

Talk at the Little Prairie Church by Steve Albers

Probably most of you know me but for those that don't, I dairy farmed for 20 some years about a mile down the road on what was my grandfather's farm and I continue to live there and crop farm with my wife, Cathy Larson, who is a river scientist.

I grew up on the farm kitty corner from the church here on the land the schoolhouse sits on. Probably most of the people in this neighborhood any older than me learned to read and write there. My Dad went there 8 years, my brother two, and the year that JoEllen McFarlane, Craig Hoover, Darrell Lee Hutton and I were to start, they saw us coming and locked the door ...(all of us still live in this neighborhood by the way).

Little Prairie actually got it's name from a small opening in the Big Woods on our farm right there across from Aldorfer's.

All of us were in 4-H right here in the basement of this church. We loved showing our animals or projects at the fair, playing on the softball team, keeping records, personally I hated giving demonstrations and anyone who really knows me knows how much I must hate to be standing up here right now.

Actually, I'm here for two reasons. One, I'd like to help my neighbors express their incredible turmoil about this project, and Two, I'd like us to start taking a hard look at corn ethanol, and if it's what it claims to be.

First, how will this impact us? Have you seen what this thing will look like? This thing is huge! A 100 million gallon ethanol plant! To get an idea what we're talking about here, all (how many) ethanol plants in the whole state last year only produced 420 million gallons. The next biggest one in the state is 50 M. and there's only 1 that size.

This thing would absolutely dominate our neighborhood. Make no mistake, a plant of this size is heavy industry. There is nothing aesthetic about this look and we will pay a price every day with our psyches. All the people who live near it, all the people who drive by it will see and smell the plume out of that huge stack in the middle of our nice little farming community and most, I believe, will in some way be sickened by it.

First of all the smell. Anybody that's been around ethanol will tell you, it smells. In fact, these guys actually told us ethanol plants don't smell anymore. They said we wouldn't be able to smell it from a hundred yards away. The day we toured the plant at Atwater, we found out you didn't have to be directly down wind to smell it. The farmer who sold the land to the plant told us, "I won't lie to you, sometimes when the conditions are right and the air is hanging heavy, it can smell pretty strong. I don't mind it all that much but I know a lot of people don't care for it."

There's the constant drone of the hammer mill and the sky will be lit all night, and then there's the trucks. The traffic will be amazing. The Co-op told me that on their busiest

day of the year they bring in about 75,000 bu. and that lasts about 3 days a year. This plant would bring in twice that much every day all year!

I'm not getting into water issues. I would like to mention the train tracks looping round and round from Billy Hoover's to in back of Hutton's and all the way in back of Hatfields and then over to Kenny Becker's. All around those beautiful wetlands. Six tracks, miles of train cars sitting there all the time. Isn't that a good look?!

I know several in the neighborhood who've said they will leave. I believe them and I can't blame them. The only thing is who'll buy their places and for how much less than they're worth right now. Advanced Bio says values generally rise in the area after building a plant. That may be true in some outer regions of some depressed part of some state but absolutely not here. Our home values and our land values aren't really related to the farm economy around here. The only way the properties near this thing could gain value is if they are sold for some other industrial use which we're all in agreement shouldn't happen out here in the countryside and away from city services. Even then, that just pushes all this disruption onto the next guy.

The other thing I want to talk about is our energy needs and the environment. There are those that would have you believe that ethanol is the 'green' alternative to oil. I love raising corn, and it would be novel to actually make money doing it.

However, as one guy put it. Corn ethanol isn't the solution. It's not even part of the solution. It's just a distraction from getting to the long term sustainable solutions we need. There are alternatives. Others can talk about them better than me. They probably won't be cheap, but neither is what we're doing to our environment now.

As you've heard there is relatively little of our fuel supply actually replaced by corn ethanol, and when we convert new acres to corn, there may be no net benefit to our atmosphere and considerable cost to our water. Cellulosic may be a better alternative but we don't know yet. Let's wait and see.

I talked to Chris Hurt, ag econ. professor at Purdue University. He warned me about all the environmental problems related with raising the amount of corn that will be needed for all this ethanol that is proposed. Water quality from leaching nitrogen, the growing Dead Zone in the gulf, increased soil erosion, fuel used to dry and market it, rotation issues such as more N, more disease, weeds, etc.

He says that by '08 there will be economic constraints that will slow down this industry. Corn prices will go up, cost of building plants is way up, the Fed. and State subsidies when you look at everything are over \$2.00 a bushel, some of that will get yanked, especially as the livestock numbers dwindle and a lot of these plants are going to struggle to keep going. He says it's simply not sustainable and an extremely expensive way to get a questionable environmental benefit.

