in 1935, the peak year, the United States had nearly seven million farms. By 1992 the number of farms had dropped to less than two million. If we may assume that each farm had a farmstead, in 1992 the United States might have had as many as five million farmsteads that were redundant to the needs of contemporary agriculture.

Roughly 125,000 of these redundant farmsteads were in Minnesota. What has happened to them? Some have been razed, some have simply been abandoned, and some have been recycled into rural nonfarm residences that can deceive the casual observer because some of the old farm buildings are still in use. We have only educated guesses about the relative importance of each category, however, so we set forth to learn more about the fate and the present use of the redundant farmsteads of Minnesota.

West on Highway 12

We began by exploring a rapidly suburbanizing area on the western edge of the Twin Cities. We identified each of the farmsteads and former farmsteads that we could see along a twelve-mile traverse of U.S. Highway 12 between Maple Plain and Montrose (Figure 1).

Our task was greatly facilitated by the distinctive combination of barn and silo that was the hallmark of a traditional dairy farmstead. We identified a total of forty-three “farmsteads,” about the number we would have expected in an area that had predominantly eighty- to one hundred-acre dairy farms in 1935.

At each place we asked the residents how much farming they were doing, and
how they were using the old farm structures we could see from the highway. We confirmed that each of these forty-three places had once been a farmstead. In the summer of 1992 eight still served full-time farms, seven served part-time farms, five were used for nonfarm businesses, twenty-one were rural residences, and two were unoccupied. In other words, at least half of the current occupants of these former farmsteads were pouring money into them instead of making any money from them.

On working dairy farms, a whole new suite of structures have been added to the original barn and silo to accommodate the increased size of the dairy herd.

The Working Farms
Only three of the forty-three farmsteads along our traverse still served dairy farms. The dairy barn and silo remain the heart of each farmstead, but they are dwarfed by a whole new suite of structures. The average milking herd increased from twelve to sixteen cows in 1950 to forty-five to fifty in 1992, and farmers have had to remodel and extend their barns to hold them.

They must farm more land to produce more feed, and they have had to put up new silos, new grain bins, and new metal hay sheds to store their increased harvests of corn, soybeans, and alfalfa. Farming larger acreages requires more and larger machines, and the expensive new machines must be protected from the elements in enclosed metal sheds with workshops. A modern dairy farmstead has half a dozen major structures or more.

A dairy cow is a harsh taskmistress. She must be milked every twelve hours, no matter what, and the dairy farmer cannot be away from the farm more than eight to ten hours at a time. Beef production often is the first recourse of a dairy farmer who, for whatever reason, decides to stop milking cows. Beef cattle demand far less attention, but they also produce far less income, perhaps no more than one-half to one-third as much as dairy cows. Dairy farmers who downshift to beef must enlarge their herds, increase their acreage, find off-farm jobs to supplement their farm income, or combine several of these strategies.

One of the full-time farmers along our traverse inherited enough land to enable him to shift from dairying to cash-crop farming, and he converted his dairy herd to a beef herd. Another rents land from owners who do not farm it, and feeds beef cattle and hogs as a sideline. A third has a full-time hog operation, and produces feed on a mixture of owned and rented land. Five of the seven part-time farmers have full-time off-farm jobs, but enjoy their beef herds, one has a herd of buffaloes, and the seventh is the widow of a dairy farmer who rents out her land.

No new buildings are necessary on a farm that downshifts from dairy to beef, and the barns on most of the beef farms are patched and weatherbeaten. “I needed a new barn,” said George Schaust, “but it would have been a foolish investment. A buyer from the city would not be willing to pay anything for a barn, no matter how good it was, and the investment simply would not have held its value. This area is full of barns that are just sitting there empty.”

Two full-time farms and one part-time farm are highly specialized. The new owner of one former dairy farmstead tore down the old barn and silo, built a greenhouse, modernized the farmhouse into a rental property, and rents out the land. Al Sterner and Jean Peterson raise vegetables on her father’s former dairy farm. Al had held various unfulfilling jobs, and they got the idea

cover photo:
There are roughly 125,000 redundant farmsteads in Minnesota.
of turning the farm into a truck farm when a budget cut cost Jean her teaching job. They have a brightly painted roadside stand for direct sales, and they also sell through local grocery stores and the local farmers’ market.

Dan Tapio is a cabinetmaker who inherited a farmstead and twenty-four acres, not nearly enough land for a dairy farm, but he wanted to use it in an ecologically responsible way rather than subdividing it into residential lots. He considered elk, reindeer, and ostriches before he finally settled on buffaloes. “A lot of this land around here is in small parcels that are rented out,” he said. “They only produce coarse hay, which is not dairy quality, but it is fine for buffaloes.”

