponds.

The key to the success of these projects was the staff. A 1984 independent assessment praised the staff for its "quality and dedication." The division's first director was Dr. Roy Chessmore. Chessmore had expertise in pasture grasses. He later wrote a book on the subject, *Profitable Pasture Management*, the profits from which still support an agronomy scholarship to Oklahoma State University

(OSU). Members of the staff were experts in various agriculture disciplines, ranging from agricultural economics to agronomy to livestock production.

As if managing a ranch and conducting research and demonstration projects were not enough of a challenge, specialists found that they had to win over the southeastern Oklahoma farmer. In general, these smallholders felt neglected by OSU's Cooperative Extension Service and Experiment Station. Southeastern Oklahoma's only agriculture research station located at Heavner had been closed in the 1950s. This left southeastern Oklahoma with no research station. Given that southeastern Oklahoma has an ecosystem unique in the state, farmers in the area believed that research done in other parts of Oklahoma by OSU scientists would not apply well to their situation.

Farmers welcomed an institution that was doing research right there-on the same soil, with the same rainfall, with the same grass- that they had on their farms. It wasn't long before farmers flocked to field days and took tours of the ranch. "Extension is for western Oklahoma, Kerr is for eastern Oklahoma," summed up Rick Ward, LeFlore County Farmers Home Administration Supervisor.

Specialists produced information sheets and a monthly newsletter that was mailed to 2000 people. A farm advice column was distributed to 16 area newspapers, which reached 100,000 people each week (at a cost to the Ag Division of about \$35). Written by Jim Horne, who became director in 1979, the column was well received- described as "informative, but not too technical." The division also produced videotapes and three different correspondence courses. One correspondence course student commented: "I believe I'm a little wiser when I go to the feed store. I've saved 30 percent on my feed bill."

As satisfying as these efforts were, the Ag Division poured its heart and soul into the farm consultation program. In Oklahoma, most of the land is in private hands, and the individual landowner is the guardian of the basic natural resources of land, wood and water, as Robert S. Kerr had pointed out in his book.

How best to reach this son (or daughter) of the soil? Why, make a house call: visit him at home, walk around the farm with him, and let him point out what he is proud of and what he needs help with. Take a soil sample. Get a feel for the farmer- find out how many children he has, how much time he has for farming, and what his financial resources are. Get a feel for the farm- not only as a place of production, but as the home place.

Often three or more specialists would visit 125-150 farms a year. They would work with the farmer in developing an individualized in-depth “farm plan.” This was a kind of blueprint for the operation. The farm’s assets were inventoried and considered. The goals and desires of the farm family, of course, formed the basis of the plan. Photographs from the time pictured Kerr specialists talking with the farm family around the dining room table.

This personal approach, while time consuming, was the key to the program’s success. Consultation with the Ag Division could result in real economic gains: in 1983 alone it was conservatively estimated that cooperating farms realized an increase in net farm income of \$2,000. Farmers were heeding advice to improve their pastures and upgrade their breeding stock. Farmer’s trusted the division’s various specialists because of their depth of knowledge and because they weren’t afraid to get their hands dirty. They even had success in reaching “the one half of the one third of the people who won’t listen to anyone,” as one OSU Extension Specialist at Stillwater put it.

Just how much regard farmers and ranchers had gained for the Ag Division was put to the test beginning in 1983. In cooperation with OSU and United States Department of Agriculture (USDA), it mounted an ambitious program to eradicate brucellosis, popularly known as bangs. For 45 years, officials had worked to eradicate this most serious of cattle diseases, but had failed. A highly infectious bacterial disease, brucellosis affects the cow’s reproduction, causing abortion and delayed conception. It also causes weight loss, decreased milk production, and even enlarged arthritic joints. The human

form of the disease, undulant fever, threatens people who work closely with cattle.

With these effects, the disease can substantially decrease a herd's worth. Infected cattle could not be shipped across state lines. Buyers boycotted breeding stock from infected areas in Oklahoma. Unfortunately, parts of southeastern Oklahoma, including LeFlore County, had long had a high rate of infection. This fact made Oklahoma one of the eleven states with high rates of infection, while the disease was under control in most places. Obviously, this was a barrier to making the area a ranching leader.

Like human diseases such as smallpox and polio, the key to eradicating brucellosis lay not in finding a cure, but in prevention through vaccination. Fortunately, an effective vaccine existed. The problem was getting farmers to use it.

There were several reasons ranchers failed to vaccinate. Improperly administered, the vaccine could cause the animal to test positive for the disease, causing big problems since such animals were treated as infected until proven not to be. Some ranchers doubted the effectiveness of the vaccine. Others were unaware of the seriousness of the disease and resented government regulations they did not understand. On top of that, ranchers feared quarantine, and its devastating effect on profits. This situation had led to widespread skirting of regulations and a continuation of the status quo. State and federal efforts at education had been inadequate, even counterproductive. In 1981, the division began a small-scale effort at brucellosis education. "The farmers needed the truth- to understand why the regulations were there," says Horne. While rates of vaccination went up only slightly, other results were more dramatic: half the producers who doubted the vaccine would work had changed their minds, as did half those who believed vaccination was not worth the effort. In addition, producers surveyed pronounced private foundations (such as Kerr) as the best

source of information about animal health. Eighteen years of building ties to the community seemed to be paying off.

