Rising Up and Plowing Down:  
How Can Two Women Make the Land an Arena for Justice? (A)

On July 4, 1980, reporters outnumbered farmers in a field of prospering, green wheat in the prairie country of southwestern Minnesota, just outside the town of Granite Falls. Video cameras rolled and print reporters jotted notes as two farm women, Anne Kanten and Lou Anne Kling, unfolded an almost unbelievable, prophetic story while Kling’s husband, Wayne, drove a tractor into his family’s maturing wheat and plowed down one acre.

The plow-down had started as a group effort. For months, the Klings had been meeting with their neighbors, brainstorming responses to farm problems they saw as disastrous, widespread, and growing—not the individualized problems of “bad managers,” as conservative politicians and even some farmers framed the situation in 1980. The Klings and their neighbors had sent out press releases together, calling the plow-down demonstration “Farmers’ Independence Day.” Everybody planned to plow down one acre a day for seven days. Then on the evening of July 3, the neighbors started phoning to say that they’d changed their minds. “They just couldn’t go out and plow their fields under,” Lou Anne Kling explained, “It would be their profit they were plowing under. Well, I could’ve told them there wasn’t any profit there to start with, but we ended up being the only ones in our area to plow under.”

Kling knew as well as anyone that it wasn’t just the hoped-for profits that had changed the neighbors’ minds. Farmers’ widely held beliefs made it hard for them to protest in such a dramatic way, even when they knew their livelihoods were at risk. They’d been raised to respect authority and to work hard without complaint. And above all, they wanted to steward their land and their crops—not destroy them.

Dianna Hunter wrote this case for the Center on Women and Public Policy as part of its 2000 Case Writing Summer Institute. The Center on Women and Public Policy, the Minnesota Women’s Foundation, and the Minnesota Extension Service provided supporting funds. © Dianne Hunter 2000.
Anne Kanten knew about land stewardship and about working politically with other farmers. At 53, she was a veteran organizer and a popular speaker at church and farm gatherings, not just in Minnesota but also around the country. Serious-looking, with stooped shoulders and weary, thoughtful eyes, she gave the impression of a woman whom life had wised up and left keenly honed, with little tolerance for foolishness. In her speeches over the years, she talked about land as a holy gift, as “placenta, responsible for all life.” She talked about economic justice for farm families and the verse from Timothy that’s inscribed on the US Department of Agriculture (USDA) building in Washington, D.C.: “The husbandman that laboreth must be the first partaker of the fruits.” She translated the King James English for her plainspoken audiences: “The farmer who gives his labor has the first claim on the crop.” Her insight and mythic, Biblical calls for justice had earned her a reputation as both a moral force and an unflagging advocate for family farmers.

On July 4, 1980, Kanten had come to the Kling place with her husband, Chuck, and their son Kent. They’d brought a Polaroid photograph that showed Kent plowing down an acre of their own wheat earlier that morning. They’d brought it to show that the Klings weren’t alone. Lou Anne Kling recalls feeling a special bond with Anne Kanten that day, and Kanten recalls being impressed by the younger woman’s ability to articulate what was happening to farmers. In time, as farm problems deepened into a national crisis, the bond between the two women would prove more valuable than either of them could have imagined. In just a little more than two years, Anne Kanten would be appointed Minnesota’s Assistant Commissioner of Agriculture. With Kanten’s support, Lou Anne Kling would create and lead an advocacy program that would help thousands of farm families in Minnesota and across the country (“Advocates Have Helped” 1987; Minnesota Department of Agriculture 1990). Eventually, Bill Clinton would appoint her to administer farm loan programs at the USDA.

But, of course, these accomplishments were yet to come. In 1980, what the two women knew was that to keep farmers on the land, they’d need to address their community’s ethical and spiritual values, as well as political and economic ones. To do this, what would they need to learn? What resources would they be able to mobilize? What networks could they build?
Relative to Anne Kanten, Lou Anne Kling was a newcomer to farm politics. At 41, this mother of seven children looked prairie common and worn by work. She kept her plain brown hair in a short perm. Her blue eyes looked keen and intelligent inside dark circles of fatigue. Five of her children had come from an earlier marriage. After divorcing their father, she’d raised them in town alone, until she met Wayne and married him in 1968. She herself had grown up on a Minnesota farm, so the transition to Wayne’s 660-acre hog and grain operation had felt like going home.

From the start, she and Wayne had belonged to the Farmers Union, a farm group with a history of political activism that included farmers’ strikes in the ‘30s and leftist rhetoric that got the organization red-baited in the ‘50s. She and Wayne attended meetings of other farm groups, too—marketing organizations and so on—but they never felt quite satisfied with what went on. “There was this division of the men and the women,” Lou Anne recalled. “And I wasn’t about to sit and talk about recipes and drapes.”

The gender division at the meetings reflected the gender divisions on most farms at the time. With few exceptions, men worked the land and took care of the machinery. Women kept house, cooked, ran to town for parts, helped drive machinery when the men needed it, and often also worked for wages off the farm. These gender roles stayed so entrenched that they remained constant, even as the farm economic crisis deepened through the 1980s (Lobao and Meyer 2000).

Lou Anne Kling’s dissatisfaction with the gender divisions in the 1970s farm organizations was matched by her dissatisfaction with their economic politics. At meetings the Klings attended, she recalls no one talking about the growing farm debt and income problems. So the Klings started their own new, grassroots group to talk about what was happening. In the process, she learned that the past held lessons that she could put to use in the present.

The American colonists came to this continent for land. The Iroquois taught them to grow corn, and ever since, Americans’ identity and prosperity has been tied to the land. The colonists’ subsistence farming soon evolved into market agriculture, and in the two centuries since the revolution, American agriculture has been continuously transformed by factors outside the control of farmers: market booms and busts, wars, politics, development of new technologies,
population shifts, and banking policies, to name a few. Farm families have suffered losses in most of these transitions. As recently as 1940, 31 million Americans lived on farms. By 1991, the number of farm residents had declined to 5 million, half of whom no longer actually worked their land (Dorcht 2000).

