

Plants and People: Ethnography on Two Rural Minnesota Farms
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Over June and July, I conducted ethnographic fieldwork on two different smallholder farms in rural Minnesota. The first farm was located in Aitkin and the second farm was located outside of Duluth along the North Shore. I arranged to stay on both farms through the World Wide Opportunities on Organic Farms (WWOOF), an educational network that connects smallholder farms with volunteers who learn and work on the farm in exchange for board and lodging. As such, I was expected to work on the farm for twenty to thirty hours per week doing things like planting, weeding, harvesting, and attending markets. Working on the farm allowed me to engage in participant observation, taking fieldnotes and talking to the farm owners and any other people who worked on the farm. This gave me the opportunity to immerse myself in farm life. It was also a way to reciprocate the help of those who welcomed me into their worlds and homes while conducting this fieldwork on their farms.

This project not only enabled me to experience a new way of life, it also was an opportunity to practice ethnographic methods. During my time on the farms, I took fieldnotes on anything I found interesting, usually on my phone as this was the most convenient method while working. Additionally, each evening I added to and reflected on the notes I took throughout the day. I also wrote at least one narrative vignette per day. These vignettes allowed me to capture the sensorial descriptions of my time on the farm. They capture fleeting moments and feelings that notes cannot. The notes and vignettes I wrote this summer will be used for an independent study in the upcoming fall semester.

Throughout my experiences on these farms, I was particularly interested in the connections between people necessary in all stages of farm work, from farming the land to selling at markets. Smallholder farms can only exist because of these social networks between market vendors, neighbors, kin, owner and employee, host and WWOOFer. Many of these networks function as mutual aid rather than monetary exchange. For example, market vendors would often give other vendors products they had left over at the end of the market. Another example is that many farms along the North Shore participate in a farm trail in which farmers in the area set up stands outside of their farms on specified days. The WWOOF program itself creates an ambiguous relationship between WWOOFer and host in which the WWOOFer is not an employee because they are not paid, but are expected to work. Further, WWOOFers become much more entangled with the lives of the hosts because they are living and eating together.

I am also intrigued by the way gender is enacted within these networks. Something that I noticed especially at the farm outside of Duluth is the gendered way farm labor is divided. For example, the men would often go off into the woods to use the wood chipper while the women were inside canning. Kin networks were also leveraged for gendered farm labor. Young men such as the son of a family friend would be brought in to help in the woods while older female relations helped in the kitchen canning. In this way, multiple generations were brought into the farm network to contribute to gender-specific farm tasks.

Overall, my experiences this summer provided an incredible opportunity to practice ethnographic methods in the field while experiencing life on rural Minnesota farms.

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