

"Farm Together Now: A portrait of people, places and ideas for a new food movement" was a book published by Chronicle Books in late 2010 featuring interviews and photo essays about 20 farms across the United States. The book was a collaboration between Amy Franceschini & Daniel Tucker, with a foreword by Mark Bittman, Photography by Anne Hamersky & Illustrations by Corinne Matesich, Design by Brian Scott. see farmtogethernow.org

Chapter 1

Knopik Family Farm

Fullerton, Nebraska

Organizing body: 2, plus many more through various organizations

Scale: 1,000 acres for mob grazing, 400 for crops

Type: for profit

Key crop: 200 cows

In operation: since the late 1960s

Iconic plant/animal: Angus cow

Websites: North Star Neighbors: www.nebraskafood.org/shop/producers/nstar.php

Nebraska Food Cooperative: www.nebraskafood.org

Third-generation farmer Jim Knopik decided to protest when he found out that some very large “factory farm” meat producers were going to be moving to town and disrupting the local economy, and bringing along their environmentally toxic approaches to food production. In the process of mounting a resistance against the confined-animal feeding operation (CAFO), Knopik realized that his own farm was involved in some practices that were also ecologically unsustainable and were harming the animals and the land.

Knopik reformed his farming and founded North Star Neighbors with his wife, Carolyn, his son, Ron, and a network of four farms in the region. North Star Neighbors is a direct-marketing cooperative specializing in raising beef, pork, lamb, chicken, turkey, and duck. Their website states: “Our animals are raised from birth on our farms. We know exactly what they eat from birth. They are never given antibiotics or artificial growth stimulants. No animal by-products are fed to our animals. Our animals are not grown in confinement buildings. They are raised on grass and in open lots and grain finished on non-GMO corn, soybeans, oats and alfalfa. Our animals are taken directly from our farms to a family owned, USDA inspected processing plant.”

Recently elected county supervisor, Knopik is devoted to environmental activism and has started the statewide Nebraska Food Cooperative, which helps sustainable producers directly market their food online.

Could you talk about where you’re from—the region, the people, your land?

Jim Knopik, owner: I live ten miles west of Fullerton, Nebraska, in Nance County, which has a lot of different kinds of soil. I’ve lived on this farm since I was a year old. And now I’m sixty. When my dad started farming, it was all about sustainable agriculture. He would just get whatever the soil would give him. If they wanted fertilization, they did it through rotation. When I started, in the late sixties, we wanted to get bigger and be more productive—we started using synthetic fertilizers and chemicals in our farming operations.

What was it that you saw on other people’s farms that convinced you to make that switch?

Less weeds in the field, for one thing—that’s something farmers always like to have: clean

fields. So if the chemicals can do that, you naturally move that way. It's a lot about image too. If things don't look good, people won't listen to you. Image is everything.

How has your livestock operation changed throughout the years?

I raised hogs out in the open up until about ten years ago; we probably raised eighty to a hundred at a time. When I first started raising hogs, I could make fifteen dollars a head. If you sell a hundred of them, that's fifteen hundred dollars—a lot of money back in 1970. And then, around 1980, I built a confinement operation, which handled about five hundred at a time. But I found out that in confinement, animals' health becomes an issue. It got to bother me that I had to run around with a syringe in my pocket all the time, vaccinating hogs. When it came time to have those animals on medication twenty-four hours a day to keep them somewhat healthy, that's when, in my mind, it wasn't sustainable. I didn't think I was qualified to administer medicine in the way it needed to be done. But there was this “get big or get out” idea.

As time went on, and those profit margins went down to two or three bucks, well, you had to raise five times as many hogs to make the same amount of money. The [consolidation] of the industry just kept taking those margins away from the producers and putting them in their own pockets. That's why now you see the big operations doing fifty thousand hogs.

When did the CAFO factory farm try to move into your community?