Through it all, the image of the American farmer has endured as a cultural icon—a gendered one. Helped along by Norman Rockwell, Grant Wood, political candidates suited up in plaid shirts and blue jeans, cereal commercials, and other high culture and pop culture of many varieties, the image of the American farming man has long stood for productivity, reliability, and endurance. As the traditional folk song goes, “It would put them to the test if the farmer took a rest, because the farmer is the man who feeds them all.”

“The Farmer Is the Man” appears in a 1890s songbook from a grassroots farm movement called the Farmers Alliance. Many similar groups have sprung up over the last two centuries, and these groups have often been labeled ‘populist,’ after the Populist Party of the late 1800s. Like the Populist Party, these groups have championed the interests of independent farm operators, especially when the farmers’ interests have conflicted with the interests of people the farmers call “big money”: bankers, monopolistic businesses, international traders, and the like.

Not all farmers shared the populists’ values, but as the farm crisis deepened, Lou Anne Kling and Anne Kanten came to realize that they did.

The Farmer Is the Woman

1 Not all American farmers have been white, it’s important to remember, even though the iconic farmer’s image with which we’re most familiar is that of a white man. The European-descended homesteaders migrated west after 160 acres of land, free for the development. After the Civil War, the government’s promise to the freedmen was a quarter of thatC40 acres and a mule. In 1920, there were 925,000 black farmers in the U.S. Now there are fewer than 19,000. The rate of loss of black farmers has been three times that of white farmers (Villafranca 2000). In 1999, the Federation of Black Farmers won a class-action lawsuit against the USDA because of discrimination in lending practices. Secretary of Agriculture Dan Glickman promised to change the AG Department’s culture from one of institutionalized racism to a culture of inclusiveness. Lou Anne Kling was asked to create and manage outreach to minorities for the USDA’s lending agency, the Farm Service Administration.

2 This short history is according to Tom Isern, who updated the song and posted his version on the Internet, where it could be accessed by the financially troubled farmers of 1999.

3 Some examples of older populist farm groups include the Grange, the Farmers Alliance, the Minnesota Farmer-Labor party, and the National Farmers’ Holiday Association. Some late-20th century groups include the Save the Family Farm Coalition, the National Farmers Organization, the American Agriculture Movement, Citizens Organization Acting Together (COACT), and Minnesota’s Groundswell (to
Each of the two women would learn from the old populists. Each met a man who shared first-hand accounts of farm politics in the ‘30s and ‘40s. John Enesvedt had organized farmers for the National Farmers’ Holiday Association during the farm strikes of the 1930s. Elmer A. Benson, a leader of Minnesota’s Farmer-Labor Party (which later merged with the Democratic Party), had held office as a U.S. Senator and as governor of Minnesota. In Enesvedt’s and Benson’s stories, rural women figured not just as helpmates but as generative, central actors. “If it hadn’t been for the women,” Enesvedt told Kling, “we would not have been as effective.”

These firsthand accounts proved especially helpful because most farm histories at the time had been written by men and told the story of farm populism from the men’s point of view. The retired politician, Benson, told Kanten about populist women leaders he’d known. He supported Kanten’s work and tutored her in the history of farm policy. Recalling conversations with FDR, he explained how populist farmers’ demands in the 1930s had led to moratoriums on foreclosures and to New Deal programs like price supports and low-interest loans for struggling farmers, which survived through the 1970s.

**Boom Times and Snowballing Debt**

During the 1960s and 1970s, farmers had relied on the safety net provided by the surviving New Deal programs. Then, in the late 1970s, grain prices soared. International grain trading flourished, especially with the Soviet Union. Secretary of Agriculture Earl Butz urged farmers to plant fencerow to fencerow and to plan to feed the world. Many farmers borrowed heavily to expand their operations. Lenders were happy to oblige. With the stock market flat (name just a few).

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4 For example, Everett Luoma mentions women three times in his important book about the 1932-33 National Farmers’ Holiday Association strike that shut down many Midwestern farm markets, including the stockyards in Minneapolis and St. Paul. A valuable and unique resource because it tells the story of the strike from the farmers’ point of view, Leoma’s narrative concentrates on male strike leaders and politicians. He allows that women “should be given as much credit as the men for the effectiveness of the strike” (34). Yet in the three places where Luoma mentions women, he presents them en masse, as women generally, and as auxiliary players or helpmates, not as leaders or strategists. He tells that, during the 1932 farm product blockade of Sioux City, Iowa, women “joined in the heavy work and drove cars across highways to halt truck operations” (34). In October 1932, women joined in a crowd of 500 farmers who stormed the St. Paul stockyards and shut down cattle trading (73). None are named.
and interest rates booming, lenders needed to put invested money to work, and loans were made.⁵

Toward the end of the 1970s, Lou Anne Kling decided that “things weren’t going right” on the family farm. Each spring, she and Wayne borrowed money to put in their crops, and each fall, there was never enough profit to pay back the loans. Instead, their lender rolled the loans over, folding each fall’s unpaid balance into a new operating loan for the following year. With interest rates in the 15-percent range and farm income heading toward 50-year lows when adjusted for inflation (Sinclair 1982), Kling visualized her farm’s debt “just like a snowball, rolling and gathering, and getting bigger and bigger.” By 1984, her vision of snowballing farm debt would be widely shared. Overall U.S. farm indebtedness would more than double in nine years, increasing 130% (GAO 1986). But in 1980, the public and the media didn’t yet understand the debt-and-income disaster that would come to be known as the “farm crisis.”

