

American Farmer

Excerpts, from “American Farmer: The Heart of our Country.”
Photos by Paul Mobley. Interviews by Katrina Fried.
Introduction by Michael Martin Murphey.

Photographer Paul Mobley journeyed into America’s heartland as a lone artist with a camera, a seeker of those who live closest to the land. He took no crew and rarely an assistant. One man, one camera. Confronting the subjects of his images, one at a time. Questioning, not

with words, but with lens, shutter and light.

When I first met Paul at an annual meeting of the American Farm Bureau Federation, he simply wanted to take my picture. Not because I’m a known performer, a singing cowboy of the South, but because I’m a child of

ANDREA DOCKERY, CATTLE, JEFFREY CITY, WYOMING, SHOWN WITH HUSBAND THAD AND DAUGHTER LAURA.

“My great-grandfather homesteaded this land along the Sweetwater River and it was passed on down to my mother. I have two brothers, but I was the one with the real passion for ranching. Running cows is not going to make you rich. It’s a way of

life and a love for the land.

“We face challenges using federal land as pasture. Special interest groups believe we’re just raping the land. But if you had to make a living off the land, wouldn’t you do your best to take care of it? Would you turn your cows out if there weren’t any grass?”

“My grandpa, dad, husband and I have all worked to improve the land. So it

is angering, because this is our life and our livelihood. They don’t see that. I can’t even imagine selling and moving somewhere else. So we’ll just keep doing everything we can to keep going. People say, ‘How do you guys do it? You don’t make any money.’ And I say, ‘We’re not doing it for the money. We’re doing it because we love it.’”



Texas and a passionate rancher with a family of cowgirls who work hard every day. I agreed, but when he showed me other pictures he had taken, I knew I'd met much more than a documenter of America's farm culture. I'd met a kindred spirit. I, too, had left behind a career that had become far too wrapped up in commercial formulas, and I knew Paul's path had been, and would continue to be, a lonesome trail—at least at first. It was fortifying to find another artist taking the powerful truth of American farmers and ranchers to the public, delivering a message of honesty, integrity, passion, and daily painstaking labor.

Paul embarked on this project when the culture of agriculture was far from the center of the world stage. He went

beyond the part of the country where most city dwellers go on vacation—beyond national parks, and “wilderness” reserves that are sometimes revealingly referred to as “recreation areas”—undeveloped land that we want for playgrounds. He went to the “aggie outback” that doesn't show up on Top Ten destination lists—into fields of wheat, corn, and beans; into orchards and vineyards; into livestock pastures, pens, egg sheds and feed yards. He was far from the fashionable “country” of bed and breakfasts, scenic turnouts and “eco-tours,” among those who toil and sweat to grow the food found on the tables of the advantaged and the desperate alike.

By the time the first phase of Paul's journey was completed, agriculture had moved from nowhere in the theater

JIM TABER, CATTLE, SHAWMUT, MONTANA, SHOWN WITH CHILDREN DALTON AND DUSTY.

“Ranching in Montana is still done the old lifestyle way. You can try to manage it and play the numbers all you want to, but in the end you gotta do the work. In the real early mornings when it's cold out, you say, ‘Oh God, we got to do another calf check.’ But then, it seems like every year there's a little bird that will nest nearby. And he's got a little song he sings, and you'll hear that bird and you'll think, yeah, we made it one more time. We'd never think of selling. For me that would be damn near like cutting my arm off. Especially land that my grandpa and great-grandparents made a go of it on.

“If this drought continues into the summer, we'll have to make some tough choices. We'll drag our feet down to the last possible second. It kind of comes down to weather. If you get the moisture, you can do a lot of different things. If you



don't, you got to start selling off some cattle. This country is real funny too. If we were to get a good rain—and a good rain would be like an inch and a half or two inches—and stay cool a little bit, it would turn right around in just a week's time.

So, you're always thinking in the back of your head, if you can just hang on for a few more days....”

of the world's drama to waiting in its wings, poised for a major entrance. Mobs in developed and undeveloped countries were loudly protesting the use of land for producing distillers' grains in ethanol plants instead of food. In the early summer of 2008, panic started spreading about high prices for fuel, fertilizer, farm machinery, and the soaring costs for the transportation and distribution of fuel. Farmers who had suffered decades of loss and debt were now in a boom/bust cycle and making headlines. Ranchers were tak-

ing a beating on the skyrocketing prices of livestock feed. Their products and produce hit record retail highs. Politicians were suddenly reversing their position on issues such as ethanol price supports, looking for an out that just simply wasn't there. They were dumbfounded by forces they didn't understand, because modern politics mostly addresses urban plight. Elected leaders often have no clue when it comes to agricultural policy, failing to realize the most obvious truth: the production of food is not a rural issue. It is an



**PATSY FRIBLEY, SHEEP,
BIG TIMBER, MONTANA.**

"The best part about living on the ranch is the serenity, the nature—and the hard work.

"I wish we could retire some day, but we'll probably just have to keep working. I had breast cancer eight years ago. Being self-employed, we didn't have any insur-

ance. We lost our entire savings. We can't start to put anything away again until the bills have caught up, which is probably never going to happen. I still can't afford health insurance. I go in for my checkups and just hope nothing is going wrong.

But, you know, I faced cancer and won. I barely get scared anymore. It's sort of like everything in comparison is just not that bad.

"This is one of the most beautiful places in the whole world, in my opinion. I don't travel too much. Once in a while, I go visit my mom in Iowa. It's so amazing because usually the night before we leave, the sunset will be breathtaking. It's like Montana's saying: 'Now, you better be coming back.'"

essential human issue.

