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**The Arts and Agriculture  
A Report of Four Projects**

**By**

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## **The Four Projects:**

### **Northern Lakes Center for The Arts**

#### **Amery, Wisconsin**

**Nature of Project:** Making prints of 1940s rural artists' work, and reprinting the 1948 book, *Rural Artists of Wisconsin* by John Rector Barton.

### **Agricultural Heritage and Resources Center**

#### **Kewaunee, WI**

**Nature of Project:** To hold a one day program at the Heritage Center featuring old tractors, farm equipment, and various items once found in farm homes such as sad irons and cast iron toys.

### **Spring Green Center for Creatively and Innovation**

#### **Spring Green, Wisconsin**

**Nature of Project:** To hold a conference in April 2007 with the title "Creativity and Innovation: Lifeblood of the Small Community." The focus will be on exploring ways that creativity and innovation can enrich the business, education, government and public life of the rural community. The project is also examining the relationship of a land ethic to aesthetics.

### **Wormfarm Institute**

#### **Reedsburg, WI**

**Nature of Project:** Four events focusing on "Home Grown Culture." Each event to focus on art/culture on the farm.

### **Introduction**

The early settlers in Wisconsin, many of them immigrants from Europe, brought with them their music, ethnic recipes, crafts such as rosemaling (Norwegians), stitchery, wood carving, quilting and more. Some kept journals, wrote stories and penned poetry, others played musical instruments. Creativity and creative expression were an integral part of the daily lives of these early arrivals in Wisconsin, nearly all of whom lived on farms or in small towns.

In those days, no one talked about "putting art into agriculture." Art was a part of agriculture, as much as growing crops, milking cows, tending a vegetable garden, or plowing a field was a part of agriculture. Much of the art created in those days was of the land. It expressed a personal sense of place and community; it reflected the deep feelings of the artist/farmer about his life and where he lived and worked. And it provided a creative outlet for people who intuitively knew that the arts were important to living a full life.

The "Wisconsin Idea," a slogan coined back in the early 1900s, had as its core making the resources of the University of Wisconsin available to the people of the state. Not just to the students who

attended classes in Madison, but to all the people, no matter where they lived. Taking the arts to the far corners of the state became an important part of the Wisconsin Idea. The University's WHA radio station began broadcasting arts programs to the rural schools in the state by the 1920s. In a radical move, Dean Chris Christensen of the College of Agriculture hired John Steuart Curry as Artist in Residence—not to teach courses on campus, but to work with rural artists throughout the state. Later, arts leaders such as Robert Gard, a Kansas farm boy with a Cornell University masters degree and an interest in drama and writing began traveling the state, teaching, organizing, encouraging, and inspiring thousands of people to put words to paper, to develop hidden acting skills and form local theater groups.

It is appropriate in the early 2000s to once more step back and examine the question of the arts and agriculture. At one time the majority of people in Wisconsin lived on farms and in small towns. Today agriculture has transformed into an industry profoundly different from what it was as recently as twenty-five years ago. Are the arts still a part of agriculture? Yes. Do the arts still live in rural communities? Yes. But along with the changes in farming, rural communities have also changed. Some have become tourist centers. Some have nearly disappeared as farm supply stores closed, schools consolidated, and post offices left. And many rural communities and small towns are struggling, sometimes merely to provide basic services and keep taxes in line. Most community leaders know that the arts have been and must continue to be a part of a rural community's future. Creativity and creative expression is as important today as ever, perhaps more important as people face ever more complex and hurried lives.

#### **Four Projects**

I suppose we might start by questioning if the arts have ever left agriculture. Some may think so. I don't. But I also believe that helping the arts and agriculture come together in interesting ways, enhancing what is already there, and providing new resources and ideas makes sense.

Below I describe four projects, vastly different from each other. Each addresses the contemporary question: How do we put the arts back into agriculture? These four projects can be seen as a contemporary approach for applying the time-tested approaches of the Wisconsin Idea.