I think it was June 1997. That situation caused me to take a hard look at what we were doing on the farm. The way we operated then was by observing our responsibility as farmers to feed people. You hear on the radio that every farmer feeds 128 people—that's the kind of thing that

keeps you in the seat for eighteen hours a day. That was propaganda, I think, but it made me work hard just the same. My responsibility was to society, to feed people.

But after the big hog guys came in and tried to push all of their hogs onto a small, little area in our community, I realized that I had isolated myself from what was really going on in the world. Once I saw what the CAFO was doing, I understood that I had to become more involved in my community. This was another kind of responsibility that wasn't just about working and keeping your nose to the grindstone.

So what happened was that, in June 1997, a real estate guy came in from out of town wanting to acquire some land that we rented. He wanted to meet me out on a dirt road near where the hog guys wanted to set up their hog site. And they wanted fifteen of them. There was something real fishy about the situation. This caused me to ask a lot of questions.

With a hog farm of my own, I knew some of the environmental impact that I was causing, but I was containing it on my property. Yet here they wanted to bring in half a million hogs into too small of an area. I could see what was going to happen.

Two weeks before I was approached, the mayor of Fullerton called me up and she asked me if [there were any] hog barns available. "What the hell is going on here?" I thought. "Why is everyone trying to do this undercover and not being really open about it?" I could see something wasn't right.

When I started asking questions, and once it finally broke open that the hog guys were going to come in here and [set up a CAFO], that's when people looked to me. In a matter of about four days, we went from six or seven neighbors discussing it at coffee on Thursday morning to having more than 150 people at a meeting on Sunday night.

We grew that fast, and that night I was elected president of the organization! The organization was called Mid-Nebraska PRIDE (People Responding in Defense of our Environment).

It seems like that is a big shift to happen so quickly.

Oh, yeah. That was when I really transitioned from a farmer to an activist, I guess. I almost abandoned the farm because so many people were calling who were having the same problem across the state. You see, this hog guy was moving to other areas. Once those people found out about how we stopped him, we were called into their communities. We were doing town hall meetings, hell, probably twice a week during the next six months. And then, of course, we were having our internal meetings, oh, I would say, dang near every day—and sometimes twice a day. I figure we had 180 meetings the first year.

How did North Star Neighbors grow out of your experience with Mid-Nebraska PRIDE?

Ron Scholey, who was the outgoing leader of Mid-Nebraska PRIDE, came up with the idea to start raising chickens in a different way. He had an organic farm and was operating it like community supported agriculture (CSA). Myself and a few of the other farmers got to looking around, saying, “Here we have cattle and hogs. We're more qualified to raise those. Why aren't

we selling those too?” And so we formed North Star Neighbors. Now four or five farms are contributing.

Was there any agreement or commitment within North Star Neighbors about the quality of the meat or how the animals were going to be raised?

Yep. We knew that we didn't want to feed the animals antibiotics. We knew we had to be different. Because if we were going to condemn big industry, the big hog guys, then we had to say, “Well, we can't do the same thing.” We didn't want to consume [those chemicals], so why would our customers? We started asking a lot of questions about feed ingredients. That kind of set up the standards of what we wanted to be. Our animals aren't fed any GMOs.

Was that a big learning curve?

From the raising part to the processing part to the marketing part—we learned the whole thing. We developed a delivery system whereby instead of sending four people to a farmers market in Omaha, three to Lincoln, and one or two to Grand Island, we narrowed that down to one person taking the orders, packaging the orders, and delivering those orders door-to-door. But with the high price of fuel, we came to the point where that wasn't sustainable either. So about three years ago, we started forming the Nebraska Food Cooperative.

Tell me about the Nebraska Food Cooperative.

What this co-op does is allow us to work together on developing the distribution system—the

system of bringing all of our products together, buying and selling them. The co-op does all the invoicing; the folks at the co-op buy from the producers, write the checks, and gather the income from the consumers.

How many producers do you imagine will be tied into the co-op?

