INTRODUCTION

Agriculture is a dynamic force in the culture, economy, and landscape of America. It is commonplace to find wheat fields of a thousand acres, a hundred hog and chicken barns, and tractors operating in gangs of twenty or more machines all under the direction of a single corporation. A drive down many county roads will also reveal that small farms are still in existence. Why do families continue to operate small farms despite corporate competition and economic difficulties? This study explores the values and perceptions of quality of life of a sample of family farmers in Mercer County, Missouri, as possible factors in the continued operation of small farms.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The American Family Farm

The family farm has long held a special place in American culture. From the first land clearings of the early colonialists through the opening of the Great Plains with the Homestead Act of 1862, and now to the current trend in many areas of urban-to-rural migration and “back to the land” movements, the family farm has been a valued and idealized element in American society. Thomas Falke argues the family farm should be ranked with baseball and apple pie to form a triumvirate of dominant American icons (2002). Associated with an idyllic agricultural past, the family farm represents to many the “simple life” (Brinkerhoff and Jacob, 1986). Close-knit families, strong neighbor and community ties, healthier living, honest and hard work – these are all values linked to living in rural areas and operating family farms. Robert Frank sees the American fascination with and sympathy for family farming operations displayed through
Congressional legislation designed to assist farmers (1994). American voters, by calling for programs to protect and aid family farmers, show that family farms are still valued and are an essential element in American society and economy. This is also a global sentiment, found in countries across the world. In his study of the smallholder movement in New Zealand, John Fairweather discovered that a rural ideal of owning land, living in the country, and working the land exists in New Zealand culture (1996). The family farm is an important element in people’s imagery of rural lifestyles and values, and needs to be studied as a component of American culture.

Many definitions of the family farm exist. For his thesis Falke defined a family farm as: “an agricultural entity in Lafayette County’s past where farming ideals were primarily based on social as well as economic values of the farm-household relationship with management practices” (2002). Alison Meares, for her study of the sustainable agriculture movement, looked at small, independent farms that were owned or being purchased by the couples operating them, in which the household and enterprise realms were not distinctly separate (1997). For his article, “Agriculture in the Information Age: the Transnational Ecology of Corporate Versus Smallholder Farming,” Ronald Nigh identified family farms as based on family household labor, local knowledge, and community agrarian culture (1999). The authors of “Part-time Farming and the Rural Community” based their definition of family farms on economic scales: those people who sold more than $500 worth of farm products were considered farmers (Heffernan, et al, 1996). The definition of a family farm varies on an individual basis and according to the study being undertaken. For this project, a family farm will be defined as an independent
unit based on household labor that sells agricultural products produced from farmland owned or leased by the operators.

**Economic Issues Relating to Family Farms**

“Money just isn’t the thing in my life. That’s not why I ranch. No rancher is in ranching just for the money; if he was he’d be in another business”

Ellen Cotton (Hasselstrom, 1996).

Family farms are facing financial difficulties in the modern economy. Falke notes that in the spring of 2002 the U.S. government passed the largest farm aid bill in American history. Farm subsidies, contract farming, and off-farm employment are common themes when discussing family farm profitability (Falke, 2002). Why do American family farmers need supplements to farm income? Analyzing farm price supports, Robert Frank concludes that family farmers achieve no monetary benefit from their operations, as profits go to large corporate farms. Explaining Figure 1:

“They family farm may be thought of as a firm whose capital stock gives rise to the short-run cost curved denoted SAC_f and SMC_f. The corresponding cost curves for the corporate farm are denoted SAC_C and SMC_C. Competition has the effect of driving the long-run equilibrium price toward $P^*$, the minimum point on the LAC (long-run cost) curve. At $P^*$, corporate farms earn a normal profit while family farms, with their higher costs, earn economic losses of $\Pi_f$, as measured by the shaded rectangle” (Frank, 1994).
According to this model, family farms are forced to operate at a higher cost than the market price of their products. The result for family farms is economic losses. Frank notes that family farmers tend to remain on the land, however, despite the loss (1994). This suggests there are benefits other than hoped-for monetary profit associated with family farms.