At the end of this report I'll try to summarize, and draw some conclusions, and make some recommendations (always a risky business) about the projects and their broader applications.

#### **Northern Lakes Center for The Arts**

##### **Amery, Wisconsin**

**Nature of Project:** Making prints of 1940s rural artists' work, and reprinting the book, *Rural Artists of Wisconsin* by John Rector Barton.

The College of Agriculture in Madison was the last place you'd probably look to find an arts program. Yet, in 1936, Dean Chris Christensen hired John Steuart Curry as Artist in Residence. Curry's assignment was not to teach art courses on campus, but to travel the state, working with rural artists, assisting them and helping them to organize rural arts groups. Curry, along with Thomas Hart Benton and

Grant Wood were identified as Regionalists and known for celebrating the rural Midwest with their paintings.

As Curry traveled around Wisconsin he discovered artists everywhere. As LaMoine MacLaughlin, Executive Director of the Northern Lakes Center For Arts said, “There was an artist behind every tree.” Perhaps not quite that many painters, but far more than might be expected. These artists, by and large, were people of the land, small town people, farm people, men and women, young people—almost all earning their living doing something other than painting, but painting nonetheless.

As was true of many rural writers, especially poets, these painters often kept their work to themselves, perhaps sharing with family and a few friends, but not going beyond that. After all didn't artists live in the big cities of the world, not in the rural communities of a farming state such as Wisconsin?

Curry began changing all that. Soon one could view artists' work at local art shows, in town squares, around courthouses, and in community parks. State-wide competitions were held and outstanding paintings selected. Rural artists, many of them with little or no formal training, received assistance and encouragement.

These paintings represented a special kind of art. As LaMoine points out, “The paintings have a sense of place and a sense of community.”

In 1948, as part of Wisconsin's Centennial Celebration, The University of Wisconsin Press published *Rural Artists of Wisconsin* by John Rector Barton. Barton was a professor in the Department of Rural Sociology in the College of Agriculture in Madison. In those days, Rural Sociology was heavily involved in promoting rural arts in the state. The book contained artwork and brief biographies of thirty Wisconsin artists. And what a great collection of work it was ranging from paintings of Canada geese approaching a cornfield, a farm auction in progress, pheasants in flight, the results of a village blizzard, farm buildings along a winding country road, and much more.

The book was soon out of print, the original paintings stored and forgotten. In 1956-1957 I was a graduate student at UW-Madison. My office, a small desk space, was located in the attic of Agriculture Hall. My fellow graduate students in agriculture, about fifteen us, worked in this drab, windowless place that at one time housed experimental rats and guinea pigs for the Bacteriology Department that was then located on the second floor of Agriculture Hall. One day a couple of us were snooping in the small storage spaces on either side of the vast attic. There we stumbled onto these lost and forgotten paintings. At the time I knew little about the Rural Arts Program and John Steuart Curry's work, and didn't know the history of these paintings. We dragged them out of their haphazard storage space, dusted them off and hung them on the walls of our graduate student room. They were a magnificent collection and much appreciated by my fellow students and me as we did our work.

As our professors occasionally visited us in the attic, some of them commented on the paintings and asked if we'd miss a few of them. They wanted them for their offices. For several years, this original artwork hung on the walls of the then Department of Agricultural and Extension Education located on the

second floor of Agriculture Hall. When I became an Assistant Professor in the Department in 1964, I once more had paintings from this collection on my office wall.

Even at that time, few people knew the importance of the collection. Some of those who did dismissed the paintings as the work of amateurs with little art sophistication. In some cases this was true, but as we know now, these painting represented a time when rural people were discovering that they, too, could express their creativity and be recognized for their efforts. These paintings represented even more. As LaMoine MacLaughlin said, as he referred to the collection of paintings and the brief artist biographies, “This book (*Rural Artists of Wisconsin*) is the story of people back in the 1940s when sense of place was still a part of their lives. Not only did their stories but their artwork reflected that.”