The farm community itself could not unite behind a single set of values or proposals. As Kling put it, “They say organizing farmers is like hauling frogs in a wheelbarrow.” Some members of rural communities, including farmers, asserted that the growing economic problems were just payback for individual farmers’ bad business decisions. In feed stores and small-town coffee shops, it was not unusual to hear someone say, “If the government would just get out of farming, everything would be okay.” In this atmosphere, many of the struggling farmers felt alone and ashamed. Many sank into psychological denial. The Klings had no intention of going

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⁵Readers may be more familiar with the savings and loan crisis than with the farm credit crisis of the 1980s. In both cases, lenders got into trouble by loaning money against assets which later proved to have been overvalued, or which became overvalued when market prices fell (as in the case of land and other farm assets in the 1980s). Oral history accounts abound of farmers who wanted to borrow tens of thousands to fix their buildings but were talked into borrowing hundreds of thousands to build new. In 1985, a quasi-governmental lending agency consisting of 37 farm credit banks in 12 districts around the U.S., the Farm Credit System, asked Congress for $10 billion to help them write off $11 billion in bad loans and to keep them out of bankruptcy court.
down that road. They wanted to talk about what was going on. They started meeting with their neighbors, and the meetings led to the plow-down.

In the process of organizing the plow-down, Kling found herself taking on the gender divisions in her community. As she puts it, this “was probably one of the first times I took my stand as being a woman:”

We were writing the press releases, and nobody wanted their name on the bottom. And I said, “Well, I’ll have my name on there.” And it didn’t bother me. And they started writing “Mrs. Wayne Kling,” and I said, “Whoa! Whoa! Whoa! Wait a minute! I’m Lou Anne Kling. I’m my own person.” And some people got sort of huffy about that. They didn’t think that was really right that I was coming on so strong as an individual.

This incident may have marked the first time that Kling took her stand as a woman, but it would not be the last. Over the next few years, as she advocated for farm families, she would continue to consciously push beyond the passive, helpmate role that many saw as her rightful place.

The Woman Who Feeds Them All

Like Kling, Anne Kanten knew firsthand about the economic politics that divided farm communities. She’d grown up on a broken-down Iowa farm that was the only investment her Norwegian immigrant, businessman father had been able to hang onto during the Great Depression. The house was so drafty that Kanten recalls water freezing on the kitchen floor. A place so bitter to get and keep was a place to leave, and Kanten did leave—to earn a degree from St. Olaf College. She took a teaching job in Milan, Minnesota, and met Chuck Kanten there. They married in 1952 and moved into a house his grandfather had built on the original family homestead near Milan. Anne Kanten found herself deeply moved by the way Chuck would talk about sod houses, covered wagons, and a family history. She called it “intergenerational connectedness and a kind of belonging to place.”

By 1975, she and Chuck were working on land stewardship issues within the American Lutheran Church. With a church group, they traveled to Tanzania to visit farmers. In later years, as demand for her speeches grew, Kanten would often look back on this trip, comparing the problems faced by farmers in Africa and in the U.S. She saw the two united by “a struggle with drought, disease, and bugs. . . a struggle of how you get your commodities to the market . . .
a struggle of being ripped off in the marketplace.” She also felt personally transformed by the African trip. It had changed her consciousness as a farm woman:

I like to get up in front and say, “I am a farmer.” And I am. But I don’t have to struggle like an African woman to be a farmer. I mean, her success or failure with being a farmer is a life and death question for her family. And that whole piece has been important to share with women here . . . that on most other continents it is the women who are the farmers and who are the agriculturalists, and who fight those battles in the marketplace.

In 1975, American farm women’s identities were so tied to the helpmate, farm wife model that it took an extreme change of perspective—a trip to Africa—to make Kanten realize that she, too, could name herself a farmer.

About that same time, another abrupt change of perspective transformed Kanten. Like the Klings, the Kantens had been watching their debts grow in the ‘70s, and Anne Kanten realized that her family might lose their farm. In 1978, she was making decorative sheaves of wheat to sell for extra Christmas money when she heard a speaker on the radio talking about a new group whose only purpose was to keep farm families on their land. She attended a meeting that the speaker had announced, and afterwards, with five other women, she called another meeting and organized the state office of the American Agriculture Movement (AAM) in Appleton. This step was a stretch for Kanten. She’d been raised to respect authority and had a hard time picturing herself in any kind of protest. “Mom and Dad came from a country with a king,” she pointed out to Jacqueline White in a Minneapolis Star and Tribune Sunday Magazine interview (White 1985, 5). “When Roosevelt gave his fireside chats, you sat and listened, because that was the president” (White 1985, 6).

Over the winter of 1978, she staffed the AAM office, and one of her frequent visitors was Elmer Benson, the politician whose career had spanned the Depression and New Deal eras. He shared his wealth of firsthand, experiential knowledge with her. As the two of them talked for “days and weeks,” Kanten said, she realized she needed to know more about the history of agricultural policy. She went to the local public library and put herself through a self-study course. Looking back on that experience, she saw how the knowledge had empowered her:

Women, I think, want and crave more information to give them the courage to do what they have to do. I’ve seen guys—they can get by with saying most anything
sometimes. But women just want to be more sure of what they’re saying. And, of course, that gives you more power when you say what you want to say.

Armed with information, Kanten would soon put her new sense of empowerment to the test.

**Farmers in the Halls of Washington**

The newly forming AAM had neither officers nor dues (Baker and Harden 1978) but gained wide attention in 1978 by bringing farmers to Washington, D.C., to lobby for changes in the 1981 Farm Bill. Anne and Chuck Kanten’s banker loaned them his van for the trip. Their fertilizer dealer loaned them his gas credit card. When the Kantens arrived and walked around the Capitol building, they saw 30,000 to 40,000 farmers. Anne Kanten felt a charge of emotion. She recalled, “Chuck hugged me like I’ve never been hugged before and whispered, ‘We are not alone.’”

In 1979, AAM’s national steering committee decided to stage a cross-country tractorcade—a parade of “the tools of our trade,” as Kanten put it. The Kanten’s son, Kent, drove one of the family’s tractors to Sioux Falls, South Dakota, where the Minnesota contingent joined farmers from other Midwestern states. Adding more farmers and tractors as they headed east, the Midwestern farmers converged inside Washington with tractorcades from six different parts of the country.