Ronald Nigh criticizes economic models that perceive smallholders as behaving like capitalist firms who respond quickly to marginal returns and opportunity costs. Rather, smallholders, “embody a different set of values based on the commitment to place and community” (Nigh, 1999). Family farmers possess a value system, linked to their rural lifestyle, that does not rank monetary gain above all other considerations. The question then arises: what are the values held by family farmers that offset the economic difficulties of operating family farms?

**Quality of Life and Value Systems of Family Farmers**

Quality of life, defined by Joseph Molnar, is: “a function of concentric sets of influences emerging from the individual, the family, the farm firm, the community, and the society as a whole” (1985). Due to its qualitative and individualistic nature, quality of life has traditionally been hard to evaluate (Meares, 1997). Linked to well-being and life satisfactions, quality of life has been the subject of several research projects evaluating the perceptions and values of farmers in regard to their social and economic situation.
In her study of southeastern Minnesota farmers, Meares analyzed quality of life in relation to gender in the sustainable agriculture movement. She concluded that the values of self-empowerment, environmental health, creativity, autonomy in decision-making and social justice, balanced with economic gain, were central to a high quality of life for the farmers in the region, especially for men. Women emphasized farm and household responsibilities and involvement in the local community as central to their rural quality of life (Meares, 1997). Values associated with farming were linked to a high standard of quality of life – attracting people to sustainable agriculture.

As Meares discovered, involvement with the local community contributes to well-being and attachment to lifestyle. Beggs, Hurlbert, and Haines modified an existing systemic model, focusing on network, participation, and sentiment dimensions, in order to evaluate community attachment in a rural setting (1996). Their new model improved understanding of rural community attachments, finding that participation in community activities led to positive community sentiments.

This relates to Heffernan, Green, Lasley, and Nolan’s study, “Part-time Farming and the Rural Community,” (1981). They sought to identify the values of part-time and full-time farmers in relation to community attachment, benefits of rural living, and goals for the local community. Concluding that few differences exist between full-time and part-time farmers, they found that reasons for following a rural lifestyle are closely linked with the level of social involvement in the community. Community involvement, as an indicator of quality of life, is a potential explanatory element of family farmers’ attachment to the rural lifestyle.
To evaluate the perceived viability of family farms in Lafayette County, Missouri, Falke asked members of his study group where they saw themselves in ten years (2002). Most of the subjects responded that they would still be farming, even though times would be tough. Falke also noted that farmers often expressed having a lot of pride and satisfaction in their farming lifestyle. This suggests that family farmers have a value system that includes attachment to the land, hope for the future, and satisfaction with their work – all elements tied to estimations of quality of life.

Brinkerhoff and Jacob analyzed the smallholder movement in order to evaluate the traditional values that connect them to the rural lifestyle (1986). They determined that farmers rationalized their lifestyle by a value system that emphasized the “simple life” and closeness to the natural environment. Satisfaction with life, community attachment, general happiness, and other factors contributed to the farmers’ quality of life and the sustainability of their lifestyle.

Molnar states that attitude and personal characteristics are more indicative of subjective well-being than objective elements such as farm size, business success, or income (1985). These individual qualitative standards have more of an influence on farmers’ perceptions of quality of life than economic considerations. Farmers see their lifestyle as having values, connected to personal estimations of quality of life, which offset the monetary situation facing family farms. This study seeks to evaluate the values and perceptions of quality of life of family farmers in Mercer County, Missouri.
METHODOLOGY

Forms of Research

This study, which encompasses the values and quality of life that farmers associate with family farming practices, is qualitative in nature. Gillespie and Sinclair state that a qualitative study must be based on empirical data collected by some sort of direct observation method (2000). I have chosen an ethnographic interview process to collect data relating to family farms. This form of unstructured interviewing can provide more data and variety of information than other types of interviewing or observation (Fontana and Frey, 2000).

This project is small in scale. Maxwell notes that for small-scale studies, it is generally clearer and more feasible to purposefully select the research sample. Additionally, the researcher needs to consider the feasibility of data collection, validity concerns, ethics, and relationship with the participants under study (Maxwell, 1996). Due to time constraints, accessibility of data was a high priority when selecting a research sample for this project. Purposeful selection of study participants in my home county provided an already-established relationship with the subjects that allowed access to interviews and data collection.