In the midst of all the mayhem, Paul Mobley's book of arresting images becomes timely and prophetic. American farmers and ranchers are in the spotlight now, and will likely remain there for a long time. They feed more people than any other agricultural community around the world. Their global counterparts are watching their methods and decisions closely. They know their survival is dependent upon American agriculture.

Those outside of rural America need to see what is in this book. They'll be astounded to find that those who are close to the land have a startling sense of where they belong in the universe. They love their lives, accept the inherent struggles, and are surprisingly at peace for those who confront so many daily challenges. Perhaps it is because they know what it is to grow things, have worked to understand and to accept the forces of nature.

It becomes a spiritual quest in the end. After taking

**IMOGENE YARBOROUGH, CATTLE,
GENEVA, FLORIDA, SHOWN WITH
SONS, BO AND J.W.**

"When Edward died in 2000, it was very, very unexpected. He was only 67. And it was difficult. We had to pay a high death tax because of how valuable the land has become. I tell you, it is the most unfair tax that there is. We paid death taxes when

Grandpa died, when Ed's uncle died, when Ed died—and we're going to pay them again when I die. All on the same property. It makes it hard for families to keep going. Right now, if you are in the cow business, you either married it or inherited it—because of the price it takes to buy land and cattle, and to get set up. We all work the ranch together—that's why we can keep it this way.

"I am 73 now. It is still gratifying when the cows are loaded in the semi and I see them going off to market. I see a job well done by my children, my land. It is a good feeling to just come in and close the gate behind me. I can sit back and enjoy what God really did create. We've worked very hard. And the people before me, too. We are all stewards of this land."



more than 32,000 images of all kinds of farmers and ranchers, from northern Alaska to the Louisiana coast, Paul's admiration ran so deep that he felt forever changed by the experience. His photographs convey a sense that his journey into the heart of America will never be over. His work will pass on this intuition to others, and perhaps they will be inspired to better understand the sacred connection between the food they consume and those who provide it. Maybe they'll visit a local farm or ranch next time they go

on that country getaway. Perhaps they'll seek out the farmers and ranchers who sell their products direct to the customer. Hopefully they will never visit a farmers' market again without taking a moment to talk to those who feed them.

For the theme song of the public television series' America's Heartland, Montana rancher Rob Quist and I wrote these lyrics:

You can see it in the eyes of every woman and man



**BILLY DOLAN, CATTLE,
GRAND CHENIER, LOUISIANA.**

"We are down here in Grand Chenier, southeast of Lake Charles, right down on the Louisiana coast. It's one of the prettiest places there is. But it wasn't too pretty after Hurricane Rita hit us a couple years ago. It just about wiped everything out in this part of the country. My house ended up five miles from where it was. It just floated across the marsh. I had 450 head of mama cows, and only 32 were left. It seems like a bad dream sometimes, but

it's just a fact of life.

"During my lifetime, we haven't had but two devastating hurricanes down here. Rita, and Hurricane Audrey in 1957 when I was 23. There were about 500 lives lost in Audrey. It flooded, but a lot of houses stayed. Old Daddy told me back then, 'Son, don't ever own no more cows in this country than you can afford to lose.'

"Well, I fooled around and lost more than I could afford to lose in Rita, but that's the way it goes. I've lived here all my life and we've seen the water come

over that Grand Chenier Ridge twice. I'm hoping it'll wait another 15 to 20 years before it happens again. By that time, it'll be somebody else's worry. I'll be gone.

"Now I spend a lot of time sitting in my swing out here under my oak tree, enjoying the cool breeze. I do what I feel like doing. I'm content with what I've seen. I haven't been a very worldly traveler, but I never seen no place as good as this. I'll keep working the land until I draw my last breath, I guess. Everybody I see stopped working, they don't live very long. That's what they say: You retire and you die."

*Who spend their whole lives living close to the land;
There's a love for the country, and pride in the brand,
In America's Heartland, close to the land...*

As ranchers who are musical artists, on a lone mission to give a voice to our way of life, our culture, our families and friends out on the land, we reached the same conclusion, on the same kind of voyage of discovery taken by Paul Mobley. It's a dramatic and radical conclusion, but I stand by it, just as Paul does: Farmers and ranchers are the single most

important contributors to the future survival of the human race and the living planet Earth. ■

When Michael Martin Murphey is not on the road, singing and playing, he's at The Murpheys' Rocking 3M Ranch North in southwest Wisconsin. www.michaelmartinmurphey.com.

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**DOUG MOSEBAR, CALIFORNIA
STATE FARM BUREAU FEDERATION
PRESIDENT, CATTLE AND CROPS,
SANTA YNEZ, CALIFORNIA.**

"We're approaching a tipping point in America. Unless we're careful, we're going to end up relying more on imported food than the food we're producing on our own soil. And I think that's pretty scary. Something's got to give. But I think often-

times in life, things have to get worse before they get better. So as this situation gets worse, I think there will be enough public outcry that it will give politicians enough mettle to do what needs to be done. Because we're all in this together.

We tend to, in our culture, compartmentalize ourselves and act as if one segment doesn't affect the others, but it really does.

"When I asked one of my sons, 'Why aren't you interested in going into farm-

ing?' he said, 'Dad, you work too hard and you don't get paid enough for it.' There's a lot of hard work involved, and there's no weekends and holidays off. It's not like you can ever say, 'Oh, this is a special day on the calendar.' Too bad. That crop is ready or that livestock has to be fed. It has a huge impact on your life. It really permeates every level."

