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An interview with Mark Epp of the Graham Center: The Future of Small Farming

To most of us, the 1980s may not seem as disastrous as the 1930s. But for many small farmers in America, the current decade is almost as bad. In the thirties, tenant farmers were losing their shirts as government programs paid big landowners to keep their land out of production. In response to this economic disaster, The National Sharecroppers Fund was established to assist tenant and low income farmers.

In 1972, the Fund christened its new Frank Porter Graham Center, a small enclave in rural Anson County, N.C. The Graham Center offered training and educational programs to low income farmers, and experimented with alternative methods appropriate to small scale farming.

About a year ago, the Graham Center re-evaluated its role in response to the worsening situation of small farmers. In the following interview, Mark Epp, on staff at the Graham Center, discusses how the Graham Center has changed its methods while focusing on new twists in the decades old problem: Can the small farm survive?

carolina planning: What are the overall goals of the Graham Center, what kind of projects are you involved in, and what are your strategies?

Epp: We can start way back with the history of the organization and go through it a little bit to help us understand where we are today. It goes back to the 1930s and the plight of the rural farmer, the tenant farmer and the sharecropper. Roosevelt put the Agricultural Adjustment Act in motion during the early 1930s. It was designed to help increase prices by decreasing supply. That was the first time that concept had ever been used. What farmowners did was to plow up cotton and kill off livestock. That meant tenant farmers and sharecroppers were forced off the land because the landowner could get by with less labor.

When the checks came to reimburse the landowners for participation in this program, the landowners started to mechanize. They converted those checks into machinery, which meant they needed even less

labor. More tenant farmers and sharecroppers were forced off the land and moved to Northern cities.

But it was a struggle. Farmers came together to form the the American Farmers Tenant Union in Arkansas. It was one of the first mixed-race unions that existed in the United States, and it was struggling along to increase benefits going to these tenant farmers and sharecroppers. That's when a group of Northern liberals came together to support their efforts. They put together what's known as National Sharecropper's Week--a week of exposure and fundraising to help this union get on its feet.

In 1937 that effort became known as the National Sharecroppers Fund (NSF), which supported the union and small farmers and later on gave money to coops in the South. They organized a center which trained a lot of people who are still around in grass roots organizations and farmers' co-operatives today.

The National Sharecroppers Fund/Rural Advancement Fund is the Graham Center's parent organization. The National Sharecroppers Fund was established first. It is not tax-exempt, which allows it to lobby. The Rural Advancement Fund (RAF) was born in 1966, when tax-free status was easier to obtain. It receives the bulk of the donation. In 1972 the Graham Center was started by NSF/RAF. The idea was to establish a national training center for low income farmers in alternative methods and crops, to show that small farms were viable.

cp: How small is small?

Epp: Well, the farms that this center worked with in the past ranged anywhere from garden-sized plots to 100 or maybe in some cases 150 acres, but most of the farms were between 10 and 50 acres. The idea was to help limited resource farmers who had "few options", and to demonstrate that they had alternatives.

That was the nature of this Center three or four years ago. One component was agricultural research and demonstration on the Center's farm to prove the effectiveness of alternative methods. Another component was education work, extension activities, and community outreach. The resource center here was an advocacy and research arm of the Center's activities.

Over a year ago we had a staff meeting where we critically examined our programs and their effectiveness. We looked at the problems in agriculture and asked, "What are the trends we see now and where will they lead us 10 or 20 years down the road?" We saw this was a depressing future.

At that point we started a process we've been involved in all year--shifting away from doing demonstrations and farming here at the Center. We are moving towards advocacy, public policy, organizing, and working with groups of farmers wherever they are instead of asking them to come here and be educated. We have three staff people working in different parts of the state, on different projects.

cp: What was the reasoning behind the shift?