The giant tractors in their long parade drew the nation’s attention, but for the farmers, getting publicity for their cause was only the first part of their work. On Sunday, March 2, 1979, Anne and Chuck Kanten presented what they called “a dialogue sermon,” making the farmers’ case to the congregation of the National Cathedral. For weeks after that, the Kantens and other farmers stayed in Washington, working six-day “shifts” to lobby for a bill that would restore parity prices for farm products (Harden 1978).

Parity has been both a goal and a rallying cry for 20th century farm populists. The parity formula, much like a standard of living index, compares net income across time periods. At 100% of parity, the price of a farm commodity would return as much profit as it did in the period from 1910 to 1914. At the end of 1977, according to AAM, the composite price of all farm commodities stood at only 64% of parity (Baker and Harden 1978). In 1979, the day before the House of Representatives voted on the parity bill, the farmers counted votes and thought they’d
won, but they lost by one vote. Anne Kanten felt betrayed. She got the sense that corporate interests had triumphed and that “people in Washington. . . didn’t know what was going on” in rural America:

But whether or not they knew what was going on, didn’t make any difference... And that’s what really hurt. That somehow there were voices bigger than ours. When we walked out of those offices, there were voices that came in and said, “This is what we have to do as a nation, to keep our exports in line, and to be able to keep our competitiveness, and to keep the raw material cheap in this country. And what that does to farmers is beside the point.”

The disheartened AAM members returned to their farms in 1979. The next year, they would have the chance to vote in a presidential election, and many would switch parties.

Parity as a Free Market Issue

In the presidential election year of 1980, to punish the Soviet Union for invading Afghanistan, President Jimmy Carter imposed a grain embargo against the Soviets. The embargo disrupted international grain trading and set Carter up, in the eyes of many farmers, as the one to blame for a projected one-third drop in net farm income for the year (Mouat 2000).

Republican candidate Ronald Reagan promised to restore profitability to agriculture through the “integrity” of a “free market” (Sinclair 2000a). Many AAM members, generally Democratic leaning, crossed over to support Reagan when he declared he would end Carter’s grain embargo. The 1980 GOP platform mentioned parity for the first time in its history, pledging to surpass parity, not through government programs, but by letting the free market work. Candidate Reagan declared, “I’m for 100% of parity. . . [But] I want it through the marketplace” (Mouat 2000). He made it known from the start that he intended to dismantle the New Deal-era system of farm subsidies, price supports, market controls, and loans that had served seven administrations before him.

When he took office in 1981, Reagan appointed John Block as Secretary of Agriculture and David Stockman as Director of the Office of Management and Budget. Stockman had grown up on a dairy farm in Wisconsin, and philosophically, he lined up with those farmers who believed that the government should let the market determine farm prices. In 1981, Deputy Secretary of Agriculture Richard Lyng recalled a meeting where Stockman revealed “some strong and deep biases” against the farm program. “He would like to see farmers treated exactly
like everyone else,” Lyng said. Among Stockman’s primary targets for budget cuts were milk price supports and the Farmers Home Administration (FmHA), a New Deal government lending agency that provided loans to farmers who could not get credit elsewhere (Crittenden 1981).

The 1981 crop produced record yields. Grain surpluses soared, increasing the downward pressure on farm commodity prices. The stage was set for a national disaster. In Minnesota, net farm income dropped from $1.2 billion in 1980 to $208 million in 1983 (Schmickle 1989). Among those hard-to-organize farmers, Lou Anne Kling, observed, “there was a lot of coalition work being done.” Local chapters of AAM, the Farmers Union, the National Farmers Organization and another new group, COACT (Citizens Organization Acting Together) held meetings in Granite Falls. Some who attended broke away and started another new grassroots organization called Groundswell.

**Making Change by Running for Office**

In 1982, Lou Anne Kling ran for a house seat in the Minnesota legislature after her district was redrawn and the Republican incumbent announced that he wasn’t going to run. She’d been lobbying at the state legislature for a minimum price bill and a moratorium on farm foreclosures. She said, “We kept running into brick walls of trying to get legislators with enough guts to carry the bill, legislators with knowledge about what was going on out here in agriculture.” She said she, Wayne, and the kids sat down and talked over whether or not she should run—”the responsibility, the time I was going to be gone from home. And we decided we could work through it all.”

Jumpstarting her days with coffee and chain smoking cigarettes, the mother of seven knocked on doors, attended get-togethers, and participated in parades. She was appalled when she asked people what issues mattered to them: “Nobody had any issues. Nobody had any questions. ‘Anything you want to know? Anything you want to find out?’ Nobody had nothing.” The only exceptions, she said, were those who asked whether she was a born-again Christian and where she stood on abortion. Nobody, she said, “wanted to talk about what was happening out here on the farm.”

After Kling started campaigning, the old incumbent jumped back in, and Kling lost the election by a narrow margin. Afterwards, she and her son Matthew ran into some people they knew in town. These people asked when Kling was going to run again, and 11-year-old
Matthew let his negative feelings slip. He said, “She’s never going to run again because I’m going to black ball her through the whole thing so she never has to leave home.” His mother laughed as she told the story six years later, racing in an old Ford LTD from one meeting to another.

Not long after the 1982 election, land prices plummeted, farm income continued to drop, and bankers started foreclosing. A neighbor visited Kling and told her, “I supported you, and I campaigned for you. Now Farmers Home [FmHA] is trying to sell me out, and I need help.” FmHA was a government agency, the New Deal lender that had been established to make loans to farmers who couldn’t get loans elsewhere. The agency was supposed to work as a safety net for low-income farmers. Kling wondered what was going on. She phoned a farmer she knew in Montana who was suing the FmHA, and he told her about a Code of Federal Regulations that governed the agency. She sent for the codebooks and started reading: “They were absolutely Greek to me! But I just kept reading and reading.” She learned that the farmer had a right to appeal the local FmHA supervisor’s decision. She went with her neighbor to the appeal hearing, and he won:

It was a mix-up. The supervisor had made a mistake, and the easiest way to get it covered was to threaten the farmer with conversion [theft by selling property that secures a loan] and get him to peacefully sell out. That’s what they were trying to do, only this farmer found someone to tell him that different rules applied.