Eventually, a large portion of the collection found its way to The Northern Lakes Center for the Arts in Amery, Wisconsin. The originals are fragile as are their frames—after all they’ve had quite a history of moving from here to there around the UW-Madison campus.

I asked LaMoine why it thought it was important to create reprints of some of the artwork, and reprint the book, *Rural Artists of Wisconsin*. “I can answer at several levels,” he said. “First, the book stands on its own after almost sixty years. It’s a beautiful book and well written. The artwork in the book is art that needs to be remembered. Secondly, it’s an educational book that tells us that some important art work with rural artists took place a long time ago. The book is a historical document in that way.”

LaMoine then went on to talk about the relation of the artwork in this book to teaching the importance of place. “A sense of place grounds you in community,” he said. “And I believe a lot of people have lost that. Our challenge is like trying to describe color and sight to people blind from birth. It’s really difficult. You need to experience a sense of place to understand it. When you come to a community and are home there, you recognize it, you realize it, and you feel it viscerally. And I think a lot of people these days have never experienced that.”

As I reviewed the book, I discovered that I only had known two of the artists personally, but was familiar with the work of several others. I once met Ethyl Kvalheim of Stoughton, Wisconsin at a Syttende Mai (Norwegian Independence Day) celebration. She has become famous for her Rosemaling painting skills.

I met Bill Boose when I was a kid growing up on a Waushara County farm. He was a friend of my father’s and lived on a little farm near Wild Rose, Wisconsin where he painted, trapped furs, and grew Ginseng. And told stories.

Shortly after I acquired my farm west of Wild Rose in 1966, I asked Bill if he would do a painting of the granary we were restoring and transforming into a cabin. “Sure,” he said. He proceeded to spend much of a week sitting at his easel on a little side hill south of the cabin, painting. Neighbors driving by wondered what in the world this fellow was doing sitting on my side hill for several days, staring at something. Apparently they had not seen a painter in action before.

In a couple weeks I got a call from Bill telling me my painting was finished. We’d not talked about prices, and now I was concerned that I couldn’t afford what he was about to charge. I had not

expected that he would spend most of a week on site. He showed me the painting, all nicely framed. It was beautiful. And the price he charged was unbelievably reasonable. The painting hangs on my living room wall to this day.

In addition to reprinting the book and making prints of several of the original paintings (LaMoine said the originals are far too fragile to travel), he is planning several exhibits for the prints, and presentations about the project. I saw the prints and heard his presentation at the School of the Arts in Rhinelander. This was an excellent venue to introduce people to artwork that has withstood the test of time, along with an approach to painting with a sense of place and community in mind—that is once more becoming popular. After having been nearly forgotten for so many years, the work of these early artists, who paved the way for arts programs in rural communities, have once more become available. As LaMoine summarized, “Without sense of place, art becomes a frill.”

### **Agricultural Heritage and Resources Center**

#### **Kewaunee, WI**

**Nature of Project:** To hold a one day program at the Heritage Center featuring old tractors, farm equipment, and various items once found in farm homes such as sad irons and cast iron toys.

As I drove from Green Bay to Kewaunee on an early Saturday morning in May, I saw the temperature drop from the comfortable sixties into the fifties as I approached Lake Michigan. A stiff wind blew from the northeast, which provides a summer air conditioner for the area, but a long, cool spring.

I was headed for the Heritage Farm, a rural historical center located on an 1875 farmstead, south of Kewaunee. They were holding a special one-day event on May 6, which they called “Old Iron and Old Irons.” People were invited to bring their old tractors, old cast iron toys, pedal tractors, steam engines, farm machinery, sad irons from the kitchen—anything that was made of iron and used in the early 1900s on the farm. People were also encouraged to bring along other items used on the farm during that era, although they may not have been of iron.

I asked Jerry Sinkula, Executive Director of the Agricultural Heritage and Resources Center that runs Heritage Farm what they were doing. The Center began operations in 1994 and operates as a not-for-profit educational organization.