Epp: We felt that demonstrations, no matter how good they were, would always be seen as institutional, relying on capital, resources and expertise, and therefore not applicable to the individual farmer. What we have probably done here through demonstrations is not to prove that all alternative crops or methods are viable or not viable but that the institutional structure is not a good way to farm. Logistically if this is the place where the demonstrations take place only a certain number of people will ever be able to come here and see them.

We also felt that what we were offering with these demonstrations and alternative crops and methods were individualistic solutions that the Agricultural Extension Service has offered for years, perhaps contributing to where we are today. We wanted to get at changing the structure of agriculture where there would be group solutions of empowerment and decision-making policy. Every time farmers think they can improve their situation by either growing another crop, finding another market, using a different method or cutting a cost, it may work for one farmer and it may work for a while but it does not have an impact on the structure that eventually drives farmers off the land.

cp: What did you see when you looked 20 years

down the road?

Epp: What we saw was an increasing concentration of wealth, particularly land ownership. This is a trend that will probably get worse. We saw a tremendous dependency on nonrenewable energy resources to carry on agriculture as we know it now. We saw an increasing monopoly of the food production, marketing and distribution system. Any steps towards a sustainable agriculture have to begin with attacking these problems.

One of the other things we talked about which is more elusive was economic and social justice. The greater the concentration of wealth, the more repression is necessary to maintain it. We saw that coming down the road and felt that a lot of work is going to have to be done in the area of economic and social justice.

cp: What kinds of things has the Graham Center done to attack these four problems?

Epp: In the past most of our work has concentrated on demonstration and education on alternative crops and methods. We have provided information on alternative crops and methods, which means you don't have to grow monoculture soybeans year after year and use these chemicals, fertilizers, herbicides and pesticides in order to make it. You can use crops in rotation and certain non-chemical additives that will help you increase profits, decrease your dependency on someone else selling you something, and move towards a healthier environment.

We're also involved in helping to establish production and marketing cooperatives so groups of farmers will be able to purchase inputs at reduced prices and market their products. Another marketing activity is the establishment of tailgate farmers markets in Wadesboro, Charlotte and Rockingham. We've participated in an advisory capacity in a couple of other towns as well.

cp: Are these the kinds of things you're continuing to do?

Epp: We will probably not continue to establish new farmers markets. What we will do, if there are people who want to start a farmers market, is put them in touch with someone who can help them start one. There's an agriculture marketing project here in North Carolina that has set up markets in other areas. There are markets that already exist and farmers who could easily teach other farmers how to begin, so we're not going to hire staff people to

do that. We will definitely link up people where the opportunity exists.

I recently met with Jennifer Henderson who's the head of the N.C. Hunger Coalition. They have chapters throughout the state. They're fighting for more federally funded food programs, and are beginning to organize food buying clubs with the food stamp recipients they work with. We were talking about the networks that need to form between groups of farmers and groups of food buying clubs. Direct marketing is one of the key factors in changing the structure of agriculture.

cp: What else is the Graham Center doing to address the problems it perceives?

Epp: Our public policy and research component does a lot of public speaking, not only here but in other parts of the U.S. Cary Fowler, who works for the National Sharecroppers Fund in Pittsboro, N.C., studied and spoke on the seed issue, which contributes to the concentration of power in agriculture.

cp: Only in this instance, it's concentration of genetic knowledge.

Epp: This is one of Cary's major points. There are seed storage centers that are supposed to preserve varieties of seeds, but the freezers can fail, or rats can come in and eat the seed, and hundreds of thousands of years of genetic resources are destroyed. Cary sees the U.S. budget as a major problem. It has only \$40,000 designated to go for collection of varieties that can be stored in the U.S. seed banks.

cp: Is it then partly a matter of public education?

Epp: Yes. Cary is writing a book, and once it comes out there will be a lot of publicity on the seed issue. He published a seed directory several years ago. It lists sources of seed companies, groups or families who have seeds available for old-timey fruits and vegetables.