I met with five farm families over the course of one week in late March 2003. Conducting a pilot-test before this time helped resolve issues regarding the feasibility and usefulness of my interview questions and approach (Maxwell, 1996). I tape recorded the interviews and took notes as inconspicuously as possible (Fontana and Frey, 2000). Soon
after each interview I wrote up the discussion and analyzed the data in order to uncover any problems with my data collection and fix these issues before the next interview.

**Interview Content**

Maxwell warns that mixing the research question with methods of data collection often leads to confusion and uninformative data (1996). In the development of questions to ask in the interviews, I tried to avoid restating the research question.

I collected background information, such as age, name, gender, family size, term of residence in the area, farm size, land use, level of education, and off-farm employment (Beggs et al., 1996, Brinkerhoff and Jacob, 1986, Molnar, 1985, Fairweather, 1996). Additionally, I asked whether any income was received from farm products in accordance with my definition of a family farm.

As an indicator of quality of life, community attachment and involvement were elements discussed in the interviews. Activity within the community (Beggs et al., 1996, Heffernan et al., 1981), such as membership in church, school, interest, and/or community groups was noted, as well as patronage of local businesses (How many times per month do you buy groceries at the town supermarket, etc).

Other subjective data relating to quality of life I evaluated through questions regarding attachment to farming and perceived viability of the rural lifestyle (Molnar, 1985, Falke, 2002) (Are you highly committed to farming? Where do you see yourself in 10 years?) Satisfaction with current life, including employment, area of residence, housing, finances, and leisure time (Brinkerhoff and Jacob, 1986) was also evaluated by having the subjects indicate their level of satisfaction with each category (Are you highly satisfied/somewhat satisfied/find no satisfaction in living in this area/your current
employment/amount of leisure time, etc.) The question - what immediate changes would you make to your lifestyle? (Meares, 1997), also evaluated farmer satisfaction. Subjects were handed a sheet with 10 items and asked to mark each item they felt was a factor in their reason for living in a rural community (Heffernan et al., 1981). These included: lower cost of living, outdoor recreation, safe environment for families, good schools, self-employment opportunities, privacy, healthier/cleaner than urban environments, connections (family and friends living in the area), limited opportunities for employment elsewhere, and never had a choice. Open-ended questions - why did you get into farming, what keeps you operating your farm, etc., generated further discussion relating to the farmers’ contentment with their lifestyle.

Analysis Procedures

After completion of an interview, I reviewed my notes and replayed the recorded conversations, transcribing the interviews into a word processor. Data was formulated into tables as well as written reviews and analyzed to determine the findings...
FINDINGS

Four people living in and owning land in Mercer County, Missouri, were interviewed for this study. The names of the subjects have been changed. Interview questions were designed to evaluate each person’s background, farm-size and land-use, employment, and perceived challenges of operating a family farm, satisfaction with lifestyle, and values associated with farming in Mercer County. In accordance with this study’s definition of a family farm, all subjects sell agricultural products produced from farmland they own or lease.

Subject Background

The age of the interviewees ranged from 39 to 70 years old. Most had received some education beyond high school. Mary Sellers had attended some college, and her husband Dale holds a B.S. in Agricultural Business and has completed some Master work. John Peters completed high school and received training in the U.S. Army. George Bryson attended 14 years of school, and his wife Lucy has a B.A. in English and Education. Theresa Elliot holds a Doctorate in Medicine. All are married and have children. John Peters has lived in the subject area all his life. Theresa Elliot has lived in Mercer for all but 3 of her 39 years. The Sellers and Brysons are relatively new to the area, being here 15 and 10 years, respectively.

Farm Size and Operation

The largest farm in this study is 850 acres, which Theresa Elliot and her husband, along with their parents, own and operate. Their main farm activity is raising cattle, and they also have several horses. At its largest size, John Peter’s farm totaled about 850 acres, with 550 acres personally owned and the remainder leased. During his
lifetime of farming in Mercer County, he and his family have pursued many farm activities.

Cattle, raised hogs all the time, one time for 20 some years in dairy business. Kept getting more cows until up around 30, then went out of the dairy business, went back to beef cattle and hogs. And then row crows – corn, beans, different things, once in a while wheat. But this area not much good for wheat. And then hay, raised them all up on hay, just over 100 head of beef cattle, besides the milk cows. With the milk cows, put up a bunch of silage for them, too.