Aware that more needed to be done and buoyed by these initial successes, the division launched a large-scale program that ran over four years. Horne and staff put “a lot of spirit and passion” in the project, he recalls. They prepared a series of ten fact sheets that answered questions about the disease in a straightforward way. They spoke about the problem at community meetings and prepared videos and instructional programs for computers. They ended up distributing a million pieces of information to producers and others involved in agriculture. While the initial target area was five counties in southeastern Oklahoma and infected areas in nearby states, the campaign eventually went nationwide. As a result, the division gained national attention.

The results were impressive. In the first two years of the campaign, the number of infected herds went down nationwide. For awhile, LeFlore County led the state in rate of vaccination. Today, 15 years after the initial program, there are fewer than 150 infected herds in the nation as compared to several thousand in the country when the program began. There are none in Oklahoma today. Why did this campaign succeed while past efforts had failed? In part, says Horne, it was a question of attitude. “We listened to [farmers’] needs and fears and provided them with credible evidence,” says Horne, and this worked.

To use, to understand, to love the soil, is a civilizing process.- Robert S. Kerr

It used to be a favorite American fantasy that by the year 2001 we would be blissfully free of the constraints of planet Earth. We would all be jetting around in our personal spaceships high above vast cities of glass. Our clothes would look straight out of a Star Trek episode and our food would simply be created from thin air whenever we pressed a button. Some of us would have

colonized Mars where with a flip of a switch and a dose of the right chemical, we could mold the rocks of the red planet into yummy entrees and interesting furniture.

Perhaps these fantasies of escaping the earth are not surprising-sometimes problems here seem overwhelming. In the early '70s, Americans first became aware that the supply of oil was largely out of our control and apt to get more expensive. Our garbage threatened to engulf us, and pollution reached critical levels: The Cuyahoga River in Cleveland actually caught on fire. In response, the environmental movement was born.

People began recycling everything from aluminum cans to grand old houses. The public supported cleaning up the air and water and protecting plants and animals in danger of extinction, including our national symbol, the bald eagle. What was natural was valued, both in fashion and food: cotton elbowed out double knits, Tang faded in favor of fresh squeezed orange juice. After or astronauts went to the moon and sent back pictures of lovely, cloudy blue Earth, Americans realized that our planet, far from being indestructible, is a fragile spaceship we are riding on a slow journey through the universe.

Eventually these historic changes in attitude were bound to affect agriculture, that most conservative of endeavors. In a 1980 study, USDA had noted the concerns of the general public, farmers, and environmental groups about the country's system of food production. In addition to concern over the demise of the family farm and localized marketing systems, the USDA found people were worried about the state of the soil. Topsoil erosion according to some reports was exceeding Dust Bowl rates in some areas. Runoff was carrying away precious soil nutrients.

The public was also worried about pollution. Common agricultural "inputs" such as fertilizers and pesticides were contaminating surface water and groundwater, threatening animal and human health. Another stated concern was pesticide residues on food and their possible effects.

It was an alarming study, which suggested to many that the security of our country's food production system was in jeopardy. There was cause for hope, however. The study also found that a small group of farmers who had switched to a low-input approach to agriculture were successful:

“environmentally sound, energy conserving, yet productive and profitable.”

Change was coming. Partly due to testimony by Robert Rodale, Jr., of the Rodale Institute and the Kerr Center's Jim Horne before agricultural committees chaired by Representative Jaime Whitten and Senator Patrick Leahy, the 1985 farm bill allocated money for what had been dubbed “sustainable” agriculture.

There is no one-way to practice sustainable agriculture. Instead, there are a number of approaches to making a given farm sustainable depending on local conditions. Often these approaches have the farmer cooperating with rather than dominating nature; relying less on loans from banks and government subsidies; and using fewer petrochemicals and pesticides. It's a self-sufficient kind of farming- management intensive, profitable and less polluting.

The philosophy of sustainable agriculture appealed to Senator Kerr's daughter Kay and her husband Robert Adair, Sr. They believed strongly in the spiritual benefits of farm life. Kay Adair felt that on a farm practicing sustainable agriculture, it would be possible for the farm family to stay in touch with nature. “Being in touch with natural cycles can keep you balanced,” she has said. “Staying connected to nature is essential to spiritual health.”

So in the midst of the '80s farm crisis, when the end of the family farm was being widely proclaimed, the Adairs began the process of giving the Ag Division a new “sustainable focus.” Like her father, Kay Adair believed in looking ahead. She hoped the new emphasis on sustainable agriculture would keep the organization on the cutting edge as the new century fast approached.

