

The Daily Cardinal

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"It's a great day for hockey."

Farm documentary presents a truly 'American' story

By Ben Schultz
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Within "American Farm" resides the beauty of cooperation, simplicity and hard work. The film, playing at the Orpheum Theatre, 216 State St., relays the tale of Contour Meadows, a fifth-generation family farm in Richfield Springs, N. Y.

For director Jim Spione, the documentary is part testament to his kin, contemplation on family ties and an examination of how they relate to the acres at their feet.

"It's as much or more about the family as it is about the farm," he said at the movie's first Madison screening.

"American Farm" takes an empathetic and quietly compassionate look at an American way of life as it passes or may not pass through the generations. The Ames family has been working the same stretch of land for more than 150 years, but may not see their tradition continue. Langdon "Lanny" Ames hangs onto the homestead despite failing health and advancing age. As the totemic figure of the movie, the years of punishing labor are obvious. He is an oak tree of a man, gnarled in the limbs and stiff in his movements.

Between the demands of fieldwork and a stoic man's understanding of a disappearing lifestyle, Lanny must contend with the family's history and the

farm's future. He must simultaneously grapple with the legacy of Murry, his father, and the ownership of the farm when he can no longer tend to it.

As Lanny makes his way down the road and tends to the animals, a serenely stunning portrait emerges. He is the yeoman Thomas Jefferson wanted as America's bedrock. Without analysis but full of instinctual understanding, he plows a field, milks the cows and delivers a calf with steady strength. Yet the lines in his face indicate that he knows it will most likely be his hired man, not his family, who takes over the farm.

"I think it was rough, but it was a good life," he said in a moment of assured reflection.

With nine interviews and well over a century-and-a-half of history to handle, Spione manages it all spectacularly. "American Farm" is focused and solid, without distractions or plain characters. Even people like Murry, the deceased patriarch, and Douglas, an absent son of Lanny, are given in-depth explanation. However, it is the farm itself that takes center stage.

"That's the 10th character in the movie: the homestead," Spione said at the screening.

The land itself always seems to be breathing and reacting. From the dust that snakes around the wagon when

the men bale hay to the snow that captures a tractor on Christmas, the struggle of farm life is obvious. At the center of it, a modest house and typical red barn stand in steady defiance, landmarks to the constant, albeit strained, cooperation between man and earth.

Sadly, "American Farm" seems a bit like a eulogy for a way of life that should not pass away. In 1900, 42 percent of

Americans were involved in farming. Today that figure is approximately 2 percent, with over half of those people needing additional employment to make ends meet.

Despite the dire numbers, Lanny provides quiet hope. His farm weathered the Great Depression, the farm crisis of the '80s and the challenges of globalization. The end

of the family operation may have reasons connected with larger issues like agricultural consolidation and lack of subsidies, but "American Farm" chooses not to address them. Instead, the tale is of one family.

Spione summarized the film simply by saying, "This is a story of a farm that may end because the family is fragmenting."

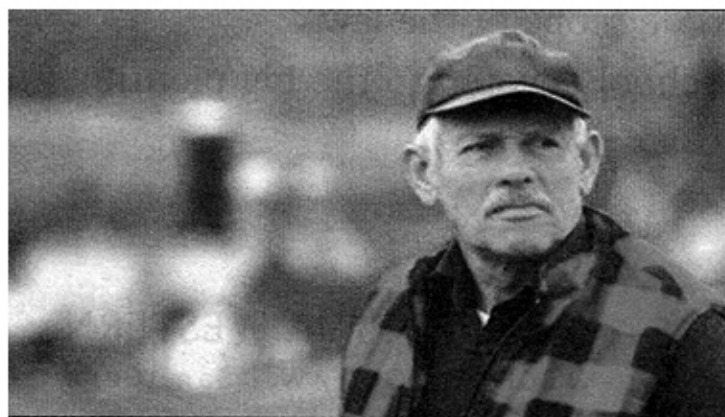


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