

Old Farm: A History

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ISSN 0003-4827

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Recommended Citation

Dilly, Barbara J. "Old Farm: A History." *The Annals of Iowa* 69 (2010), 248-249.

Available at: <http://ir.uiowa.edu/annals-of-iowa/vol69/iss2/23>

Hosted by [Iowa Research Online](#)

Old Farm: A History, by Jerry Apps with photographs by Steve Apps. Wisconsin Historical Society Press, 2008. xi, 222 pp. Illustrations, appendix, notes, index. \$29.95 cloth.

Reviewer Barbara J. Dilly is associate professor of anthropology at Creighton University. Her research and writing have focused on farming communities in northeast Iowa.

An old Wisconsin farm is the setting for a family's adventures of living on the land. It is the primer from which a father (now a grandfather) teaches his children (and grandchildren) the linear history of the land and the timeless heritage of nature. Landowner and author Jerry Apps feels that the only way to authentically convey to the next generation an appreciation for the land is to own it and live on it.

Apps's cultural ecology of an old farm reveals intimate and interconnected relationships among plants and wildlife, seasons and climate, people and place. From this personalized account of life on the land, we gain a deeper understanding of what makes someone not just love a place and nature, but seek to understand it so that it can be cared for sustainably. His deep connection to the land comes from thinking, feeling, and acting from "deep within" (2). The cultivation and nurturing of that sensibility throughout a lifetime were shaped by reading Aldo Leopold and John Muir. He learned reverence and a spirituality of nature from reading Thoreau and Emerson and knowing Wisconsin Senator Gaylord Nelson. Rachel Carson and Wisconsin naturalist Sigurd Olson taught Apps the need for a common sense that comes from interaction with living things and the sense of urgency to set intentional goals to respect and protect the environment. Apps learned from his grandfather, father, and neighbors that survival on a farm with poor soil meant learning to value something other than material success.

Apps's holistic interdisciplinary methodology is largely anthropological. He engages in participant observation, story collecting, and gathering local archival data. He drew from published taxonomies of native and imported plants, animals, and insects that lived on his farm to compile an ethnobotany of the farm. In his ethnographic account, Apps describes his family's struggles with the limits of the land and the methods by which they constructed buildings, cut, cured, and burned firewood, raised gardens, hunted deer, cooked their local foods, and shared meanings. From the insights of an insider who experiences every inch and minute of a complex ecosystem, tempered by the outsider perspective of a scientist who sees the local cultural flaws and recognizes the limits of the local resources, Apps found a way to sustain an intact ecosystem for the next generation.

Jerry Apps's story is richly illustrated by his son Steve's exquisite photographs. The images reveal timeless truths about place, habitat, and process. The few people found in the images remind those who would live on the land to assume a more collaborative, behind-the-scenes relationship with nature. The greatest contribution of this work is the recognition that there is much more of value in nature and on the land than extractive resources. Nature is a steady force of experience and meaning that can teach us all to reflect on connections within a bigger picture if we will watch and listen.