Mary and Dale Sellers have diversified their farm operations, raising cattle, hay, sheep, and goats on 750 acres. The smallest landowner in this study is George Bryson, who now owns 182 acres. Originally focusing on cattle, he and his family now devote most of their property to the production of hay, which they share on halves with the neighbor who bales it.

We have 75 acres, maybe 100 acres that we hay. Some years we’ll get a couple hundred bales off it, so some years our share will be 100 bales, and some years its not so good. But basically we make enough on hay to pay the taxes on this place.

In addition to selling hay bales to local farmers, the Brysons have experimented with alternative marketing strategies.

We came up with the idea of Wild Bird Nesting Material. Put the hay in a plastic bag and put a catalogue sheet in front of it. We sold that in like 30 states I think, in bird centers. Sold 1 bale and made about 3000 bucks. We’d still like to pursue that, but since 9/11 it’s been pretty difficult. But we’re always looking for some way to make a bit of money on the farm.

**Employment**

All the interviewees sought employment off the farm. Theresa Elliot has a medical practice in the town of Princeton and works only part-time on her farm. George Bryson commutes to Iowa five times a week to his office job at a battery manufacturing
The Sellers family also seeks off-farm employment, with Dale working a full-time job in addition to farming. John Peters worked full-time on the farm but occasionally supplemented his farm income with part-time jobs off the farm, such as the summer he worked with the FC, measuring ground and interviewing farmers. During the last 18 years of his farming career, he built a liquor store outside of Mercer and his wife Evelyn worked there full-time. He is now retired, but his wife continues to work.

**Economic Challenges of Farming**

All subjects commented on the economic difficulties of farming. In the early years of his farming experience in Mercer County, George Bryson worked part-time on the farm with his father.

He [Dad] bought some cattle, and when I came down I bought some cattle, which we lost our butt on…and then we went to just haying basically, because there’s not much money in cattle. It takes a lot of work, a lot of risk, and you can’t get much return out of it.

Mary Sellers also talked of the difficult nature of farming, stating that she wanted to, “Work smarter not harder.” Their present farming operations required a lot of time, energy, and money, a situation she would like to change. Theresa Elliot expressed dissatisfaction with the finances involving her farm operations. John Peters and his wife Evelyn also discussed the hardships they experienced farming.

John:
Farming just ain’t much of a way of living…I mean the prices. You take what you can get, and then that didn’t do it…you work yourself to death…

Evelyn:
Never time to go anywhere or do anything.

John:
Just tied down, milking twice a day, made it hard, with kids in school activities and everything, had to get around, had to milk early, or late, or miss out [on the kids].
John Peters also saw farming as becoming increasingly difficult. Farm sizes have increased, technology has become more advanced, and operation costs have swelled.

Farming is all corporations now, even families. Get farms of 1000s acres, everything computerized…A farm of 30-40 acres isn’t even considered a farm anymore…Anymore $80,000 tractor and $30-40,000 farm combines and still some $2 and something for corn.

He also discussed how prices for seed crops have outstripped the increase in yields.

Back then you could get 30-60 bushels of beans, a big yield. Now can get 200-250 bushels. But seed companies…1-bushel costs over $100, need 1 bushel per acre, need at least 45 acres…outrageous.

The Peters also saw the government as an important element in modern farming, reflective of the economic difficulty of farming operations.

John:
If it wasn’t for the government the farmers would all be broke and gone already. That’s the only thing I think is keeping anybody on the farm…Farmers anymore have to farm the government as much as the land. To me anymore it’s more of a welfare deal in way. Farmers need a college education…to keep up with all the government stuff and all, because if they don’t go that route, they go broke…under. It’s not farming now, you’re not independent anymore…we never were, but used to think we were.
Evelyn:
I wouldn’t want to farm now.