In May of 1985, a new board of trustees formed to guide the fledgling organization. Members of the five-member board had diverse backgrounds, and their experience with sustainable agriculture varied. Besides the Adairs, the

board included the Ag Division's director Jim Horne and Walter Woolley, Jr., past president of the Oklahoma Cattleman's Association. From out of state came Wes Jackson of the Salina, Kansas, Land Institute. Author of the seminal book *New Roots for Agriculture*, Jackson had helped to inspire the Adairs' thinking about the new agriculture. Later that year, several new trustees were added including Wendell Berry, Kentucky farmer and author of another important book, *The Unsettling of America: Culture and Agriculture*.

The organization was to be incorporated as a new nonprofit charitable foundation, but first a new name had to be decided upon. Should it be The Kerr Center for Regenerative Agriculture? Alternative Agriculture? Organic Agriculture? Not only was the name up in the air, but so was the organization- half the staff quit soon after the name sustainable was adopted and the transition began.

Horne, who stayed, understood the fears of those who had bailed out. He too was new to sustainable agriculture and as yet not entirely convinced of its practicality. He had the caution of a man whose area of expertise was agricultural economics. He had seen just how difficult it was to make a living on a farm without adding ecology to the farmer's list of worries. However, he had also realized that many farmers were increasingly unable to afford the kind of inputs that conventional agriculture demanded. He knew that something had to change if the family farm was to survive.

Horne had a strong belief in the value of living on the land. This belief would help sustain him through what would be, to put it mildly, a difficult few years. From 1985 to 1986, Horne had to put together an entirely new organization. A business office had to be created and operating guidelines established. A mostly new staff had to be hired. And farmers had to be appeased- they kept the Center's phones ringing, wanting to know why their trusted advisors were no longer there.

Horne was assisted in the transition by Barbara Chester, a secretary with the Ag Division from its first days, and Steve Muntz, a pasture specialist with the Division since 1980. Muntz retained the trust of area ranchers and was Horne's right-hand man through the chaotic first years at the Center.

The most important task facing them was deciding just what the Center was going to do. Wendell Berry's definition of sustainable agriculture as "an agriculture that does not deplete land or people" sounded simple, but was not so simple to achieve. The new staff embarked on a fact-finding tour of land grant universities and private sustainable groups, such as the Rodale Institute, mostly in the northeastern states. They read, studied, and discussed the problems with conventional agriculture and argued over the new approaches.

Some specialists came to the Center with a background in biological sciences, eager to apply the principles of ecology to agriculture. Others came from more conventional agriculture backgrounds, disillusioned with the status quo and willing to try new techniques. There were women as well as men, this in itself a change from most conventional agricultural organizations.

Working at the Kerr Center offered a unique opportunity for those interested in sustainable agriculture. Specialists had the freedom to entertain novel ideas; in fact, the ability to think creatively was a basic requirement. This was partly because sustainable agriculture was so new and partly because The Kerr Center was and is an independent found. One can pursue research free from the constraints imposed when an agribusiness foots the bill (as is the case sometimes in university settings). The Center runs on the earning from its own endowment, grants, and donations. (It has no connection with the energy company co founded by Senator Kerr, The Kerr McGee Corporation.)

Working at the Kerr Center would have its drawbacks, too. While sustainable ideas may have been gaining ground in other parts of the country at the time, in Oklahoma they were unpopular, if they had been heard of at all. Horne got little support from his peers in agriculture education. "It was really

lonely the first five years,” Horne recalls. Horne and his new staff had to convince farmers and ranchers that they hadn’t turned into a bunch of radical environmentalists. He remembers thinking: “This is really going to be a hard sell.”

Crossing the Poteau River to the south side of the ranch, you can imagine you are entering another world, a world before fences and energy crises, a more spacious world of vast grasslands, broken by forests of oaks and watered by shimmering oxbow lakes.

On summer evenings, comes the clamor of tree frogs, the buzz saw of cicadas, and the insistent call of the chuck-will’s widow. There are wild smells—the sharp perfume of yellow flowers, the resin of pine, and the vanilla of clover—in the humid air along with the tame, earthy smell of cattle. On a foggy morning, the shiny green fescue planted by man is as beautiful as the native bug bluestem, and the cows emerging from the fog are as handsome as the deer, their bellows as startling as the bugling of elk.

The farm is a part of nature. This is an ancient, basic idea. But in modern “industrial” agriculture, this view of the farm had been replaced by simpler models, such as the farm as mining operation—where food is extracted, like gold from the soil. Or the farm as factory, where food is assembled like a bicycle from a few raw materials.

In 1986, The Kerr Center began to transform the Kerr Ranch from a well-managed, conventional spread into a model sustainable enterprise, tapping into the natural cycles of abundant sun and rain in southeastern Oklahoma to grow grass and beef without relying on just a chemical fertilizer fix. In doing so, they would become the only such organization with livestock as a primary focus.

To make a ranch or farm sustainable, it must be viewed as a system. Farm as *system*: In Webster’s definition of the term are words such as interrelated, complex, and whole. On a ranch, the cows, the grass they eat and the soil they walk on cannot be separated in the long run, if the system is to remain viable.