“We’re putting art, history and agriculture together,” he said. “And in an unusual way. In the early 1900s, lots of iron was used in farming, iron in farm equipment, iron in cook stoves, sadirons, and in toys, too.”

As we talked, visitors arrived to view exhibits and talk to the exhibitors. Men who had restored old tractors, John Deere, Farmall, Case, Allis Chalmers, Oliver and Ford sat proudly by their work, happy to tell you about the machine and how it was used on the farm. They were pleased to tell you a story about early farm life when they drove this very restored tractor or one like it. Visitors, a steady stream all day,

also gazed at horse drawn machinery: grain drills, cultivating equipment, and heard stories about what farming was like with horses.

Inside the beautiful old restored barn, I visited with Wilma Rebein about her apron collection some of them made from feed sacks, several of them the type that tucked up under a woman's chin to protect her dress from splashes and spills, and provide a place to dry one's hands. Some were fancy, the kind a woman wore when entertaining guests, the ones with fancy designs across the bottoms. "Bought some of these at auctions," Wilma said. "People these days don't appreciate how much work went into making these aprons. Some are works of art, too." Indeed they were. I examined aprons with cross-stitchery, and elaborate designs. It was another way for a farm woman to express her creativity with thread and needle. Although aprons were useful items, they also provided a subtle way for a woman to show off her sewing skills—her art.

A photo exhibit of farm homes lined the walls of the old barn. Last year the center invited photographers to submit photos of old barns and some 262 photos comprised the exhibit. They called the exhibit, "The Lonely Barn." Most of these old barns stood empty, no cows, no hay in the mows, no straw in the stable. No families working together in these old architectural wonders, milking cows, throwing hay down from the hay mow, feeding the calves, hauling out manure—doing what families with dairy cows did, dad, and mom and all the kids working together.

JoAnn Vogel and her friend Linda Mach, both on the Board of the Center, and additional volunteers organized the exhibits. "I asked for stories, what it was like as a boy or a girl growing up on a farm," JoAnn said. "We received more than 240 stories related to the barn exhibit.

"This year we wanted to feature farm homes," JoAnn said. "The farm home I grew up in was built by my great grandfather in 1857. Those years spent with my grandparents were the most memorable years of my life. We call the exhibit "Treasured Farm Homes."

"Farm homes in this area were influenced by the ethnic roots of the people who built them," said Jerry Sinkula. "We are a very ethnically diverse community." As a result there are Belgian brick homes, Czech homes, German homes, and even some with Victorian influence. "They have a little gingerbread decoration and sometimes a little trim on the porch," Jerry said. Sinkula's ethnic roots are Czech-Bohemian and German.

In another part of the old barn is a Wisconsin John Deere collection featuring items manufactured at Horicon, Wisconsin. The collection includes seeders that go back to 1912 (seeders replaced the hand planting of grain around Civil War time). The Van Brunt Company manufactured seeders in Horicon, Wisconsin starting in 1860. John Deere bought out Van Brunt in 1911, but continued putting the name Van Brunt on their seeders for several years. Most people don't know that John Deere did more than make green tractors and farm machinery. They made green bicycles, green motorcycles, green snowmobiles and of course lawnmowers and garden tractors.

In one end of the former stable section of the barn is a replica of an early 1900s farm kitchen, complete with wood burning cook stove. Here I'm introduced to a collection of irons, sad irons they were

called, that women used for ironing clothes before electricity arrived on the farm. Sad irons were heated on the cook stove, several at a time. A woman ironed until the one she was using cooled, then she switched to another hot one from the stove. Hard, hot work. Tucked among the sad irons, I saw some examples of gas operated irons. You put gasoline in a little tank, pumped with a little built in pressure pump, lit the thing and it heated the iron. These were popular about the same time as gasoline lamps with mantles replaced kerosene burning lamps. The gas lamps cast a brighter light than kerosene, but also required pumping. Kerosene lamps were essentially foolproof. Dump in some kerosene, touch a match to the wick, replace the chimney and you had light—considerably more than a candle.