Word of Kling’s work spread through the farm grapevine, and soon she was traveling all over the state to help farmers who called her with FmHA problems.

**A Surprising Appointment**

Kling and Kanten saw the urgency of the situation and met to strategize. They saw that farmers needed a dramatic way to tell their story, Kanten said, so the two decided to reach back into history for a strategy. They organized a penny auction, a tool from the 1930s Farmers’ Holiday era. When a lender forced a foreclosure sale, the neighbors would show up in force, bid a penny or two for each item, and give everything back to the farmer. In September 1982, a penny auction organized by Kanten and Kling successfully stopped an FmHA foreclosure at Westbrook. After that, hurting farm families came from all over the country started phoning Kanten and Kling.
In October, Marlene Johnson, DFL\(^6\) gubernatorial candidate Rudy Perpich’s pick for lieutenant governor, called and asked Anne Kanten, if she would get some people together and “make a little speech on behalf of farmers” at the Prom Ballroom in St. Paul. Kanten did, and Perpich sat on the platform. In November, when he was elected governor, he asked Kanten to serve on the committee charged with selecting the new commissioner of agriculture. In December, Perpich called again and asked Kanten to serve as assistant commissioner. Perpich told reporter Dennis McGrath that he’d selected Kanten because he wanted her to organize a pact among Midwestern states that would set minimum prices for farm commodities—an idea that McGrath labeled “radical.”

McGrath’s paper, the Minneapolis Star and Tribune, ran side-by-side stories announcing the appointments of Anne Kanten and the new commissioner of agriculture, Jim Nichols. The side-by-side arrangement of these stories suggested balance, but the two appointees were assessed quite differently, even on traits they seemed to share. Nichols, a former state senator, according to the article, drew “near unanimous applause from a sampling of farm leaders” who found him energetic, enthusiastic, and straightforward, if sometimes abrasive. Nichols himself praised his own outspoken nature: “I always said exactly what was on my mind in the state senate. I didn’t pull any punches, and people liked me for it. People should always know where you stand” (Brandt 1982).

When it came to knowing where Kanten stood, that seemed a different story. McGrath called her appointment a worry for the leaders of the state’s more traditional farm organizations. He called her “tireless, articulate, soft-spoken but outspoken”—the “but” apparently signaling that, in her, outspoken behavior should be regarded with suspicion. AAM was branded “probably the most radical farm group in the state.” Having an AAM member in a high position, according to McGrath, “has created a general feeling of nervousness among the old hands in the agriculture department.”

One of Kanten’s hardest jobs at the department, she later said, would be building trust with her mostly male staff of state regulatory employees while also always remembering “how

\(^6\)Minnesota’s Democratic party, the Democratic-Farmer-Labor Party, a result of a post-World War II merger between the old populist Farmer Labor Party and the Democratic Party.
the farmer fit into all that.” She recalled that Perpich apparently had not consulted with Nichols on her appointment. Nichols was a conservative Democrat, and Kanten confirmed McGrath’s claim about how she fit into the department: “I made Jim nervous. I made the whole department nervous.” Adding to the tension was the fact that a commissioner usually chose his own assistant, but Perpich had given Nichols no choice.

**Using a New Deal Agency to Get Rid of Farmers**

At the national level, it’s difficult to say how much President Reagan really understood about what was happening to farmers. In March 1983, speaking at a National Agriculture Day ceremony, he sent a message of hope: “We’ve planted the right seeds and now economic recovery is popping up all over the country—and America’s farmers aren’t going to be left out.” Given the reality of farm economics, though, his optimism seemed uninformed or insincere. U.S. farm income in 1981 and 1982 had fallen to the lowest levels in 50 years (Sinclair 1983). Many farm policy experts, including Secretary Block, according to some reports, favored paying farmers to idle cropland—a doomed idea given the free-market mind set of Stockman, Reagan’s budget director (Sinclair 2000a). That same year, Stockman’s Office of Management and Budget ordered a 20 percent reduction in the number of delinquent borrowers at the FmHA (Schneider 1986). Farm communities felt the effects of this policy almost immediately.

In the northwestern corner of Minnesota, which had been hit by five years of consecutive weather disasters, 400 farmers met to discuss problems they were having with the FmHA. This group, spearheaded by Crookston-area farmer Willard Brunelle, became known as the Northwest Minnesota AG Action Committee. Brunelle met with FmHA personnel, and the district director told him “point blank,” Brunelle said, “that there were not going to be enough funds for farmers.”

The AG Action Committee had its critics. Some resented the low-interest government loans made to struggling farmers, sometimes at rates as low as 5 percent, when conventional interest rates were running 15 percent and more. One farmer told the *Minneapolis Tribune*, “There’s a certain percentage of farmers that are going to abuse the system” (Klauda 1984). In reality, the loan servicing options that FmHA employees offered to the area’s struggling farmers fell far short of options that Congress had provided. This fact would soon put the agency on the losing side of a national class action lawsuit.
In 1983, Lou Anne Kling went north to help Brunelle and his wife, Joann, with an FmHA loan application. The Brunelles had agreed to work with her as a test case to challenge how FmHA rules and regulations were being applied. At this time, Kling also began to give presentations about FmHA rules. The demand for information was so great that the Wheat Growers donated an office in their building in Red Lake Falls, and Kling met one-on-one there with farmers, helping them fill out paperwork for FmHA loan applications and appeals. Farmers feared losing their farms, their way of living, and their relationship to the land they loved. Kling recalled that “people were lined up in the hallway. It was such a desperation for knowledge!”

Later that year, Kling went with Anne Kanten and Governor Perpich to Washington, D.C. The three met for breakfast with Minnesota Senator Rudy Boschwitz, Undersecretary of Agriculture, Frank Naylor, and FmHA Director, Charles Shuman, to talk about the farm crisis in Minnesota. Kanten had asked Kling to “jot down some things that you have seen happening,” Kling recalled. She’d put together a five-page report (“nothing professional” she said later). She handed a copy to everyone at the start of the meeting.