So it stands to reason that the Center soon did a biological inventory of the plants and trees of the ranch's 4000 or so acres of pasture, bottomland, woodland, and lakes. As it turned out, the cows shared the spread with a surprising diversity of plant species, more than 500, including such obscure plants as pencil flower and porcupine grass, as well as the familiar oak and pine. As new management techniques were tried, the survey could be used to assess their impacts.

The Center continued to do a variety of educational activities during its first years, including hosting field days and tours, producing a newsletter, and continuing the brucellosis campaign. The center of operations continued to be the ranch south of Poteau. However in 1988, a research station was established in Vero Beach, Florida, to work with citrus, and in 1990 the Kerr Angus Ranch was established near Coyle, Oklahoma, to work with livestock. The emphasis was on research and demonstration projects. After all, how could specialists advise farmers about how to make their farms sustainable if they hadn't done it themselves?

In 1989, a group of farm managers, ranch workers, and researchers headed by Horne collaborated on guidelines for evaluating both the economic and ecological sustainability of the Center's projects. The guidelines addressed fertility management and soil health, insect and disease management, and energy use and conservation. They also dealt with biological diversity, water management, nutrient recycling and waste management, plant and animal adaptation to local conditions, and economic accounting systems (to include both monetary and non-monetary benefits). The ten areas address the major barriers to sustainability and can be used by any farmer wanting to evaluate the viability of his farm. The creation of this canon of concerns was certainly a first in Oklahoma and was a significant contribution to the national debate on just how to make farms and ranches sustainable. (The guidelines are currently being expanded.)

How to keep soil healthy and fertile is perhaps the most important task of the farmer and a key concern of sustainable agriculture. Since World War II, keeping the soil fertile has meant spreading commercial fertilizers-nitrogen, phosphorous, and potassium-on the soil. These essential soil nutrients are costly to produce and distribute, in the process using sizable amounts of fossil fuels. While the Ag Division had advocated the use of such outside inputs to improve the fertility of the soil, The Kerr Center began looking at ways to maintain fertility by less expensive, more natural means.

Ecologist Teresa Maurer, on staff from 1988 to 1992, advocated looking at natural systems to learn how to manage agricultural systems. For instance, what might one learn from prairies about managing pasturelands? How were the prairies grazed by the buffalo so long ago?

The answer: they were grazed in rotation. One way to build fertility, recycle nutrients, and conserve energy on modern pastureland is through the practice of rotational grazing. Where the buffalo roamed, they were not followed by truckloads of 10-20-10 fertilizer; the buffalo grazed the grass and moved on-allowing the grass plenty of time to rest and grow again. In other words, the range was not overgrazed.

The same is true in rotational or controlled grazing of cattle. The Kerr Center introduced the practice to southeastern Oklahoma. One of the Center's first demonstration projects was on the 1300-acre Dean Unit, designed to show the full-time rancher sustainable techniques. Cows are rotated through a number of pastures giving each pasture a set rest period. The system works-soil fertility has been maintained at generally the same levels since 1986 without adding costly fertilizer. Cow manure returns nutrients to the soil. Earthworms that would have been killed by excessive fertilization live on to aerate the soil.

The approach requires a change in thinking though. As Livestock Specialist Will Lathrop has observed: "Before I came to Kerr the only thing that mattered to me was the cow. I never looked down. I only looked at them." But

the sustainable approach has turned his thinking 180 degrees. “Everything to me now is in the soil, and it works its way up. Rotational grazing is teaching the farmer that is you don’t have soil, you don’t have anything.”

Recycling nutrients and building up the soil through natural means has been the goal of many projects over the years. At the 20-acre Kerr Horticulture Farm, the staff has been experimenting with cover crops, compost, and crop rotations to build soil fertility. These are old techniques that had largely been abandoned, yet they work extremely well. Cover crops such as purple hull peas or crimson clover add nitrogen to the soil. They also can prevent soil erosion, increase organic matter (which in turn enhances biological activity in the soil), and improve soil structure so that water is more available to crops. For several years, the staff made compost in a composting chicken house on the Rock Creek Farm, a 45-acre demonstration of a diversified farm. A layer of sawdust from plentiful Oklahoma oaks on the floor of the house absorbed the chicken waste and transformed it into what looks and smells like good, fresh dirt. A high-nitrogen compost fertilizer, it was spread on crops and pastures. Such compost does not pollute groundwater or the river like large amounts of raw chicken waste or chemical fertilizer can.

Pesticides can also pollute surface water and groundwater. Reducing their use would seem to be a win-win proposition, not only protecting these natural resources but saving the farmer money, and protecting farmer and consumer health. The problem is these benefits are often long term or hidden, which is often the case with sustainable techniques. Pesticides on the other hand can give spectacularly instant results. In the South particularly, weeds (and insects) are one of the hardest things to manage sustainably.

