

OPINION

Film brings life to an important story

Not long ago the U.S. Department of Agriculture put out farm economy estimates for 2004. At first glance the news was very good: "The value of both crop and livestock production is forecast to increase in 2004 for only the fourth time since 1990," the USDA's Economic Research Service reported. The value of crop production was projected to top the previous record, set in 1996, and livestock production was on target to exceed the record set in 2001.

Great news, you'd think.

But take a closer look. Increasingly, the successful farms — that is, the profitable farms — are the big commercial farms. Family farms are suffering.

For at least the third year in a row, rural residential farms saw negative figures for their farm income. In most cases, their household income came from off-farm income — usually jobs "in town."

We've known that the family farm has been having a tough time for years. Farm land across the country has been taken out of production at a rapid clip and sold for housing or for some commercial use. With the influx of Amish families, that trend has been slowed in our immediate area, but it is present nevertheless.

The struggle of the family farm is personalized with a new, full-length documentary film, "American Farm," which premieres this weekend at the New York State Historical Association's auditorium in Cooperstown. The film focuses on Lanny Ames' family, a mainstay in Richfield Springs for generations.

It's a story about change in America, and it's an important story. Hard to believe, but there are now students in area school systems who have little or no firsthand knowledge of farm life. That would have been impossible a generation or two ago.

For generations families could produce living, respectable incomes from small family farms. They could raise families in a wholesome atmosphere that brought the work ethic alive. It was a good life — hard, but good.

Now, for most of the remaining small family farms, it's a painful struggle and probably a losing battle eventually.

Lanny and a hired man work his farm. His kids have moved on, and you can't fault them. They know that the chances of making it the way their father and grandfather did are stacked against them.

"American Farm" is an important story for people to see. Not because it features a Richfield Springs family, but because it tells a significant story about how rural America has changed in our lifetime.

The Cooperstown showing will be at 7 p.m., Saturday, Feb. 19. Tickets (\$7) are limited, so reservations are encouraged. You can make them by calling the Farmers' Museum toll-free at 1-888-547-1450.