I also spent some time looking at Dale Swoboda's farm toy collection, most of the items made of cast iron. Toy tractors, farm machinery—used by farm kids to play farming until they were old enough to do the real thing—which generally came by the time they were six or seven and could start helping with the barn chores.

JoAnn Vogel and her crew have also restored the old log farm home at Heritage Farm. Walking into the house is like returning to the year 1900. The parlor features a wood burning heater, which was common in farm homes until as recently as the 1950s. There is an old cradle, a sauerkraut cutter and a spinning wheel. The kitchen table is set with period dishes, ready for a flock of relatives to visit, or perhaps a crew helping with butchering or wood sawing.

I talked further with Jerry Sinkula about art and agriculture. "Early 1900 farmers built art into their lives," Jerry said. "Art was expressed in the dresses women made, in the dollies that covered up their tables, the hooked and braided rugs they made, the clothing they knitted." Much of this was ethnic art,

"People were making things for their homes that reminded them of their homes in the old country," Jerry said.

We talked about the need for young people to learn about their heritage, and how that was one of the purposes of the Center. "The Heritage Center is more than buildings we are trying to preserve. It's the stories about farm life that we pass on to the next generation," Jerry said. He continued, "I often say, 'you don't know where you're going if you don't know where you came from.' One thing we're trying to do is help young people understand how this country became what it is today by studying the past."

Two other art forms that are high on the Center's list of importance are music and food. "These are a continuation of ethnic art," Jerry said. "Almost everything you eat around here has some authentic ethnic heritage. And you see it in the music, the old time bands that continue to play ethnic music. More and more young people are picking up the music now, coming to the dances, learning how to do the polka and other folk dances."

At days end, I drove out the driveway of the Heritage Center with several new stories and a bunch of memories. Back in the early 1960s I worked as University Extension Agent in northeastern Wisconsin, so I had learned about the ethnic art of the region—especially the good food, the Saturday night polka dances, and the story telling. I especially remember Chicken Booyah (a soup), Bohemian Goulash (a main dish), Knee Caps and Kolache (both desserts). Now more than forty five years later, so many things have



changed, yet much has remained the same. In the midst of a dramatically changing agriculture, a show like “Old Iron and Irons” reminds us that the past is important. That what we are today as a people is a reflection of our histories. And that stories are one way to give history life and to pass on one’s heritage to the next generation.

**Spring Green Center for Creativity and Innovation**  
**Spring Green, Wisconsin**

**Nature of Project:** To hold a conference in April 2007 with the title “Creativity and Innovation: Lifeblood of the Small Community.” The focus will be on exploring ways that creativity and innovation can enrich the business, education, government and public life of the rural community. The project is also examining the relationship of a land ethic to aesthetics.

The early planning for the conference outlined four major themes:

1. **Home cooking: organics, artisan foods, and entrepreneurial success.** This theme will feature stories of successful local producers. Slow foods [in contrast to fast foods] and the art of cooking will be enjoyed at a home grown potluck as part of the conference. Participants can also tour artisan and innovative cheese factories, including the Cedar Grove Cheese Factory’s living machine waste water processing green house.

2. **The public spaces: From land ethnics to land aesthetics.** Following this theme, participants will explore the relationship of landscape to the generations of farmers and their communities who have created a land aesthetic.

3. **Nurturing the next generation: A journey of mind and spirit.** Questions to be explored include: How do we nurture and sustain the spark of creativity throughout a lifetime? Where in our schools, our homes and our community life do we acknowledge, engage, and sustain the human need to create?

4. **Civility, government and the common good.** Within this theme, participants will discuss community questions as: How do we reinvigorate the sense of small town togetherness, and our shared commitment to the common good? What have innovative communities done to heal the rancor and help citizens and elected officials meet the challenges of supporting schools, law enforcement and other public services.