It has been done, though, at The Kerr Center. One of the longest running and most successful projects is the Cannon Multispecies Grazing Project, begun in 1988. Project Manager Elise Mitchell grazes sheep with cows and has found that not only do they get along pretty well, but the sheep love weeds like

ragweed and cocklebur that the cattle shun. The cattle eat the grass, which the sheep don't care for. She has also used goats to clear brush in pastures. Along the way she has found that llamas and Great Pyrenees dogs are attentive guardians of lambs and ewes.

The concept is basic-don't try and fit a square peg into a round hole. Look for something-animal or plant-that fits the environment, instead of changing the environment. Sometimes the solution to a problem is quite novel: Horticulture Specialist Alan Ware has found that Chinese weeder geese can keep his organic strawberries free of crabgrass. (The geese were used before World War II to keep cotton free of weeds). Grasses that seem particularly well adapted to Kerr land such as eastern gamagrass and tall fescue have also been researched.

In the sustainable scheme of things, it is a given that monoculture is not conducive to biodiversity, a strong tenet of sustainable agriculture. A case in point: a pasture without trees is like a beach without umbrellas- beautiful, but hot. Agroforestry Specialist Tim Snell has come up with an easy, inexpensive way to plant large numbers of trees in pastures. These plantings are multipurpose: used not only for cattle shade, but erosion control, windbreaks, and wildlife food and shelter. When mature, they can be harvested for fence posts, firewood, or for commercial use. Sometimes introducing a new element like trees into the environment has unexpected results. Snell has observed that in the tangled vegetation under the trees, mice thrived. They in turn ate large numbers of cocklebur seeds, cutting down on this troublesome pasture weed and saving time and money used to control it.

A diversity of crops and animals on a farm is often smart economics, akin to not putting all one's eggs in the same basket. Trees were the inspiration for another project. In 1989, Alan Ware began growing shitake mushrooms on small oak logs. These tasty Japanese mushrooms sell for high prices in specialty markets, and he found they are relatively easy to grow. The project has been the

Center's most popular thus far, spawning regular workshops and numerous requests for information.

Horticultural crops are well suited to the small acreages so common in The Kerr Center's area of influence. Early Center projects included growing blueberries, Christmas trees, and sweet sorghum. (Amish draft horses were used in cultivating and cutting the sorghum cane). In recent years, blackberries, strawberries, greenhouse bedding plants (using composted chicken litter as a potting medium), vegetables, and ornamental trees have been experimented with.

The Kerr Horticulture Farm has been certified organic by the state and so must use only natural pesticides or find other ways to combat pests. Finding such solutions sometimes means probing the mysteries of plant chemistry. On the Horticulture Farm, cover crops have been used to lure beneficial insects to the site. At the Vero Beach Research Station, Robert Adair, Jr. has created an effective, cost-efficient pest control spray using oil from the Neem tree and biopesticides. (This and other innovative practices of the Station's Sustainable Citrus Program are now being adopted by the citrus industry.) At the Center's Soil and Plant Analysis Laboratory, Russian scientist Maria Filimonova is investigating plants that may be used as natural pesticides. Plants such as black walnut trees have chemical compounds that inhibit the growth of other plants. Identifying the effects of such plants may one day allow farmers to grow their own herbicides.

The projects mentioned are just some of many tried over the last ten years. Progress Reports periodically summarize projects in detail and include cost analyses. Progress is assessed honestly, and how sustainable each project had proven to be is explored. The Center invites critical review and comment, says Horne. And new projects are always in the works.

We are oriented towards a practical, what works philosophy.- Alan Ware

The bottom line: Sustainable farming must be profitable, or it has no chance of success. To keep the staff in touch with farmers and their problems, the Center reinstated a full-fledged farm consultation service in 1992. Staff experts in livestock, pasture management, horticulture, agriculture economics, and forestry form consulting teams to visit farms within a 150-mile radius of the Center. "It's the heart of the program," says Horne. In 1996, the Center had 40 active "cooperators" as participating farmers are called.

Consultants average 12 visits a month to cooperators. These "house calls" are free and provide in-depth information to those who might not otherwise be able to afford it. (Farmers are under no obligation to follow suggestions). Mastering sustainable agriculture methods requires more information, training, time, and management skills than well-known conventional approaches do. This makes the Center's consultation service doubly valuable. Farm visits help specialists, too. Often farm visits are more like information exchanges, keeping them in touch with farm realities.

Farm visits can build relationships that last for years. Farmers respond well to face-to-face visits, says Horne. They feel more comfortable on their own turf, than visiting an office. Sometimes it takes several visits before consultants gain the trust of a farmer. Ware says that The Kerr Center consultants quickly learned what their Ag Division predecessors knew: college degrees and fancy offices don't impress the average eastern Oklahoma farmer. What does impress him is the consultant's willingness to assist however possible.

Cooperators vary in their farming experience- some are just beginners, while others have been at it for 50 years. Acreages also vary widely, from as little as 1 acre to 85 acres. Enterprises are almost evenly divided between livestock and horticulture, raising everything from Limousin cattle to medicinal herbs.