Another area the Graham Center is becoming involved in is rural organizing. In Henderson County, North Carolina, one of our rural educators is working on property taxes. The revaluation is being done in that county this year and everybody's rates doubled or tripled. She's helping people understand property taxes and the options. For example, farmers can sign up for a present use valuation. There's also a deferment for elderly people who are over 60 years old or disabled, which brings their property tax down if they

qualify. There were community clubs already formed in the county before this issue surfaced, so she's working through them.

cp: What types of lobbying activities is the National Sharecroppers Fund involved in?

Epp: At some point we'll be having an impact on state policy as it's formulated in the Legislature. Right now agricultural policy is basically formulated by the Agriculture Extension Service, Farm Bureau, and some of the other power lobbies, like tobacco, poultry, and beef producers. Small farmers just don't have a voice at all. We hope to be putting together a constituency of small farmers that can speak for their own interests.

cp: Do you find that small farmers are harder to organize, that they're very independent?

Epp: I don't know that they're any more independent than other folks. Maybe they are to a certain extent. It's partly because of cultural things, and partly because of a very strong identity with a piece of land. But another strong factor is that small farmers have been forced into taking on that role by advertising. When you read farm magazines and you see the kinds of things that are meant to appeal to a farmer, you can see this. The message is self-sufficiency, of owning your own machinery and working on a piece of land. It wasn't that way in the early days. Talk to anybody. There was lots of sharing back and forth, lots of group activities. Farmers are not individualistic by nature or historically, but I think that there's been a push in that direction.

cp: Kind of divide and conquer.

Epp: Exactly. That's one thing. The other thing is that you have more consumers that way. You can sell more products when you have people behaving like that. But when farmers understand that there's something that's after them directly, that they're being taken advantage of somewhere, they will get together. There are things that they will have to overcome, but they'll work together. Farmers' organizations, like the Non-Partisan League in Minnesota and in North Dakota have a fertile history. They have taken on the world and we don't ever hear about them. No, I don't think farmers are any more individualistic by nature or tough to organize than other people.

cp: It sounds like a lot of the farmers' problems are the result of national poli-



Mark Epp of the Frank Porter Graham Center.

cies.

Epp: That's a good point because one of the major policies is the federal income tax structure, which is incredibly unfair to small farmers.

cp: How is that?

Epp: In many ways. Where does one start? The income tax structure is designed for the wealthy. It has tools all the way through it to aid the wealthy and that works in farming as well as big business. For example, there's the investment credit mechanism in which a farmer buys a piece of machinery and can deduct it. There are certain things that qualify and the things that qualify are those that only a farmer with a lot of capital or a large volume operation would want to buy.

cp: People with a lot of money can take the tax credit?

Epp: Right. So that mechanism allows farmers to invest and then write it off their taxes. Those kinds of farmers will not have to pay any taxes at all, whereas a small, struggling farmer is not able to use the tax credit.

cp: Are there laws that can be enacted on the state level that could address other problems?

Epp: Certainly there are things that can be done at the state level. Some states put together laws that limit the amount of land that farmers can own, or in the case of Minnesota, that corporations can own. Or they can prevent foreign ownership. Some states encourage older farmers who don't have heirs who want to farm to transfer land to young farmers who do want to farm, but don't have the capital. Those things are done at the state level.

cp: What role does the Agricultural Extension Service play in terms of agriculture policy?

Epp: We have to start back at the land grant college, because that's where the Extension agents are trained, and where the decisions are made. The first thing you should understand about them is that they function like corporations. They compete with each other for the best professors and students. They also compete with each other for grants from large corporations to conduct research. The land grant colleges were originally established to be a people's college, for rural people, to take care of their problems and work out solutions. Whatever the problems--agricultural, social, marketing or food storage problems--the land grant colleges were there to help. But the land grant system has been co-opted and taken over by the large corporations. They use public funds to subsidize their efforts. Jim Hightower has done the best work on this, Hard Tomatoes, Hard Times, which is an exposure of land grant colleges.