He bought twenty-five buffalo calves, raised them to cows, then bought a bull, and is raising his own calves. He sells some calves to other breeders, and feeds out the rest for market. “The meat is low in cholesterol,” he said, “I collect the fur and sell it for forty dollars a pound, and I bag the manure for sale to gardeners, who pay a premium price for it.” He told us that he keeps the animals where they belong by feeding them well, but he has also built some impressive fences, with woven wire six feet high stapled to posts the size of telephone poles.

The Redundant Farmsteads

Five former farmsteads are used by nonfarm businesses that rent out the farmland, or have sold it (Figure 1). Two are tree services, one is the machinery depot for a construction company, and one is an automotive recycling center. The owner of the fifth has converted the old eighteen-cow dairy barn into an antique shop, and he would like to develop an amusement center with a miniature golf course and a go-cart track, but the local authorities have not looked with favor on some of his plans.

Twenty-one of the former farmsteads along our traverse had been recycled into rural nonfarm residences. Two of the residents were retired farmers who have sold their land, but the rest have moved out from the city and commute to work. Most of their jobs are in the western suburbs, and few commute more than ten miles. Why have city people moved out to former farmsteads? Each answer is unique, but nearly everyone mentioned the attraction of the rural lifestyle and the opportunity of keeping animals, almost invariably horses, but often dogs as well.

Some people actively dislike cities, and many of those with whom we talked reminded us of the tradition of the pioneer settler who knew it was time to move on when he could see the smoke from another settler’s cabin. We came to think of them as “elbowroomers,” people who had grown up on the outer suburban fringe and who felt compelled to move farther out to escape the suburbs that were starting to crowd in on them. Julie Jacques said, “the area around us got all built up, and we wanted to move out to a place where we didn’t have any close neighbors.” The elbowroomers are the advance guard of the expanding metropolis.

Most of the farmsteads that have become available for the elbowroomers are the by-products of farm enlargement. A farmer who has bought a second farm does not need the farmstead, and usually is only too happy to rent it for a price that seems handsome to the farmer but low to the city person. Farmsteads on a major highway, despite
its fierce traffic, are especially attractive to commuters. We would expect to find more unoccupied former farmsteads on secondary roads and in less accessible areas, so in the summer of 1996 we surveyed all of the farmsteads and former farmsteads of eastern Cottonwood County.

Eastern Cottonwood County

We chose Cottonwood County as an example of a rural agricultural area in Minnesota that is well beyond the range of metropolitan influence. Windom, the county seat, had a population of 4,283 persons in 1990. The county is two and a half hours from the Twin Cities, and an hour and a half from Sioux Falls. No county residents commute regularly to either place, and few if any former residents of metropolitan areas have fled to the county.

The U.S. Census of Agriculture says that the number of farms in Cottonwood County dropped from 2,063 (slightly more than three per square mile) in 1950, the peak year, to 876 (almost exactly one and a half per square mile) in 1992 (Figure 2). We used aerial photographs taken in 1950, supplemented by topographic maps, to identify each of the 1950 farmsteads. Most were easy to find on the photographs, because the hallmark of a farmstead on the windswept prairies of southwestern Minnesota has been an “L”-shaped windbreak, and today the windbreak may be all that remains at the site where a farmstead once stood.

Our survey of the eastern half of Cottonwood County in the summer of 1996 found that most sections (a section is a square mile) had three or four farmsteads in 1950, and that one or two of these farmsteads were not occupied in 1996 (Figure 3). One-tenth of the 1950 farmsteads had completely disappeared, or had left no trace but the ubiquitous windbreak. The pattern of abandonment within each section was random, but at the county level it was remarkably uniform. There are no concentrations of abandoned farmsteads, and no areas lack their quota.

A Closer Look

The U.S. Census of Agriculture, which defines farms extremely permissively, says that Cottonwood County had only a farm and a half per section in 1992, so we must assume that one or two of the remaining occupied farmsteads in each section is in fact the residence of a nonfarm family. We selected Carson Township for intensive investigation of this assumption in the summer of 1997. We asked the present residents of each of the eighty-eight farmsteads and former farmsteads how much farming they were doing, and where they worked, if they had off-farm jobs (Figure 4).

As we had anticipated, only thirty-five of the ninety-two occupied farmsteads in Carson Township, or roughly one per section, were the homes of full-time farmers. This figure actually exaggerates the number of full-time farms in the township, because six farms were partnerships (father and son, or two brothers) that required a residence for each partner. These auxiliary residences help to explain the apparent clustering of farmsteads in the northeastern quadrant of the township (Figure 4).