The Governor started explaining what was going on in Minnesota, Kling recalled. He then said, “I brought my two best farm experts,” and turned the floor over to Kling and Kanten. “While Anne and I were talking,” Kling said, “I noticed Shuman reading through my report. Every once in awhile, he’d look up and say, ‘Is this all true?’ I’d say, ‘Yeah, I can document it.’” She’d brought along letters from farmers that backed up the report. In response, Shuman appointed a special administrator and sent an investigative team into northwestern Minnesota, where they found a backlog of 700 unprocessed loan applications. In 1984, FmHA sent 25 staff members to process the backlog (“FmHA Sending Help” 1984).

Suing the Government

Meanwhile, the FmHA’s new direction was also being challenged in court. Back in 1982, James Massey, a legal services attorney, had been reading about how the Reagan administration was using the FmHA to make life harder for low-income borrowers. He read about cases in Georgia and North Dakota where farmers were suing the FmHA over due process issues. For FmHA borrowers at the time, Massey recalled, “There were no restraints, no regulations, no rules.” Once the county supervisor and district director decided to liquidate a farmer’s loans, the government would cut off all of the farmer’s right to income and try to get
them off the farm within sixty days, without written notice or a hearing. Massey went to the Little Falls legal services office and met with attorney Lynn Hayes and paralegal Melba Granlund, a former dairy farmer. He told them about the North Dakota and Georgia cases. Granlund, he said, “lit up like a Christmas tree! She went out of the room and came back with a bunch of files, farmer clients that Farmers Home was starving out of business.”

One farm couple, Albert and Pearl Gamradt, had already been meeting with Lou Anne Kling about financial problems that had come to a head when a tree fell on Albert’s back while he was logging to supplement their farm income. With hired hands milking the Gamradts’ cows, production had fallen so much that there was no money left after the creamery deducted payments to the FmHA. Kling knew that this wasn’t supposed to be happening. In response to AAM’s tractorcade, Congress had passed a law that allowed the FmHA to release farm income as needed for family living and farm operating expenses. The Reagan administration refused to implement these provisions, arguing, according to Massey, that “Congress has said we ‘could,’ but we don’t have to.” Meanwhile, the Gamradts got no money from their dairy checks for 18 months.

The Gamradts told Kling about a lawyer who wanted to sue the FmHA on their behalf. Kling’s initial thought had been “How crazy!” It didn’t help when Massey showed up for court in Birkenstock sandals and a ponytail, but Kling grew more impressed when she saw how he and Hayes managed the case. Since the self-taught Kling had made herself an expert on FmHA regulations, the two lawyers were glad to have her help. “At that time,” Massey said, “nobody else in the country had done 20 or 30 Farmers Home cases, as far as I know.” Kling helped the lawyers with the Gamradt case, working as a new kind of advocate, a combination legal assistant, farm expert, and financial analyst.

In St. Paul, Anne Kanten made sure that Kling and the lawyers had all the data they needed from the department of agriculture. She also sent a personal statement that Massey said he entered into the court record:

She quoted Walter Brueggemann that the land is an arena for justice and fairness, and she said, “These are fighting words.” That last part was Anne's quote. I’ve used it over the years in articles and lawsuits, saying, “We need to allow farmers to fight in the state house and the court house so they’ll stay out of the jail house.”
In October 1983, Federal Judge Bruce Van Sickle certified the North Dakota case, *Coleman v. Block*, as a national class action lawsuit affecting 230,000 farmers. In November, he issued a temporary restraining order barring FmHA from foreclosing and requiring the agency to release money that farmers needed for family living and farm operating expenses ("U.S. Orders" 2000). Massey called it "the Biblical injunction," because Van Sickle quoted Second Timothy. The judge cited the same verse that Anne Kanten had been using in her speeches, the one that’s inscribed on the USDA building: the farmer who produces the goods is entitled to the first share.

The Gamradt and Coleman cases proceeded simultaneously. Then, when the Coleman lawyer, Sarah Vogel, joined the North Dakota attorney general’s office, Massey and Hayes took over the Coleman case. In 1984, Judge Van Sickle issued a permanent order requiring FmHA to implement loan servicing options and a hearing process for delinquent borrowers across the nation.

**Making Change by Educating Farmers**

Despite success in the Coleman case, farmers still didn’t necessarily know their rights. They needed information, and they needed to have the court decisions and the resulting federal regulations interpreted in plain language. In 1983, while the Coleman and Gamradt cases were being litigated, Jim Massey sent an intern to travel with Kling and write a book about farmers’ legal rights. Randi Roth, a law student at the University of Chicago, didn’t own a car, and she had never spent time on a farm. In a St. Paul hotel room, she met Kling, Pearl Gamradt and Bobbi Polzine, the charismatic leader of Groundswell. Roth recalled the conversation with self-effacing humor: "I said, ‘I am from Chicago, and I am here to write a book for farmers about FmHA foreclosures.’ They said, ‘Oh, my God!’"

For the next few weeks, Roth traveled around Minnesota with Kling. The education flowed both ways, as Roth asked questions, listened, and took notes:

I followed her around and wrote down everything she said. I listened to questions that people asked her, and I began to see the pattern of repeater questions. People didn’t know about writing confirming letters and documenting what happened to them. And people didn’t know sophisticated, substantive information, like for example, eligibility criteria for operating loans.
During the last two weeks of the summer, Roth wrote up what she’d learned in a book called *Farmers’ Guide to FmHA*. Written in direct, clear, accessible language, the book had two parts: self-advocacy skills and FmHA rules. Lou Anne Kling and Anne Kanten helped get the book into the hands of farmers.