I talked with Derrick Gee, Project Director in early August, 2006 about the planning progress. The planners have been a bit concerned that some of their early work involved “speaking to the choir” especially concerning the theme of “land ethnics to land aesthetics.” He said that most people who have bought land in the area bought it because of its beauty and they want to keep it that way. The challenge is to involve a broader sweep of individuals, some of whom may not understand or accept why all the fuss about land ethnics and aesthetics. So Gee and his people are broadening the scope of the project to include

working farmers, both commercial and organic, business people, environmentalists, realtors and developers, service clubs, as well as 4-H and FFA representatives.

Some basic questions they're wrestling with, when they pose the question of how to "improve the landscape" is "what's landscape?" And "what's improve?" One person's idea of improvement might be to bulldoze over the farm buildings and build a condominium complex. Another would find that idea deplorable, and the antithesis of improvement. And what about the landowner who collects old cars and allows them to rust in his yard, along with a collection of similar items. Does anyone have the right to tell him that his yard is an eyesore and his landscape should be "improved?" It's his land isn't it? He pays taxes on it and should be able to do with it what he pleases?

As Derrick Gee points out, "Different people have different goals. What can we do that all can agree on?"

These are but a few of the thorny questions this project hopes to address in the conference planned for April, 2007.

**Wormfarm Institute**  
**Reedsburg, WI**

**Nature of Project:** Four events focusing on "Home Grown Culture." Each event to focus on art/culture on the farm.

I first became acquainted with this project when Paul Dietmann, a University of Wisconsin Extension agent for Sauk County asked if I would give a presentation on Arts and Agriculture at a meeting that was to be held in Baraboo. It was then I learned that the Wormfarm Institute, the sponsor of the meeting, was one of four groups examining the connection between arts and agriculture. This February 21, 2006 meeting was the first for the Wormfarm group.

Nineteen people met at the Java Café, on the court house square in Baraboo. The group included active farmers, including conventional and organic, photographers, a bookstore owner, artists, writers and others interested in the topic. The meeting began with Donna Neuwirth and Jay Salinas of the Wormfarm Institute giving a brief introduction of the planned activities:

- Four dinner meetings designed to connect people working in the arts with people working in agriculture.
- The first session to have seven people from agriculture, and seven writer/artists plus hosts with the plan that the number would grow with more attending at future sessions.
- When possible, locally grown food to be served at each gathering.
- A speaker, writer, or artist to make a presentation at each meeting to stimulate discussion.

Then I talked for a few minutes about how the links between art and agriculture are not new in Wisconsin. The connections go back to the early settlement days of the state, and then were enhanced in the early 1900s when the trio of Governor Robert LaFollette, Charles VanHise, University of Wisconsin President, and Charles McCarthy of the Legislative Reference Library developed The Wisconsin Idea—

taking the University of Wisconsin off campus to the far reaches of the state. I used examples of the University's "School of the Air" that broadcast music and arts programs to the one-room country schools in the state, and I talked a little about the Artist in Residence program that brought noted regional artist, John Steuart Curry to the College of Agriculture and to the people of Wisconsin.

The Wormfarm people then put the project in focus. They said the time was right for examining the connections between arts and agriculture. They cited several reasons including:

--Sauk County has arts grants available for non-profit organizations. Wormfarm is a non-profit organization that artists might use as a vehicle for applying for grants.

--The Wisconsin Academy of Sciences, Arts, and Letters is focusing on the future of farming and rural life in a special 1906-07 series of seminars, workshops and meetings.

--The Sauk County Smart Growth Plan identifies preservation of agriculture heritage and scenic beauty as part of its long term priorities. The next part of the meeting might best be described as "organized brain storming," the overall question being how to connect art to agriculture.