According to a recent survey, all found the information they have received useful and overwhelmingly rated the consultation service as excellent.

The aim of staff specialists, says Horne, is to take farmers in the “direction of sustainability.” Some have moved a little way, some a long way. They want to work with all kinds of farmers, he emphasizes, not just those already convinced of the wisdom of sustainable ideas. The current consultants all come from backgrounds in conventional agriculture, so they understand the conventional point of view. “I used to think ‘How can I live without paraquat’ too,” Ware jokes. But when he really understood sustainable agriculture, he was sold.

The goal of the program is to similarly educate the farmer and spark his understanding, without alienating him. Sometimes this requires a change in vocabulary, using “good sense management,” for instance, instead of sustainable agriculture. However they are conveyed, sustainable ideas provide an alternative to the status quo. Horne hopes such ideas will stimulate the farmer’s own creative thinking. Often the consultants act as a sounding board, says Ware, providing support for innovative ideas and reaffirming the farmer when he is on the right track.

Cooperators have incorporated a number of sustainable practices into their operation: rotational grazing, drip irrigation, direct marketing and composting. Specialists view even small changes, such as a farmer choosing a narrow spectrum over a broad spectrum herbicide, as progress. Minimizing the use of expensive chemicals is a small but important step toward a sustainable future. As Horne points out, the barriers to sustainable agriculture are largely psychological, a process of throwing off a half century of conventional wisdom that still exerts its influence daily. It’s a long-term proposition.

Back in 1986, when The Kerr Center for Sustainable Agriculture opened its doors, it became the only major source of information about sustainable agriculture for folks in rural Oklahoma. At that time, Oklahoma’s county extension agents- who do the bulk of farm advising- were untrained in the new

ideas and apt to view them with a suspicious eye. The Kerr Center became an alternative extension.

The Center soon began offering the public a variety of publications, most of them free of charge. (Donations are accepted to cover postage). The current publications list includes progress reports, manuals (on sweet sorghum and ponds), proceedings (of a pasture management clinic and field days), and research and education papers. Information packets focus on horticulture crops and livestock. Fact sheets cover a variety of subjects ranging from a popular booklet on shiitake mushrooms to a rundown of agroforestry practices to information on pasture legumes. About 10,000 publications are mailed each year all over the world.

In 1988, the first public field day was offered, and these have continued at a stepped up pace, with two field days per year in recent years. Tours are offered by appointment, and visitors have come from all over the world. Probably the most unusual group thus far has been 17 Pakistani scientists, who learned about sustainable agriculture while sampling such exotic fare (for them) as biscuits and Kerr Center sorghum.

The Center's educational activities vary, and the place becomes a college or museum or think tank or community center as the occasion demands. The Center has an extensive library on sustainable agriculture that is open to the public. The Center sponsors workshops on such topics as herbs, sustainable rural development, livestock production, shiitake mushroom production, and computer programs for farm accounting, to name just a few.

From 1992 to 1994, Meadowcreek, an environmental education center in north central Arkansas, was an affiliate of The Kerr Center. Meadowcreek offered workshops on energy, agriculture, and ecology. Each summer a group of seventh and eighth graders attended Meadowcreek Weeks, a two-week environmental education program. Kids did research projects and learned about building a sustainable society.

The Center also sponsors activities to enhance environmental awareness. The ranch is a wildlife preserve, home to ducks and turkeys. Locals have learned about beavers during “Watchable Wildlife” days. The Center has also accepted and endangered species, the burying beetle, which was relocated there in 1988 and 1989. For Earth Day, the staff present lessons to schoolchildren on composting and recycling.

While not everyone has time for a workshop, anyone can take a few minutes after supper to read The Kerr Center Newsletter. “It’s the biggest educational tool that we have,” acknowledges Lara Ervin, Education Coordinator. Through 20 years of changes, the newsletter has been a constant. Jim Horne wrote the first one out on a legal pad, and within a year the Ag Division staff had begun contributing to an expanded version. Previously issued monthly, it now appears bimonthly with more pages and is sent to about 2000 people, free of charge. The staff strives for high-quality content, says Ervin, and delivers easy-to-read mini lessons and articles on sustainable issues. The newsletter also lists upcoming events.

While such publications cast a wide net, in rural America there is often no substitute for community involvement. The staff is family oriented with ties to local churches and schools and of course to farmer’s groups. The Center helped organize the Farmers’ Market in Poteau to provide an outlet for local growers, many of whom have been cooperators. The Market had to be the best stocked of any outside a big city- summer vegetables and fruits; a gourmet section of jams, honey, brown eggs, and shiitake mushrooms; meats from rabbit to pork, as well as Italian bread and fresh flowers. Kids petted Katahdin sheep while their parents stocked up.

In October 1987, the Center sponsored its first sorghum festival, where specialists showed how to cook sorghum juice into sweet syrup. Twelve thousand people came to learn about the current potential of this crop, which in years gone by had been a staple of the area. The festival was a result of the

Center's sorghum project where specialists grew and milled the cane and learned to cook the juice into syrup (an almost lost art-it took about two years of practice before they produced a high-quality syrup).