**Putting Activism on a Budget**

Early in 1984, Kling later recalled, her husband, Wayne, told her “this working with farmers was costing us a lot of money.” Wayne asked her to put her advocacy work on a budget—no more than $200 a month. She understood his concern but felt torn. Obviously, with farm commodity prices continuing to drop, the Kling family could no longer afford to foot the bill for her advocacy work. But $200 would have only covered her gasoline expenses—not to mention car maintenance, meals on the road, and long distance phone calls. And Kling didn’t see how she could cut back on the advocacy work. It would mean disappointing people who needed her. If she couldn’t help the farmers who phoned her from all over the country, where would they find someone else equally well informed, experienced, and willing to advocate for them? Who else could serve as an empathetic bridge between farmers and legal services attorneys? Who would meet with farm groups and keep them informed about farmers’ rights? And what about the budding relationship with the Minnesota Department of Agriculture, now that the Governor had appointed Anne Kanten, the sympathetic “outsider,” as Assistant Commissioner? Short of cloning Kling, which Kanten whimsically suggested, what were Kling and the people who counted on her supposed to do?

* Unless otherwise cited, direct quotes and paraphrases from Lou Anne Kling and other narrators in this case come from interviews conducted by the author and archived in the Minnesota State Historical Society’s Oral History Collection OH 37. These interviews are also compiled, in edited form, in the author’s 1990 book, *Breaking Hard Ground: Stories of Minnesota Farm Advocates*. Quotes and paraphrases from Anne Kanten’s speeches come from the author’s collection of Kanten’s speech notes.
Epilogue (B)

Kling shared her concerns with Anne Kanten, Jim Massey, Willard Brunelle, and others until a shared idea emerged. The idea was to train other farmers to do what Kling had been doing. Massey envisioned legal services attorneys following a theoretical model that he called “empowerment” and “most bang for the buck.” He explained, “We figured we can’t send lawyers to all these hearings, and we know there’s only one Lou Anne Kling. Who else can do it? The farmers are going to have to do it themselves.”

Kanten’s boss, Jim Nichols, thought the idea “was a political hot potato,” Kanten recalled. She felt that his reluctance and the department’s mostly male, old-guard bureaucrats’ nervousness about her supposed radicalism made proposing a major initiative tricky, especially an initiative centered around the needs of struggling farmers. It was, she said, “like a lot of ideas that a woman working with men might have. She has to sow the seeds and let the men meditate on them awhile.” She recalled many conversations in which she and other stakeholders—sympathetic state legislators, farm activists, and other supporters of the farmers’ cause—worked to convince Nicholas that the plan was worthwhile. Finally, Nicholas agreed to a temporary program—lasting twelve weeks and operating on a shoestring budget of $50,000. The farmers would work almost as volunteers, putting in 20 hours a week and getting paid five dollars an hour, plus gas money and phone expenses.

In March 1984, Massey, Kling, and a group of 36 farmers gathered for a training at the department. A month later, Kanten called the new farmers’ advocates back for a follow-up meeting. She asked them to tell about their experiences. “It was one difficult story after another,” she said. “They were working more than the 20 hours, and their phones were ringing at all times of the day and night. I thought, ‘We’ve asked too much of these people.’ We knew we had to have more funding.”

The Minnesota Legislature appropriated $288,900 over two years for the farm advocate program in fiscal year 1985. Advocates assisted 12,000 farm families between 1984 and 1987 (“Advocates Have Helped” 2000). In 1988 they made nearly 18,000 contacts with farmers, lawyers, and others involved in farm debt restructuring (Minnesota Department of Agriculture
In 2000, the program still survived. An appropriation of $234,000 from the Minnesota Legislature provided enough money to employ 13 advocates at $10 an hour.

Anne Kanten retired from the department of agriculture in 1989. Soon after, she delivered a major paper on capitalism vs. environmental protection at the Lutheran World Federation meeting in Oslo, Norway. She continues to speak on world hunger and farm politics, with a “slight tilt now,” she says, “toward church politics.” She serves on the board of the nonprofit law firm Farmers’ Legal Action Group.

Kling’s farm advocate contract was not renewed after Republican Arne Carlson was elected governor in 1990. In April 1993, President Bill Clinton appointed her state director of the Farmers Home Administration. In December, she accepted an appointment as acting administrator of FmHA farm loan programs in Washington, D.C. When the agency was reorganized at the initiative of Vice President Al Gore, Kling became deputy administrator of farm loans in the new Farm Service Administration (FSA). When black farmers successfully sued the USDA for discriminatory lending practices, Kling was asked to create and manage outreach to minorities for the FSA. She administered a $1 million budget and was the only woman at that level of management in the agency.

In 1986, legal services attorneys Jim Massey, Lynn Hayes, and Randi Roth situated their practices in a new nonprofit law center, Farmers’ Legal Action Group, Inc. (FLAG). Since 1986, FLAG attorneys have represented hundreds of thousands of farmers in class action lawsuits like Coleman. They’ve also written and published numerous farmers’ handbooks, conducted farm law trainings in 35 states, published articles in law journals, and broadened their work from a focus on credit issues to other issues of concern to farm families.

In 1985, bad debts overwhelmed the Farm Credit System, and FCS asked Congress for help. The quasi-governmental lending institution, consisting of 37 farm credit banks in 12 systems across the country, faced loan losses of $11 billion and asked for a $10 billion bail-out (Berry 2000). Under the Agricultural Credit Act of 1987, Congress provided the bail-out but also restructured the agency and included provisions that forced the FmHA to offer loan servicing options to borrowers who were behind in payments.
Coleman v Block forced FmHA to provide loan servicing options for farmers and prevented FmHA from liquidating or foreclosing on farm loans for six years. Pleadings were heard in various courts until 1989, when the U.S. Supreme Court refused to review an Eighth Circuit decision that the case had become moot because of the Agricultural Credit Act of 1987. While the case halted FmHA farm foreclosures, farm supporters in the Senate in 1987 were able to add FmHA debt restructuring provisions to the credit act. Senators Byron Dorgan and Kent Conrad of North Dakota, Tom Harkin of Iowa, and Tom Daschle of South Dakota, let it be known that they would only support the Farm Credit System bail-out if FmHA debt restructuring provisions were included in the bill, according to Lynn Hayes. As the bill was drafted, Hayes spent weeks in Washington, providing technical assistance. With the FmHA still controlled by the free-market ideologues of the Reagan administration, what she needed to do, she chuckled in the telling, was “to make sure we had as few loopholes as possible for Farmers Home to use.”