Satisfaction with the Farming Lifestyle

Despite the difficulties of farming, the interviewees all responded positively to the question of why they got into farming. For Mary and Dale Sellers, love of livestock was the main attraction. George Bryson stated that cheap land prices brought him and his family to Mercer County, and they enjoyed the opportunities for outdoor recreation the land afforded, such as fishing and mushroom hunting. Living in the country was something he and his wife had wanted to pursue ever since they’d been married. Farming
was a natural occupation to John Peters: “That’s just something I’ve always loved. I was born on the farm and I just never thought much of anything else.” Theresa Elliot, when asked why she got into farming, replied: “Never out of it. I love the lifestyle.”

The subjects also commented that they would not make any immediate changes to their lifestyle. The Sellers recently completed home improvements that doubled the size of their housing. Mary said, “No more changes, the house is enough for a while.” John Peters, although now retired from farming, replied:

I don’t know. It was good and everything I reckon…I could never have been happier. I don’t think I could have ever went in and worked 8 hours a day in them big factories and things. Or lived in a city. I would have hated that.

Theresa Elliot and the Sellers stated that they are highly committed to farming. George Bryson, however, replied that he would not continue his farming operation if it cost him money to do so.

No, I’m not like a big row crop farmer, I’m not going to keep farming government programs, just so I can keep doing it. I don’t mind having a regular job, the farming is just an enjoyable, supplemental job.

The subjects were asked to state their satisfaction with several elements associated with happiness and life contentment. The data is displayed in Table 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>John Peters</th>
<th>Theresa Elliot</th>
<th>George Bryson</th>
<th>Mary Sellers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Farm Employment</td>
<td>Highly Satisfied - at first. Satisfaction later declined</td>
<td>Highly Satisfied</td>
<td>Satisfied - with room for improvement</td>
<td>Satisfied</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Off-Farm Employment</td>
<td>Satisfied</td>
<td>Highly Satisfied</td>
<td>Satisfied</td>
<td>Satisfied</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Area of Residence/Housing</td>
<td>Satisfied</td>
<td>Highly Satisfied</td>
<td>Highly Satisfied</td>
<td>Highly Satisfied</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finances</td>
<td>No Data</td>
<td>Satisfied</td>
<td>Satisfied</td>
<td>Satisfied</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leisure Time</td>
<td>No Data</td>
<td>Satisfied</td>
<td>Satisfied</td>
<td>Satisfied</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Life</td>
<td>Satisfied</td>
<td>Satisfied</td>
<td>Satisfied</td>
<td>Highly Satisfied</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1. Lifestyle Satisfaction Indicators
Theresa Elliot, the Sellers, and George Bryson all saw themselves as doing much the same thing in ten years. Mary Sellers predicted: “We’ll be staying on the farm, and hopefully having more leisure time.” Theresa Elliot stated she expects to be, “Right where I’m at.” George Bryson hopes one or both of his younger daughters will go to college and figure out someway to make a living off the farm, and he and his wife will do some traveling. He does not anticipate ever selling the farm.

Questions designed to evaluate community attachment, as an indicator of life satisfaction, revealed varied levels of involvement among the subjects, as displayed in Table 2.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>John Peters</th>
<th>Theresa Elliot</th>
<th>George Bryson</th>
<th>Mary Sellers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Church Group Member</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School Group Member</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other (Community/Special Interest)</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shop at Local Grocery Store, times per week</td>
<td>Yes, 1-2</td>
<td>Yes, 1-2</td>
<td>Yes, 1</td>
<td>Yes, 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frequent Local Restaurants, times per week</td>
<td>Yes, 0-1</td>
<td>Yes, 0-1</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes, 1 per month</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2. Community Involvement

Values of Farming

The interviewees also discussed some of the values and benefits of the farming lifestyle. John Peters, the father of 2 children and the adopted father of one grandchild, commented on the benefits of farm life for children:

Kids and all, they had a chance out here on the farm…get out and play and be with nature and everything…Lots of kids…they have no idea where food comes from…they just go in and pick it up in a plastic package.
George Bryson addressed the recreational advantages of his farming lifestyle:

Because we don’t have any animals on it [the land], it gives us a huge backyard. It’s like a huge recreation place, that produces enough income that we can pay the taxes…In winter, we don’t have to get out. When it’s nice, we can get out and enjoy the land.

The subjects were given a list of seven items and asked to rank them in order of importance for how they relate to their decision to farm and live in a rural community.