Right now we have sixty, and when this distribution system gets in place, and as people learn about it, that number is going to grow very fast. We have schools that are looking for local food now, such as the University of Nebraska, plus restaurants and grocery stores. But the problem is that they don't want to buy from twenty different producers and write twenty different checks. So if they want three hundred pounds of, let's say, potatoes, there're producers out here who can supply fifty pounds, and the co-op will put it all together. We're creating opportunity that's going to just keep on growing.

Have you ever spent much time looking at the Federal Farm Bill?

Not in detail. I've used the Farm Bill and the farm programs a lot throughout my farming career. The Farm Bill—and I'll put this very bluntly, as clear as I can—is like a bull with a ring in its nose. The Farm Bill leads the farmers around it in whichever direction they want them to go. If the Farm Bill is set up by big industry, or the big packers, or whoever has the most influence, then that's the direction the farmers will go. And that's the direction the farmers are in now in conventional farming. They are where industry and the big guys want them to be.

Do you think the Farm Bill could be improved?

I think it'd be rather easy. See, the Farm Bill now is a top-down policy. The problem with policies is that it only states one rule, and everybody has to abide by the same rule. But it could be done differently.

For example, in Nance County we have sandy soil, prime agricultural black dirt, and hilly land. One policy wouldn't do well here. What it takes is local people deciding what the best policies are for where they live. Local people ought to be making local decisions. You can't have someone in Washington make a farm policy that covers cotton farmers, corn farmers, and potato farmers all in the same stroke of the pen.

But I do think it would be best if the change happened through the Farm Bill—a better farm bill. I think it almost has to, because it's so far out of hand. If it isn't going to happen there, I think it's going to be by a revolution.

I keep having this vision that there's going to be a turnaround, an exodus or whatever you call it. People are going to have to come out of big cities and go back to farms. The farms are going to have to be divided up, and people are going to have to start farming. We're going to have to start working with more by-hand labor. We better get that in place pretty damn quick, or there's going to be a lot of starving people and a lot of commotion going on.

Where would you like to see your own farm and your own work in five years?

Well, before I graduated from high school, I'd see farmers working together. We used to split up hay and we'd thrash, harvest, do so many things together. And the farthest anyone had to drive was a mile to have a group of six or ten farmers working together. By the time I was thirty, me and my kids would have to drive four or five miles to have a group of four farmers working

together. Now, it's only our family working, because now you have to drive eight or ten miles to work cooperatively with another farmer. You don't have those close bonds with neighbors anymore: eating together and living together and playing and working and all that. That's pretty much gone.

If I could do it in five years, which might not happen that quickly, I would like to see a farmer on at least every quarter in this area, or maybe every eighty acres. And I think it's real possible, if farmers could generate most of their living off their farm, to meet their needs of eating. We're not going to need as many fossil fuels with communities that are closer together.

And we must change the tax—that's my next deal, really. Because taxation could actually drive the rest of the farmers who are sustainable off their farms if they still can't generate enough money to pay taxes.

Are you interested in moving in the organics direction?

At one time I thought this was the way to go, because the organic market is a premium market.

The big guys have found a way to tunnel into that market and, by name only, once they [conformed to] the national organic standards, they diluted the organic name—"organic" doesn't mean as much to consumers as it used to. It used to be if something was certified organic, you didn't have to look any further than that, but now [the big companies have] ruined that standard. .

. . So nowadays it's more about local foods, and it's not so important to be certified organic.

When Whole Foods was out in California, the son of their vice president came out and visited

with a bunch of our farmers. [The company] wanted to start buying from us. And when they got done interviewing us, and with our meetings, we found out that all they wanted was our story—they didn't care about how the animals were actually raised. They wanted to buy all the producers' animals within our organization, with us retaining ownership of them. They wanted to put the animals out in a big feed lot in Western Nebraska where they would all be fed the same rations and bred the same, so that they'd have consistency in the product. That's one thing about local markets or local people selling product: When we raise and produce a finished product, it's not consistent in size or shape or anything like that. But that's what [Whole Foods] was after: They wanted to put our names and our pictures on their package, but they didn't really give a shit about raising them our way. It was all about marketing.