Since 1991, the sorghum festival has been held at the Overstreet-Kerr Historical Farm in northern LeFlore County. The 140-acre farm, with its 100-year-old home and historic outbuildings, was donated to the Center in 1988, with the stipulation that the farm be kept alive. The Center did extensive restoration work from basement to roof to save the beautiful white house. Then the house was refurbished and redecorated in a historically accurate style. By 1991, the farm was opened to the public, once again a source of community pride.

The house has long been a local landmark. After marrying a Choctaw woman, Missourian T.G. Overstreet had established a 3000-acre ranch and farm in the late 1800s in the Choctaw Nation. Like Senator Kerr 75 years later, Overstreet cleared bottomland to establish his farm and was well known for the quality of his cattle- in fact he is credited with introducing Herefords into the area.

The historic farm is a large-scale demonstration of farm life in the Choctaw Nation/early Oklahoma and the only such project in the state. It's a popular outing for school groups, and a center for the community- host to weddings, arts and crafts shows and parties. The sorghum festival is the Historical Farm Fall Fest. Sorghum is made the old-fashioned way (milled with mule power and cooked over a wood fire). Craftspeople demonstrate other old-time occupations like broommaking, basketmaking, woodworking with hand tools and cidermaking.

Farm Manager Jim Combs has also begun a livestock and heirloom seed conservancy project. Combs keeps livestock used by Choctaw farmers around the turn of the century- Pineywoods cattle, Choctaw ponies (a rare strain of Spanish horse), Choctaw hogs, and Spanish goats. The purpose is to preserve genetic traits that modern breeds may lack.

Another purpose of the farm is to reexamine the elements of sustainable agriculture that existed 100 years ago. Combs shows visitors his Dominique chickens, known for their aggressive hunting down of insects in the lawn and orchard (an important trait in the pre-pesticide era). Kids can pet the Mammoth donkeys once used to pull the family in their wagon- gasoline-free transportation. Combs hopes town kids will realize that eggs come from chickens not from styrofoam cartons. He hopes they will absorb the lesson that such farmers were self sufficient and have important lessons to teach us today about sustainability.

When you're right, don't run. Hoe your row out.- Robert S. Kerr

About ten years ago, Kerr Center president Jim Horne predicted that by now a lot of people would be thinking about sustainable agriculture. "It's the only sane way," he commented.

He was right. During the first years of what promises to be seen as the sustainable revolution, the voices coming from The Kerr Center seemed to be crying in the wilderness. But things have changed. University researchers and educators have since begun "coming out of the closet," says Horne and voicing their interest in sustainable agriculture. One can now utter the word "sustainable" just about anywhere without the fear of bodily harm, jokes Ware.

Looking through a newspaper over the course of a month will confirm these changes. Researchers in Iowa are studying the soil as a living organism. Agribusinessmen in Washington, D.C. are talking with environmentalists about "agro-environmental" goals. A new college textbook is touted for new information on how to achieve pest control "with or without chemicals." The Gallo Brothers Winery in California is using cover crops to enrich the soil between rows of grapes.

“It’s not moving as fast as I would like,” says Horne, but nonetheless “it’s encouraging.” The changes are in part due to congressional testimony by Horne and other supporters of sustainable agriculture. After they spoke of the need for federally sponsored research in the area, sustainable agriculture was funded for the first time. The Low Input Sustainable Agriculture (LISA) program provided small grants to farmers and organizations, and Horne served on its administrative council.

The late ‘80s were heady days. While the Kerr Center was steaming along on its own projects it was beginning to forge ties to the many small groups and individuals eager to find out more about sustainable ag. In cooperation with others, The Kerr Center participated in three small grant projects under LISA. With 25 other organizations, The Kerr Center became a part of the Arkansas-Oklahoma Sustainable Agriculture Network (AOSA). It published a quarterly Newsletter, sponsored workshops and field days and provided an organization of like minded souls to offer each other support. In 1990, The Kerr Center hosted Oklahoma’s first conference on sustainable agriculture, bringing together farmers, Cooperative Extension personnel and scientists for two days.

Representing The Kerr Center, Horne has worked to keep sustainable agriculture before the public by serving on a number of USDA committees, including the National Sustainable Agriculture Advisory Council as chairman. The result: while agriculture policy had gone through some major upheavals, the money provided to sustainable agriculture programs increased from 4 to 11 million dollars per year. Grant money now comes through the successor to LISA, the Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education (SARE) program, and The Kerr Center continues to link Oklahoma farmers with SARE grants.

His efforts have kept The Kerr Center in the forefront of the sustainable agriculture movement. In recent years, Horne has served on the sustainable agriculture task force of President Clinton’s Council on Sustainable Development. Their task: to make policy recommendations on how government,

corporations, and individuals can move towards a “sustainable future”. The establishment of this council indicates that the idea of sustainability- whether it be in agriculture, energy use, or economic development- is an idea whose time has come.