In fact, he said it doesn't even compare with a little bit of conservation and how about better mileage cars. Cathy and my first car was a Datsun B-210 in 1975 and it got over 50 miles to the gallon. Haven't we come a long way?

I talked with Vern Eidman at the U. and he was telling me how DDG's are fine for cattle but not of much value to single stomached animals. He expressed much concern for not only the feed remaining for livestock but also the balance of nutrients in the remaining feed. He talked about how consumers will have to pay a lot more for their meat and we will not only be eating a lot less in our diets but importing that from other countries. Can you believe it? The richest land in the world and we have to import meat so we can feed our gas guzzling cars.

Advanced Bio promises to create some jobs at this plant but how many jobs will be lost in the livestock industry as producers and their employees drop out of the corn race. I was talking to Jim Dell at the Co-op and he said Rice Co. produces about 14 M. bu. of corn a year. Jim estimated about half this much is actually fed in Rice Co. My point is a plant of this size would suck up every available kernal of corn from 6 Rice Counties. None left for the river or the hungry people of the world. By the way, the bushels going down the river from Savage are already half what they were just a few years ago.

Back to Little Prairie. After all, this is really about Little Prairie. This has always been a very active and close knit community. Our farmers have always worked back and forth with each other. Maybe one of the best examples I can think of for how much we respect each other is that none of us has ever broken out and started outbidding all his neighbors for land rents. It's kind of like you just don't do that. Do you have any idea how amazing that is? In Little Prairie you don't earn respect with your checkbook but by sharing and trusting.

The Community Club has been going on as long as I've lived. How many communities do that?

We can't run into each other here without sharing a good story and sometimes it's even one you haven't heard before. Maybe it's the how Claude was a catcher and could fire a baseball to first like a bullet without looking, or the time my Dad went all dressed up to pick up Mac to go to a meeting and Mac was hurrying to finish chores and turned and threw a pail full of sour colostrum all over him. My Dad told me how Merton showed him how to drain the oil out of their brand new car with disastrous results or how they'd hide in our centuries old hollow elm when they got in trouble.

How loved were Lloyd and Ethel? Nobody could tell a story better than Lloyd. The way he'd start slow and then his voice would rise and at the end he'd tip his head back and slide his cap back (you know, the one that said, "I don't need this job, just the pay!") and he'd be laughing so hard you could hardly understand him. Or maybe he'd offer you a 95 degree beer straight out of the baler...you know there was no beer in Ethel's house.

All the guys had shacks growing up and maybe we'd be playing right up to suppertime and then my Mom would yell for us. We could pretend we didn't hear that but then Anita

would call out and as we all know, you couldn't ignore that! All the girls got their nicknames from Adam along with an occasional skillybootch!
Speaking of the girls, Full O' Pep always played for the championship because you had to always play at least two girls and we had the Reuvers girls so we probably played more than two most the time.

Mac and Eleanor and Adam and Anita, raised two families of adopted kids with more love than you can imagine and still found time for the rest of us too. Anita was the most tireless, most compassionate, most forgiving woman I've ever known. She held the keys to this neighborhood, both literally and figuratively. Not much happened without running it by her first. She delivered us the good news and the sad.

My Dad entertained and never judged. My Mom opened her door to everyone and introduced the neighborhood to people of color including foreign students and busloads of kids from the inner city who had never been on a farm.

Jim and Harriet. Has anyone ever given more time and expertise than Jim's given to this church and to all our homes really?

And of course the Littles. There just about everywhere you look and I've turned to them often and they're always helping someone out.

What would we do without Denny fixing everything.

Of course I could go on and on and maybe I shouldn't have started because there's just no end, but I'm trying to make a point here. We need each other worse than we need this plant.

This church, show me another country church that is growing and has the daily activity of the Little Prairie church. People move into this community and they are welcomed.

I'm trying to give you an idea of what this community means to us. It kills me to hear Tom and JoEllen, Dave and Stephanie, Bill and Betty, Dave and Pam, Bob and Katie, Ed and Marly, Bruce and Lori and others say they'll actually leave if it's built.

Advanced Bio doesn't get us. They've moved in here hoping to impress us with their money and scale. They haven't asked us if we wanted them but moved right ahead with their plan like we were barely here and like they can't imagine who wouldn't want 150 trucks of activity a day. They don't get that we were raised to be a part of something by people we've tried to make proud.

Some say you have to sacrifice a few for the good of many. Let me say, we are not few, people connected to Little Prairie number in the hundreds and possibly thousands. This is HOME to so many people. We need to be heard.

Every year we have the 4th of July picnic on the schoolhouse lawn. We sing about America, we honor our flag and veterans, the kids still have sack races and toss water balloons, and we all connect and laugh and share. I hope it's always without the smell of ethanol.