This information is included in Table 3.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>John Peters</th>
<th>Theresa Elliot</th>
<th>George Bryson</th>
<th>Mary Sellers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lower Cost of Living</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outdoor Recreation</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Safe Environment for Families</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-Employment Opportunities</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Privacy</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Healthier/Cleaner than Urban Environments</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Connections (Family/Friends Living in the Area)</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3. Values of Rural Living, ranked in order of importance.
CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of this research project was to explore the cultural values that farmers in Mercer County, Missouri, place on living on and operating family farms in the face of economic pressure. Interviews were conducted between March and April 2003, in person and over the phone. Topics discussed in the interviews included farm size and main patterns of land-use, off-farm employment, economic challenges of operating a family farm, satisfaction with the farming lifestyle, and values associated with farming in Mercer County. Questions were designed to collect information on economic issues relating to family farms and the quality of life and value systems of family farmers.

Economic Issues

Farm Activity - The farmers interviewed in this study use a variety of farming operations. Two farmers are specialists, one focusing on hay and the other on cattle. Two have diversified their livestock and land-uses.

Employment - All four of the subjects and/or their spouses have had to seek off-farm employment.

Economic Challenges of Farming – The subjects all expressed difficulty or dissatisfaction with the economic factors involved in operating family farms. The amount of hard work, the risk involved in farm enterprises, and the time involved in farming were all mentioned, as well as low prices for agricultural products, exorbitant equipment and seed costs, and the necessity of working several thousand acres of land in order to receive any worthwhile profits. Government aid also appeared to be a necessary element to sustaining farm operations.
Quality of Life and Values Associated with Farming

Satisfaction – I found that two of the subjects had grown up on a family farm and were so satisfied with the lifestyle they became farmers themselves. The other two subjects had bought farms in the area and moved there because they were attracted by the lifestyle, land values, outdoor recreational prospects, and the opportunity to own livestock. None of the subjects would make any immediate changes to their lifestyle. Only one interviewee was not highly committed to farming. The subjects stated themselves to be satisfied or highly satisfied in regard to their employment on and off the farm, area of residence/housing, finances, leisure time, and life in general. All four interviewees see themselves and their families continuing to farm through the next 10 years.

Community Attachment - Two of the four subjects were involved in a church organization, and three were members of a school and community/special interest group. All shop frequently at local grocery stores and three occasionally eat at local restaurants.

Values – A range of answers were collected regarding the most important reasons for farming and living in a rural community, varying from privacy, safe environment for families, lower cost of living, outdoor recreation, and the perceived healthiness/cleanliness of rural rather than urban environments, to connections (family/friends living in the area) and self-employment opportunities.

From this study, it appears that few economic benefits exist for family farmers. All four subjects described the difficulties they encountered through their farming operations. All have had to seek employment off the farm. Given this data, however, every person expressed his or her satisfaction with the lifestyle. One of the subjects did
not display a high level of community involvement, spreading some doubt as to the strength of community attachment as an indicator of quality of life. The varied responses of the subjects regarding the most important factor that attracts them to the area may be attributable to each person’s background and personal value system.

The interviews illustrate that values do keep people operating family farms in the face of economic difficulty. Farmers appear to be happy with all aspects of their life apart from their economic situation. This raises some questions about the viability of farming in Mercer County. When will the economic difficulties of farming become greater than the personal and community values farmers place on their rural lifestyle? Given the trends of rising operating costs, falling prices, and increasing farm size, it is likely that small, private farmers will ultimately be driven out of the farming industry. Decreasing the size of their operations to a “hobby” farm and finding alternative employment may be the only way for farmers in Mercer County to continue living in the area and enjoying the rural lifestyle they value so highly.

**Areas for Further Research**

This project was a case study of one county in northern Missouri. The research sample was small in number. Two of the interviews were conducted over the phone, rather than in person. To be more conclusive, this same study could be conducted with an increased number of participants from a wider geographical area under consistent interviewing conditions. Additionally, Premium Standard Farms, a large corporate hog-farm, is based in Mercer County. Further studies could assess the impact of this farming corporation on the small farmers in the area. Family farming is an important element in American society and will continue to warrant extensive research.