



Session One Hand-out

The Story of Bountiful Prairie

In 1974, the community of Bountiful Prairie was booming. The Russians were buying grain and crop prices were rising. Strong grain prices prompted strong livestock prices.

Young families who had started their lives in the city were coming back home to farm. Main Street was booming. Farmers were buying new cars, pickups and tractors. Merchants were bringing their sons and daughters into their businesses and building new homes. Churches and schools were sprouting new additions.

But when commodity prices softened and interest rates skyrocketed in the 80s, it all came crashing down with record foreclosures and families leaving the land. Machinery dealers and small businesses went down in a chain reaction.

Things were a little better by the end of the 80s and in the subsequent decades. Still, the community seemed to be slowly dying. Every year it took more acres to make the same living. Livestock production got harder as corporate farms expanded and meat packers paid them premiums, while discounting livestock from small operations.

Everyone was adapting as best they could. Many farmers tightened their belts and hunkered down to pay off debts and make it to retirement. Those who could find them took off farm jobs. Some decided to call it quits while they could still hold on to the family land. Most told their kids to not even think about coming back to farm.

A few families decided the answer was to get big. Why not? Under the farm program, the bigger you farmed the more money you got. New technology like Roundup Ready made it feasible to manage bigger acres. Competition among expanding farms was fierce. Cash rents and land prices went up, squeezing profit margins ever tighter.

The whole community was struggling. Efforts to lure a new factory to town were not successful. To the contrary, the one plant that had moved to Bountiful Prairie in the 60s for its lower labor costs now moved to China to hire people for a few dollars a day.

Retail businesses were suffering from declining population and growing competition from a Wal-Mart down the road. Local merchants complained that wholesalers charged them more than the retail price at Wal-Mart, which used its size to get deep volume discounts. Still, local people flocked to Wal-Mart. It was cheap. Some took part time jobs there. But pay was low and there were no benefits.

Every institution in town was struggling. Church attendance and donations were down. There were fewer young families in town to participate. The school was considering closing. Kindergarten enrollment kept dropping and state aid was declining.