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'American Farm' Film About Small Business Struggles

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RICHFIELD

The common story of financial hardship on the small, family-run farm is one that most are familiar with, but this farm story is about a stable small business that the next generation is not interested in maintaining.

Lanny Ames is the fifth generation on the Ames farmstead in Richfield Springs. At almost 70 years of age, he still has hold of the reins, but there is no one on the other side to take hold and carry on.

"American Farm" is a documentary film produced by James Spione that tells the story of the Ames family, both past and present, in their own voices, with home movies and photos and new interviews.

"This film is in my heart and in the hearts of the people who grew up on the farm," said Spione. "My mom is Lanny's aunt. She was born and grew up there on the farm. Lanny's mom, Florence, who was Murry's wife, still lives there. There is a family reunion at the farm once a year. A few years back, Bertha, Lanny's sister, brought a four-page typed document with photos capturing her memories from the 1930s and 1940s for her children and grandchildren. I was touched by this, and felt that the story needed to be told on a larger canvas - film."

The farm gained steam when Lanny's dad, Murry, took over from his father, Sherman, shortly after his wife's death. The emotional story of her death is told by Shirley, Murry's youngest sister, who was 4-and-a-half and present at the time of the accident. Murry started using modern agricultural practices he learned from Cornell Cooperative Extension, such as contour planting. These new practices helped the farm to produce more and better crops. Murry was not just a farmer, he was a man of amazing and strong character, a man of charisma. He held the family together. It is a deeply American story, the story of rural America in the 20th century. He was "a hard act to follow," Spione said.

Lanny began helping his dad at an early age. It is what was expected of the son; to take over the farm. Lanny enjoyed farming and so when a junior in high school, he was asked if he planned to take over. His answer was "yes," and he started then and there. A new barn facility



LANNY AMES

Photo provided

was built at the farm, which really improved the operation. His dad, Murry, went to work as postmaster at the post office in Richfield Springs as well as other commitments; gladly helping with the farm when he was home. Lanny's boys began helping with chores at an early age. It was always his hoped that one would follow him as he had followed his father. Instead, they have all left the farm.

The family farm in America was, at one time, the gathering place for the whole family. Summer vacations always included the "city slicker" cousins coming out for a week, or a month or maybe the whole summer. They would endure the pranks and teasing of the country cousins. It was a rite of passage which was replayed each summer all across America. The family farm was a community within itself; often several generations living side by side, helping and encouraging each other through daily life. Families laughed and cried, played and worked hard, every day, year in and year out. The family farm was a way of life.

Yet, this way of life has been slowly dying, being swallowed up by big corporate farms, with more control by fewer people and money leaving the community rather than supporting it. It is common now for farmers to be in an

office administrating the business of farming while hired labor does the actual work of the farm. The small family farm must expand or get absorbed by someone else.

"There are no experts interviewed for this film, no narrator to explain. This film is Lanny and Donna and the rest of the Ames family telling their story," said Spione. "It is the story of each generation's decisions and how they have affected the next generations."

During the making of this film, Spione visited the Ames farm often, following Lanny as he did his work. He was able, through his time there, to catch some of the joys and hardships of farming. Whether it was Lanny's tractor stuck in a deep ditch during a Christmas night snow storm and what it took to remove it; a broken hay baler on a hot sunny day with hay needing to be baled before dew or rain came along; early morning chore time of milking and feeding the cows; or a calf being helped into the world.

"There was no script or blueprint in making this film. It is real life. Rather like a Faulkner novel. This film is a character drama with each person's unique voice and character telling the story. This is real life, feelings, impressions," said Spione. "Documentaries of this nature are off the radar now. Farming documentaries were in great number in the mid '90s. Now it's the third world countries - Iraq, Sudan, and such - where the emphasis is. I'm having great difficulty getting this film into the festivals because of this. I will leapfrog the festivals and bring this film to local theaters and such, then later approach public television after I have some figures to show them as to the numbers who have come out to see this film. This is a real issue there is an audience for."

"American Farm" will be presented by The Farmers' Museum on Saturday, February 19 at 7 p.m. at Fenimore Art Museum. Doors open at 6:30 p.m. Reservations are preferred, but not required - admission is \$7. Proceeds from the film will benefit the Agricultural Education Programs of Cornell University Cooperative Extension. Following the viewing of the film, Spione and other members of the Ames family will be present for discussion.

"Garrett Livermore, at The Farmers' Museum, has been very enthused and encouraging in setting up this viewing," Spione said. "Everyone at the museums have been really helpful."