For example, policies recommending what crops to plant come out of N.C. State University. And that goes for the chemicals farmers use for controlling insects to the fertilizers applied. All of that comes out of the land grant colleges and it comes in a package to the Extension agent. Agents go back for periodic training, and the experts come out occasionally to hold workshops for other farmers and agents. Once in a while the representative from the company comes to update the Extension agent and you see the agent wearing a cap that says Monsanto. That's what it amounts to: from the researchers to the Extension agents, they are simply selling the companies' products.

Realistically, there are differences in the Extension Services from state to state. From the little bit of exposure that I've had, South Carolina tends to be somewhat more responsive to the farmers' needs than does North Carolina. There are differences from county to county, and differences between agents. Some agents

are very good. For example, I've met agents in the western part of the state who seem to want to get out and really understand and help farmers. They are proud of the work they do. I've heard people say that in the eastern part of the state, in the counties where agribusiness is very strong, you couldn't get agents out on the farm at all. They just sit in their office and make telephone calls.

But it is land grant colleges, Extension Services and FmHA (Farmers Home Administration) who make available the capital which moves farmers into the situation which they are in today. Farmers get over-extended and many are in a precarious financial situation. Bankruptcy and Farmers Home Administration foreclosures are increasing. The trend in Wake, Orange and Chatham Counties is still upward.

A lot of this is the result of recommendations to get bigger, use sophisticated confinement operations, and invest in a lot of equipment. Then in bad years when prices are low, this puts farmers into a difficult financial situation. It's happening across the country. Dealerships are going out of business, worried that nobody is going to buy machinery.

cp: Who takes over those farms once they've gone into bankruptcy?

Epp: Banks and insurance companies. Prudential is buying thousands of acres in Nebraska. Then they rent it out. The land is more profitable to own than it is to farm. That's a quote from an agricultural economist at the University of Missouri. That again goes back to the structure of income tax, which rewards those who own something, especially land. The pricing structure is not there to reward you for working land and selling a crop.

cp: What can planners do to help solve some of these problems besides enacting zoning and development ordinances?

Epp: Planners can research the structure of agriculture in their area, to find out who is getting agricultural credit. Also, it's good to know what kinds of crops are being exported or sold locally, and what this is worth.

Planners should also be aware of the movement to industrialize agriculture through factory farms and factory production of crops and livestock. This process eliminates jobs and removes decision-making power from individual farmers.

You get into arguments with people who say

that bringing industry into the county is the only way to make it grow and thrive. So is the solution to get industry in here without thinking about the impact it might have or what kinds of jobs are created? Who decides what kind of jobs are coming in here? Are there going to be micro-electronics jobs? Textiles jobs? Are they going to transfer jobs from other counties? None of those questions are decided by the county commissioners or any of us--just bring in industry. Or is a toxic waste dump going to locate and employ a dozen people? They want to do that eight miles down the road. Planners can work on issues such as toxic waste disposal, and water resources, not just for urban and industrial use, but for agricultural use.

cp: Are there problems between water allocations for urban versus rural use in North Carolina?

Epp: Yes. If you look at the Year 2000 Report, they're talking about water being a critical factor. There's a project to build a reservoir in Randolph County, and it's going to wipe out enough dairy farms to affect 3% of the state's milk production and 11% of the county's milk production. So what do planners look at when they're doing a feasibility study? Do they look at the needs of High Point and Greensboro--who are going to use the water--and the industries there? How much money is going to be generated from the recreation areas around the dam? How is the cost-benefit analysis computed? That's all on the surface. Behind the scenes some of the decisions that get made are based on other factors. For example, it could happen that the county commissioners are pushing for a new project because they've already bought some of the land that's going to be used, and they know the real estate value is going to skyrocket. I don't know what planners can do about that.

cp: Is there anything else you'd like to add?

Epp: People who are affected by industrial development should have some say about which industries locate in their community. Decisions about which industries complement what's already in place, benefit existing residents, and increase incomes should be made with input from all members of the community. Planners can facilitate that process.

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