



Local seminar addresses status of the vanishing family farm

By Emily Morrison

"It's just like a square dance," says the character Annie in the one-woman play *Planting in the Dust*, portrayed during a recent appearance in Rochester by Minnesota native Laura Clark. "Everybody has a place in the pattern ... It's a constant weaving of new designs, in harmony."

The subject of her soliloquy is life as it should be on the family farm that once served as the prototype of the American dream. The model for that idyllic reverie, however, is fast becoming an endangered species, as Annie makes painfully clear later in her monologue.

"Everything I used to think was forever is eroding," she laments to her offstage friend, Ellie. "Foreclosures every week. Soon there won't be enough people out here to hold a square dance. Then who will take care of the land?"

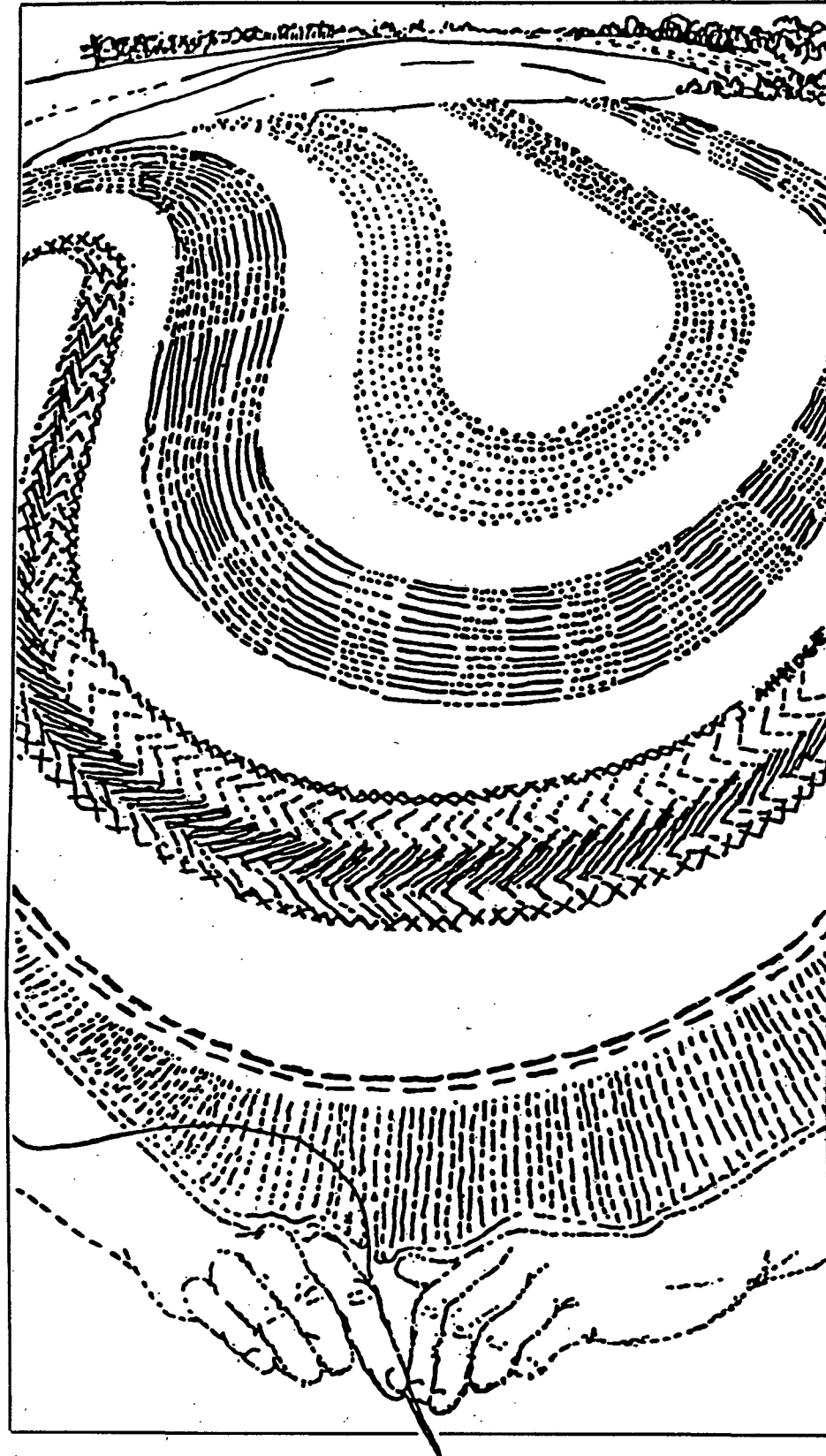
Several possible answers to that question were ardently debated a few weeks ago by participants in a day-long seminar held Sunday, March 29, at Temple B'rith Kodesh on Elmwood Avenue. The event was billed as "A Day of Reflection, Learning and Action To Save the Family Farm," sponsored by the Politics of Food Program of the Rochester Peace and Justice Education Center, the New York State Farm Alliance, the Temple B'rith Kodesh Social Action Committee, the Jewish Federation and Genesee Ecumenical Ministries.