The financial situation for farmers has not improved. In 1986, President Reagan was still promising to dismantle “the government’s elaborate farm support bureaucracy” (Kilborn 1986, 1). In 1996, the Republican Congress passed the “Freedom to Farm” bill, legislation that attempted to save tax dollars by curbing and eventually ending government farm subsidies. Commodity prices fell, and a new farm crisis was at hand. By 1998, Congress was forced by provide another agricultural bail-out: $6 billion in emergency payments to farmers. The USDA estimated that grain farmers’ net farm income had fallen 30% between 1993 and 1999 and that the Midwest was likely to lose 40,000 farmers in 1999 alone (Hage 1999).

How do women fit into this story of late 20th century farm politics? A newer generation of researchers has been working to add women’s names and stories to history, but creating a rural women’s history has been slow work, complicated by factors like the loss of oral histories as participants in the older farm movements age and die. In 1984, conferences on the history of rural and farm women began at New Mexico State University. In 1997, attendees at the Sixth Conference on Rural and Farm Women in Historical Perspective formally organized the Rural Women’s Studies Association. In explaining the need to study rural women’s history, co-authors Deborah Fink, Valerie Grim and Dorothy Schieder argued that “the history of rural women does not flow in any direct or predictable way from that of rural men, who occupy the center stage in supposedly nongendered accounts of the rural past.”
This case study adds two consciously gendered accounts to the story of the 1980s American farm crisis. What Lou Anne Kling and Anne Kanten accomplished, they accomplished as farmers and as women—distinctions which are not incidental but central to understanding the realities of their lives, their points of view, their options, and their choices as spelled out in this case.
Appendix: People and Organizations


DFL: Minnesota’s Democratic-Farmer-Labor Party

Farm Credit System: FCS. Quasi-governmental financial institution consisting of 37 farm credit banks in 12 systems across the country.

Farmers Alliance: Farm grassroots organization of the late 1800s.

Farmers Home: See FmHA (Farmers Home Administration).

Farmers Union: Farm group with grassroots beginnings dating to 1902.

FCS: See Farm Credit System.

FmHA: The Farmers Home Administration, a New Deal-era lending agency created to give credit to farmers who could not get credit elsewhere.

Pearl and Albert Gamradt: Minnesota dairy farmers and plaintiffs in the Gamradt v Block class action lawsuit.

Groundswell: Grassroots Minnesota farm organization that grew out of coalition building in southwestern Minnesota in 1982.

Lynn Hayes: Legal services attorney. Co-counsel for Gamradt v Block and later for Coleman v Block.

Anne Kanten: American Agriculture Movement organizer, American Lutheran Church activist, and Minnesota deputy and assistant commissioner of agriculture from 1984 to 1988.


James Massey: Legal services attorney. Lead attorney for Gamradt v. Block and later for Coleman v. Block.
National Farmers’ Holiday Association: Grassroots farmers’ group that organized a farm strike in 1932-1933 to shut down the transport and trading of farm commodities.


Northwest AG Action: Grassroots organization formed in northwestern Minnesota to work on problems between farmers and the FmHA.

Bobbi Polzine: One of the founders of Groundswell.

Randi Roth: James Massey’s law student intern. Later a legal services attorney. Author of *Farmers’ Guide to FmHA*.

USDA: United States Department of Agriculture. Department in charge of the Farmers Home Administration.
Bibliography


“FmHA Sending Help to Speed Farm Loans.” Minneapolis Tribune. 24 February 1984.


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McGrath, Dennis J. “Anne Kanten: Leaders Wary of Farm Activist.” Minneapolis Star and Tribune. 21 December 1982: B3+.


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Discussion Questions

Why do you think some farmers blamed the farm crisis on individual “bad managers,” while others blamed the financial and political system? With the historical perspective that you now have on the situation, which point of view makes the most sense to you? Why?

In stepping outside of the traditional helpmate role for women, Lou Anne Kling made some people angry. Why? Do you think that people would be likely to respond in the same ways today? Why or why not?

Does what happened to farmers in the 1980s have any relevance to our lives today? Explain your answer.

Name some of the alliances that Anne Kanten and Lou Anne Kling made in their work. Were these the best possible alliances that they could have made? What other possibilities can you imagine?

Was it necessary to bring Lou Anne Kling’s farm advocacy work under state sponsorship? What other options can you imagine, if any?

Activities

What women’s stories are going untold in your own community? Arrange to interview a woman whose story has not been told. Take notes or tape the interview. If possible, work with others and build a collection of these stories. Share the most interesting ones with the class.

Interview women from different generations about their work experiences. If time permits, work with a small group and compare what you learn. Discuss the kinds of jobs held by women in the 1940s, the 1960s, the 1980s, and now. How did people feel about women working in each of the different time periods? What has changed about women’s work and people’s attitudes toward it? What has not?

How are farmers doing financially now? Do some research. Possibly interview some farmers. Have financial conditions improved since the 1980s? Are farmers still losing their farms? What is the current national policy on farm prices?
Resources

Videotapes


*Down and Out in America.* Joseph Fuery Productions. Directed by Lee Grant and featuring Groundswell activists Bobbi and Albert Polzine. Oak Forest, Ill.: MPI Home Video, 1985. This Academy Award-winning documentary shows us the lives of the urban poor and of farmers who are organizing to hold onto their land. Lou Anne Kling and Senator Paul Wellstone can be glimpsed among protestors who refuse to leave a loan office unless the Polzines’ debts are reorganized.

Books


Websites

Farmers Legal Action Group, Inc. <http://www.flaginc.org>

Minnesota State Historical Society <http://www.mnhs.org>