Rural Farms Today

Many former farmsteads have become redundant because farmers have had to increase their scale of operations in order to stay in business. Since World War II the average size of farms in Cottonwood County (and in virtually every other county in the United States) has steadily increased (Figure 2).

“When I started farming,” said Mike Adrian, who owns 500 acres and rents 500 more, “a thousand-acre farm was a really big deal, but today my farm is fairly typical.” Cash-grain farms in southwestern Minnesota now average well over a thousand acres, so the contemporary cash-grain farm economy needs less than one farmstead for each two sections, and the others have become redundant.

Cash-grain farmers have enlarged their operations by renting land instead of buying it, because they cannot afford to have their capital tied up in land. “We don’t own much land,” said Brenda Magnus, “but we have a fortune invested in machinery.” Only four or five farmers will bid on a piece of land that comes up for sale, but twenty or so will bid eagerly on any land that is available for rent.

A young farmer needs to rent more land when he takes over a 300- to 400-acre farm from his parents, but all of his neighbors also are looking for land to rent. The competition is fierce, and it is tough to find land to rent near home. Established farmers have an advantage, because they can afford to pay more to rent or buy contiguous land to consolidate their holdings, but younger farmers with less capital may have to travel up to fifteen miles to find fields they can rent.

Commuting is a concept that city folk rarely associate with farming, but farmers spend a lot of time on the road between their homes and fields that are up to fifteen miles away in different directions. They complain that they spend more time hauling machinery back and forth than they spend actually working in the fields. It is difficult to track down members of farm families for interviews, because one spouse usually

Figure 2. Number and Average Size of Farms in Cottonwood County, Minnesota, 1925-1992
has an off-farm job, and the other is working in a field somewhere within a fifteen-mile radius.

Part-time farmers, who account for 11 percent of the occupied farmsteads of Carson Township, also are commuters. Most are “sundowners,” who have full-time jobs off-farm and do their farm work evenings and weekends. They are gradually easing out of farming, but still cannot quite bring themselves to quit completely. They have sold or rent most of the farm, but they have kept the farmstead and a few fields. Most sundowners are middle-aged or older, because it is virtually impossible for a young person to start farming part-time and then build up to a full-time farm operation.

A few part-time farmers feed hogs on contract, which gives them a steady income. The contracting company supplies the hogs and feed, and the farmer is responsible for the buildings, utilities, labor, and manure disposal, which necessitates a certain amount of land. Bud Fast, for example, works full-time as a bus driver, and farms less than 100 acres, but he contract-feeds two lots of 600 hogs each year for a company that produces 66,000 a year.
significant. Nonfarm farmsteads may be hard to distinguish from working farmsteads, because they still have grain bins and machine sheds that they rent to neighbors.

Most of the farmsteads that are no longer occupied have sad histories similar to each other. The farmer retires and moves to town, or his widow moves to town when he dies, because living out in the country is too difficult. They have been living in the house for many years, and they have made do with outdated decorating and seriously inadequate electrical, heating, plumbing, and septic systems. After years of deferred maintenance these systems simply are not worth the cost of fixing up in hope of attracting a buyer.

Sometimes the house is rented, but the kinds of people who rent a cheap place out in the country are not likely to maintain it with tender loving care, and it continues to deteriorate until it becomes uninhabitable and is abandoned. Loren Klassen rented his great-grandfather’s farmstead to a series of old bachelor farmers “who lived like pigs and turned it into a hotel for old bachelor alcoholics” until it got so bad that he was forced to tear it down.

Variations in the Fate of Redundant Farmsteads

In conclusion, some of the houses on the recently vacated farmsteads in Cottonwood County seem to be in just as good shape as those on farmsteads closer to the Twin Cities that are still occupied. Elbowroomers, the pioneers of the expanding metropolis, have eagerly recycled every redundant farmstead near the Cities into a rural nonfarm residence, but many farmsteads in distant Cottonwood County have been abandoned because there is no demand for them.

In 1950 the average farm in Cottonwood County ran around 200 acres, and each section had three or four farmsteads. Today the average cash-grain farm runs to two sections or more, and the average section has two to four redundant farmsteads. Thirteen percent of the 1950 farmsteads had completely disappeared by 1997, and another sixteen percent were unoccupied.

Forty percent of the occupied farmsteads in Cottonwood County in 1997 still served full-time farms, one-tenth served part-time farms, and half were rural nonfarm residences. Few people have moved out from town to take up residence in the country, and the rural nonfarm residences are the homes of former farm families who simply continue to live where they have always lived. These places, too, probably will be abandoned when their current residents die or move to town.

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