At the heart of the afternoon's agenda was the survival of the family farm in the face of what the AFL-CIO Executive Council on Farm Policy has called "an agricultural system dominated by wealthy tax-loss, tax-shelter seekers, by giant agri-businesses and food conglomerates."

The farm crisis — the subject of considerable difference of opinion among seminar participants — is a complex issue, characterized in part by unmanageable debt and high interest rates, traditional export markets weakened by an overvalued dollar, falling prices for farmers' products, declining farm incomes and land values that function to erode local tax bases and depress rural economies, and the bankruptcies and foreclosures of hundreds of thousands of small, family-operated farms across the nation.

Also at issue was the Harkin-Gephardt "Save the Family Farm Act," a new bill introduced in Congress last fall. Local supporters and opponents of the proposed bill turned out to discuss its ramifications, both for the family farms and the Reagan Administration's 1985 Farm Bill, which proponents of the Save the Family Farm Act intend for the new bill to replace.

Rabbi Judea Miller of Temple B'rith Kodesh began the afternoon's proceedings with a biblical reflection on land stewardship. Afterwards, seminar moderator Alison Clarke of Politics for Food introduced two area dairy farmers, Sandy Sickles of Wyoming County and Grant Perry



of Auburn, a former agricultural extension agent.

Support prices for milk established by the U.S. Department of Agriculture have dropped steadily since 1983, according to Sickles. "Farming is a way of life as well as a

serious business," she observed. "It's the only business I'm aware of in which the seller of a commodity has no control over the price he obtains."

"Is there really a farm crisis — and has the crisis hit you yet?" asked Grant Perry of his

largely urban audience. "I feel that the word 'crisis' has lost its ring," he added. "In a crisis, the alarm is sounded; the fireman is into his boots and at the fire. Everyone responds." The current farm conundrum, said Perry, is characterized by an absence of apparent solutions or even of a common understanding of what the problem entails.

Imports of commodities that are already grown locally have cut significantly into the family farmer's ability to prosper, said Perry. "We're probably the number two or three apple-producing state in the nation," he said. "In Wayne County, you're right next door to it." Yet inexpensive apple concentrate is regularly imported from Argentina into Wayne County, where it is stored in huge vats to be processed into apple juice, according to Perry.

Perry's fears for the future of the family farm are partly grounded in statistical evidence. "Thomas Jefferson said that the strength of this country was built on a diversely held land base. We had 1,900,000 farms in this country in 1982; 300,000 farms presented 72 percent of the receipts," Perry observed. "By 1996, 50,000 to 70,000 farms in this country will control 90 percent of the production."

Parity — according to Webster's, an equivalence between farmer's current purchasing power and their purchasing power at a selected base period, maintained by government support of agricultural commodity prices at a level fixed by law — has dropped from an index of 100 in 1911 to 54 percent of that level in 1987, said Perry. The Harkin-Gephardt bill, he pointed out, would peg the parity ratio (ideally defined as a fair price received by farmers for the fruits of their labor) at a minimum of 70 percent.

Tom West, an organizer for the New York State Farm Alliance, appeared next on the program. The group's member chapters, he explained, are coalitions of farmers who work in conjunction with church, labor and community groups to save family farming. Among the alliance's goals are fair farm prices, a moratorium on farm foreclosures, debt restructuring and achieving political awareness and power among rural residents.

West presented a slide show, "Beyond the Crisis: Solutions for Rural America," which extolled the merits of the Harkin-Gephardt Save the Family Farm Act. Afterwards, Alison Clarke led a group discussion of the pros and cons of the proposed bill. Members of the New York State Farm Alliance appeared chiefly to support the new bill, which would establish parity farm pricing and supply management on agricultural commodities. Members of the New York State Farm Bureau, a more conservative organization supportive of the Reagan program, criticized the slide show as "biased."

Named after its two sponsors, Senator Tom Harkin of Iowa and Representative Richard Gephardt of Missouri, the Harkin-Gephardt Save the Family Farm Act

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