

The Farm Is More Than a Place: The Legacy Agriculture Gives to Society

A Tribute to Dolly Parton

Roger McEowen (roger.mceowen@washburn.edu) – Washburn University School of Law

Roger McEowen's Blog: <https://agriculturallaw.lawprofessorsblogs.com/>

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Overview

Dolly Parton's death at age 80 offers an opportunity to think about something much larger than the life of a remarkable entertainer. Her story is, in many respects, a story about the enduring importance of the American farm - and about something that much of modern society has forgotten.

Parton spent most of her adult life surrounded by international fame, enormous wealth and the machinery of entertainment. Yet when she talked about who she was and what shaped her, she repeatedly returned to a small farm in the mountains of East Tennessee. She did not describe the farm merely as the backdrop to a colorful childhood. It was where she learned to work, where her family produced food and income, where children were expected to contribute, and where she learned lessons that ultimately shaped her career and philanthropy.

That is worth remembering because the importance of farming to society is increasingly obscured by distance.

The Invisibility of Agriculture

For much of the American population, agriculture has become almost invisible. Food appears in grocery stores, restaurants and increasingly through delivery apps. The connection between a steak on a plate, a loaf of bread on a kitchen counter or a shirt made from cotton and the land, livestock, farmers and farm families that produced the underlying commodities is easily forgotten. And perhaps nowhere is that disconnect greater than among America's social and cultural elites.

There is a tendency in some circles to romanticize rural America while simultaneously treating farming as an antiquated activity that ought to give way to something supposedly more sophisticated. The farm becomes a backdrop for a lifestyle magazine photograph or a vacation destination rather than what it actually is: one of the fundamental institutions upon which civilization depends.

Dolly Parton's life tells a different story.

The School of Farming

Parton was one of 12 children to parents born of the same generation as my own. Her family farmed in the foothills of the Great Smoky Mountains. In a 1967 interview, at only 21 years of age, she described the family's life simply: "We just farmed and that's all we did." She remembered working in the fields, hoeing corn and setting tobacco. That sentence captures something that is difficult for modern society to understand. The farm was not



merely a place where the family lived. The farm was the family's economic enterprise, workplace, food system, classroom and community. Everyone had a role.

Her family's principal cash crop was tobacco. The children worked in the tobacco fields, and the income generated by the crop could be critical to the family's ability to survive. Her father farmed but also worked construction jobs because farming alone could not support such a large family. He could work the farm, leave for construction work and return to the fields afterward.

There is an important lesson here. Farm families have historically understood something that modern culture sometimes forgets: work is not merely a means of obtaining consumption. Work is formative. It teaches responsibility. It teaches persistence. It teaches that weather does not care about your schedule, that livestock do not observe holidays and that a crop does not respond to excuses. It teaches that you sometimes work because the work needs to be done.

Those lessons followed Parton long after she had become wealthy enough never to work another day. She once humorously described herself as “a workhorse that looks like a show horse.” The show horse came later. The workhorse was formed on the farm.

Farming Is More Than Economics

This is where the concept of a farming legacy becomes so important. A farm is an economic asset, but a farm family is also an institution. Generations pass down land, livestock, equipment, knowledge, stories, values and responsibilities. The legacy is not contained in the deed to the land. It is contained in what the land teaches.

Parton's father never learned to read and write. She later connected that circumstance to the realities confronting poor farm families, where children sometimes left school because their labor was needed.

Parton did not respond by rejecting her father's life. She responded by honoring it. Her Imagination Library, which began in Sevier County in 1995 and eventually expanded internationally, was inspired in part by her father's lack of educational opportunity.

Think about that for a moment. A lesson learned on a farm eventually became part of a worldwide philanthropic legacy. That is what a legacy does. It carries something forward.

Farming is More Than Food Production

Parton's music provides another illustration. “Coat of Many Colors” drew from her childhood experience. The story worked because Parton understood the economics behind it. Her family did not simply choose homemade clothing as an artistic statement. They made do because buying something new was not always an option. Yet the song did not reduce rural poverty to despair. It found dignity in circumstances that were materially difficult. That may be one of agriculture's greatest contributions to society: the farm teaches people how to distinguish between material wealth and human worth.



Farm families understand scarcity. They understand stewardship. They understand that not everything can be consumed today because something must be preserved for tomorrow. Those are not merely agricultural values. They are civilizational values.

What Happens When We Lose the Farming Legacy?

This is why the decline of the farming tradition should concern everyone - not merely farmers. When a society loses its connection to agriculture, it risks losing its connection to some of the most basic realities of life. Food does not simply appear. Someone must plant it. Someone must care for it. Someone must assume the risk of drought, disease, insects, markets and weather. Someone must maintain the land. And someone must be willing to do it again next year. The farmer operates in a world governed by realities that cannot be legislated away. Nature imposes limits. Economics imposes limits. Time imposes limits.

That is precisely why farming can produce humility. Modern society, particularly among those who live far removed from agricultural production, can sometimes operate as though human preferences are sufficient to overcome physical reality. Farmers know better. The land gets the final vote.

A Legacy Worth Preserving

Parton once said that everything about the Smoky Mountains influenced her - the people, faith, food, neighbors and the way she thought and felt. She eventually returned capital to that region through Dollywood and related investments, with an explicit desire to create jobs and opportunities in the community that had produced her. Again, there is a lesson here for agriculture. A successful person does not have to be ashamed of where he or she came from.

Leaving the farm economically does not require abandoning the farm culturally. And becoming wealthy does not mean the values learned in rural life suddenly become obsolete. Quite the contrary. Those values may be among the most valuable things a person carries away. The farm is therefore more than acreage. It is more than an appraisal. It is more than a balance sheet. It is more than an agricultural operation to be liquidated when the next generation decides it would rather pursue a career somewhere else. It is a family's institutional memory. It can tell a child who his grandparents were, what they endured, what they built and why the family is where it is today.

That is why farm succession and estate planning are about more than dividing assets. They are about deciding what, if anything, will survive the transition from one generation to the next. The land may eventually be sold. The operation may change. The livestock may disappear. But the legacy does not have to. Dolly Parton's remarkable life illustrates the point beautifully. She became one of the world's most recognizable entertainers, but when asked to explain who she was, she kept coming back to the same place. The farm. That is something worth remembering in a culture increasingly disconnected from the land.

America does not merely need farmers to produce food. America needs the farming tradition because of what farming produces in people. It produces responsibility. It produces resilience. It produces stewardship. It produces an appreciation for work.



And, perhaps most importantly, it produces a sense that what we inherit is not merely ours to consume. We are temporary stewards of something that was entrusted to us and that we have an obligation to leave for those who come after us.

That is the essence of a farming legacy. And it is a legacy that society ignores at its peril.

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K-State Agricultural Economics | 342 Waters Hall, Manhattan, KS 66506-4011 | www.ageconomics.k-state.edu

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