We began talking about the definition of culture. This is a tough assignment for any group. Bring a group of professional sociologists or anthropologists together and they will wrestle long and hard with a definition of culture, especially one that goes beyond the dictionary definitions that include such phrases as "art, music, literature and related intellectual activities," and "people who share a set of beliefs, customs, practices and social behavior,"

After some discussion the group agreed that for the purposes of this project, culture means "the creative arts: visual arts, music, poetry, literature and dance." The word artist was defined as "those involved in the creative arts." So with this foundation, we moved on to a series of discussion questions:

*What benefit to a farmer might interaction with an artist offer?* The discussion moved to suggesting that artists might help some farmers think differently about other things besides farming. Further, there is likely an income potential—many artists are looking for hands-on experiences in the country. Farms also can provide a setting for ag-tourism.

*What benefit might an artist experience from interaction with the farmer?* Artists might come to realize something of what farmer's do and why they do it in a particular way, including the practical question of the source of our food. Farming practices that might look wrong to an artist often make good sense to a farmer who must put high priority on earning a living for his family. So with artists and farmers working together, both might benefit. Artists and farmers, too, might discover the interesting interplay between farming and the arts, and where there is overlap. Farming itself can be seen as one kind of creativity, one kind of art. Although some believe that farming, which has become highly scientific, may have lost some or much of its "artful" dimensions.

Participants offered several other interesting perspectives:

"Artists have lost touch with their constituencies. Artists need a story to tell. The link between the agricultural world and the artistic world can be mutually beneficial."

“People don’t know where their food comes from. Maybe farmers need artists to help them tell their story.”

“Artists need the land for renewal and inspiration.”

*What arts and agriculture collaborations have you heard about?* Participants suggested several interesting examples, including one from the Wormfarm Artist in Residence Program. In 2004 an artist from Spain, Ramon, worked on the farm and created some paintings by sitting out in the field. The paintings were displayed at an art show in Reedsburg. Farmer neighbors, who had seen him working at his easel in the field came to the art show to see what he had done. People who had never attended an art show came. An interesting interaction between the artist and farmers occurred.

The discussion went on into the night. One of the issues that bubbled up occasionally was the “them” and “us” question—farmers and artists. There was some discussion, but not much, that farmers are often artists themselves. Many farmers write, paint, do folk art such as wood carving, sew quilts, sing in choirs, and do ethnic cooking. And I suspect the opposite is true, as well. I know professional artists, who are also farmers.

Workshops of this type, with farmers and professional artists working together might help move past the “them-us” question to “we-together.”

At their second meeting in March, the group wrestled with the question: “What constitutes a thriving rural culture?” They explored cultural activities that now exist in Sauk and surrounding counties. They examined such questions as: “What does a thriving rural culture look like?” “Where are the rural gathering places in our area?” “What are the local celebrations, festivals, historical sites, cultural institutions?” “Where do the creative arts (music, art, poetry, and dance) flourish in our area?” “What might we borrow from our rural past to enhance our local culture?” “How does a thriving rural community interact with an urban one?”

They even came up with a new word: “Cultureshed” defined as “A geographic region irrigated by streams of local talent and fed by deep pools of human and natural history.”

For their third meeting, they focused on the future with such questions as “What events, occasions, celebrations or collaborations can you imagine that may help realize a bright future for farming and rural life?” “Describe a thriving Wisconsin farm and a thriving small Wisconsin town in 2020?”

“Artists and farmers have many things in common. One may be that what they do has value that transcends the economic. Is this true? For the farmers, or those who grew up on farms, name three reasons to farm. For artists, what motivates you?” And then they end with this provocative question: “Are these the wrong questions and if so, what are the right ones?”

By the fourth session the group began to focus on specific activities to enhance culture and agriculture, or what the group had begun calling “Home Grown Culture.” Some of the ideas they considered included: A farm tour. What does it take to elevate the profession of farming to “superstar” status as chefs, musicians, athletes, and others have done? The “re-enchantment of agriculture” including

celebrating planting and harvesting, and other dimensions of farm life. The farmer as artist—farmer as creator of not only food and beautiful landscapes, but the farmer as creative problem solver. The family farm economy—the family farm may be the only working example of this left in society. Home grown culture—create a brand to illuminate and build on the cultural riches in our midst: agriculture, art, music, cheese making, theater, literature, dance, cuisine.