Everywhere are the signs that this is so. In 1992, the Center made a foray into a conventional trade show by sponsoring sustainable farming workshops during the Horticulture Industries Show in Tulsa, Oklahoma. Since then, the Center has played an even bigger role in the show, and the numbers attending grow larger every year. The Oklahoma Shiitake Growers Association will hold their first meeting in late 1996, a direct result of the years of work by Alan Ware in demonstrating and promoting these mushrooms, which were virtually unknown in Oklahoma. A further sign of progress: The Kerr Center is organizing the first Oklahoma Southern Sustainable Agriculture Working Group, which is expected to be up and running in January of 1997. This grassroots farmers’ organization will join similar groups in other states working for sustainable agriculture. And because many farmers are no longer “beginners” in sustainable practices, the Center is planning more advanced workshops targeted at the Center’s cooperators.

While Oklahomans are waking up to sustainable agriculture, on the other side of the world, The Kerr Center is also making an impact. The Center participated in an exchange program with Russia in 1992, and since then has sponsored academic, farmer and student exchanges. In 1993, Horne presented a lecture titled “Ecological Agriculture: Our Approach” to members of the Biosphere Club at the Biological Center of the Russian Academy of Sciences in Pushchino. The lecture was subsequently published in Russian and English (available from the Center). He serves as director of the sustainable agriculture laboratory there, has lectured around Russia, and collaborated with Russian scientists. He was the first American to receive a doctorate from Timirayzev, the oldest agricultural academy in Moscow.

Because the Russians are eager for more information on sustainable agriculture, Horne is currently writing a book for them, the first such book to be published there. It deals with solutions to stressed agroecosystems as a result of state farm systems that are of the industrial model. (Horne may adapt the book for a general audience).

While Soviet-style conventional agriculture is highly dependent on fossil fuels, Russians disdain chemicals in their gardens. Gardens are essential in a country whose economy is in turmoil. It's common to see people carrying rakes and hoes on the subway as they head for their garden plots (often miles away). Russians, including highly trained scientists, like to brag about their fruit trees. They are connected to the land, says Horne, in a way that we, in large part, are not anymore.

This American disconnect from the earth is disturbing. He points out that we are only one generation away from losing any ties to farm life. This is more important than just losing ties with a particular occupation. An idea that is implicit in all The Kerr Center writing is that there is a profound relationship between people and the land. It's a spiritual relationship- we belong to the land. And the land nourishes us.

This spiritual connection is what makes farming a way of life instead of simply a job. On a farm, a family works together and is strengthened by it. Children learn responsibility caring for livestock and garden plots. Rural communities provide a sense of belonging that big cities can never equal.

That agriculture should nourish the whole person, body and soul, is a basic tenet of sustainable agriculture. But this nourishment is impossible if farmers can't afford to stay on their land. Historically, The Kerr Center (and before it, the Ag Division) has put much of its energy into the production end of agriculture: how best to grow cattle or tomatoes or sorghum. The Center is poised now to enter a new arena- that of sustainable rural development.

A recent study funded in part by SARE found that “lack of marketing alternatives” is the main barrier to more sustainable agriculture in the South. How best to overcome this barrier? The study proposes “ the creation of locally owned, value-added enterprises.”

The Center is approaching rural development from a couple of new angles. The first is through providing seed money for a new organization the Rural Opportunity Fund. This nonprofit organization is designed to help farmers who want to add value to their raw products, particularly those mindful of conserving natural resources. This “added-value” does not necessarily have to be a giant step into manufacturing or processing. It can be as simple as an onion grower grading his onions, or a forester making his own two by four’s. Second, the Center has commissioned an assessment of rural community development programs, to find out how funds are used and their effectiveness. The Center’s community rural development specialist is examining the structure of agriculture and the structure of communities in the state. The Center is looking at how laws, regulations, and trends have hurt small rural communities. The Center is also looking at the laws, trends and situations that favor the revitalization of these communities.

The stakes are high. Rural communities, desperate for jobs, are welcoming industries that often pay low wages and are polluting, that extract non-renewable resources and send their profits out of state. This type of development is not sustainable. The Kerr Center hopes to prompt a discussion both locally and nationally about just what kinds of enterprises are sustainable.

While The Kerr Center is widening its scope, so is the sustainable agriculture movement. It is no longer just a small group of farmers who recognizes that sustainable agriculture addresses “a food security issue for our nation,” says Horne. “It’s in all our best interests to get back on track and preserve our resources and not borrow from our children.” Senator Kerr, were he still around, would certainly agree.

All over the country, small grassroots community groups are springing up- the annual Sustainable Agriculture Directory of Expertise lists 700 organizations and individuals. Just as agriculture is the base on which we all stand, so may the ideas of sustainable agriculture someday form the basis of a dialogue between farmers, consumers, businessmen, environmentalists and ordinary citizens who want social and economic justice for all. Says Horne: "The spirit that drives this movement will never die."

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