Some of the outcomes noted by the project leaders included:

--Putting the “agri” back into the culture was determined to be equally if not more important than putting the culture back into agriculture.

--A thriving rural culture cannot exist without a thriving agriculture.

--Eating is most people’s connection to agriculture—food must be emphasized, celebrated and given valuable time.

--There were concerns about the project devolving into artists interpreting farmers’ lives for them.

--There were concerns about an artist’s work being valued only as a social or political tool or marketing scheme.

--It became clear that if this project is to have real substance it will take time—there were no “deliverables” after four meetings.

The group is now looking forward to carrying out many of these plans as they move into the next phase of their work.

### **Summary and Conclusions**

The considerable differences among these four projects make it clear that multiple approaches can be and likely should be used in “Putting the arts back into agriculture.”

The Amery project is bringing back to life a piece of Wisconsin artistic history by re-publishing a 1948 book that includes biographies of rural artists with examples of their work. The Amery project has also made prints of many of the book’s paintings, which have been and will continue to tour the state.

The “old iron” project recognizes the historical aspects of arts in rural communities, applauds them, and attempts to carry them forward to younger generations. This program emphasized ethnic art such as music, food, sewing, quilting, and old tractor renovation.

The Spring Green project is attempting to combine a land ethic with esthetics—two difficult but important concepts. Land use issues are integral to this project. They are also emphasizing how creativity and innovation can enrich rural communities at all levels.

The Reedsburg group, through a series of structured discussions with artists and farmers sitting at the table, focused on how professional artists and farmers can help each other, and contribute to each other’s successes, and to revitalizing their rural communities.

The value of these four projects goes beyond the important question of the arts and agriculture. These four projects have demonstrated that people of vastly different backgrounds and motivations can work effectively together to tackle a problem. Farmers, both conventional and organic, sitting down with

professional artists, local business people, and others is a model for dealing with many community problems and challenges, not the least of which is the question of connecting the arts and agriculture.

Many small town and rural problems are considered only when there is a crisis or a serious issue: a new urban development in a once farming community, a manure spill that contaminates a nearby stream, a power transmission planned to cross a pristine rural area and so on. At these times emotions are high, tempers flair, and sound, creative problem solving often is displaced by “quick fix political expediency.” The planning approach advocated by all four of these groups deals with questions and problems before they evolve into emotional crises—land use problems, urban-rural relationships, the importance of art in a community, etc. Reasoned, in-depth discussion, over time, with an opportunity for people to get to know each other over a meal, usually results in more creative solutions that are broadly supported and thus more easily implemented.

### **Suggestions**

Based on the activities and results of these four projects, communities wishing to explore the relationship of the arts and agriculture should consider the following:

--Before beginning a project, examine the history of the community, its ethnic background, the place arts have played in the past ranging from arts in the schools to theater groups, arts organizations, writer groups, and ethnic arts such as music, painting, sewing and cooking.

--Realize that a discussion of the arts and involvement with arts programs can be fun, and should itself be a creative activity.

--Involve all dimensions of the community: farmers, business people, professional artists, part-time artists, young people, and environmentalists to mention a few.

--Understand that each community is unique and programs and activities involving the arts and agriculture should fit the special characteristics of a community and its people.

--That a sense of place is essential to a program focusing on arts and agriculture. As LaMoine MacLaughlin said, “Without sense of place, art becomes a frill.”

--Be aware that creating programs and activities to encourage arts and agriculture are not short-time efforts but require long term commitments to planning and programming.

--Continue to support and encourage the University of Wisconsin’s various campuses and especially University of Wisconsin-Extension to promote and provide assistance to artists, and art organizations. UW- Extension, especially, must continue to assist rural communities as they attempt to organize arts and agriculture programs.

--Recognize that the Wisconsin Idea is as important today as it was one-hundred years ago.