

WHAT WOULD MAKE A SUCCESSFUL CATTLE RANCHER AND WHEAT FARMER BECOME A VEGETARIAN ENVIRONMENTALIST? A GOOD LOOK AT THE SOIL—AND HIS ROOTS—TELL THE STORY.

Howard Lyman grew up on one of the largest dairy farms in Montana during World War II. Since his mother and father were busy all day with milking cows, he was raised primarily by his grandparents. For “day care,” grandma sent him out into the garden to collect ladybugs.

“I thought it was the Garden of Eden. I loved it! I’d put my collection in a jar, and at the end of the day, we’d dump them out and count them, then turn them loose again. You could tell how healthy the garden was by the number of ladybugs.” On a good day, he’d bring in as many as 125.

There came a time, though, when Lyman didn’t give a hoot about ladybugs, much less what they could tell him about his 50-yard-by-50-yard garden. After he left the farm to go to Montana State for his degree in agriculture, he learned about “better living through chemistry.” He became a staunch advocate of chemical farming, convincing his parents to let him convert their organic farm into the modern agriculturist’s dream. Dismissing his father’s concerns as old-fashioned, Lyman was on his way. Soon after, he remembers, he wrote a check for \$1 million, and when it didn’t bounce, he thought, *I’ve really arrived. I’m the Donald Trump of agriculture!* Until 1979, he believed he was *it*, the new and improved Farmer John, on top of the world.

Then, suddenly, he found himself paralyzed from the waist down.

The Mad Cowboy Rides Again

by Karen Risch illustration by Tom Voss

The Mad Cowboy ...

A tumor on his spinal chord had grown large enough to take him down, and surgery was the only way out. Yet a recovery wasn't 100% guaranteed. In fact, far from it. Doctors told him, "You have a one-in-a-million chance to ever walk again." Confronted with this likely possibility, Lyman began to examine his life, his lifestyle, his livelihood.

"When you end up with something like that," Lyman points out, "it sort of strips away all the phoniness. When somebody gives you those odds, they're saying, 'Look out, sucker. Pick out a wheelchair you like because you're going to be in it the rest of your life.' I really wondered what kind of fiber I was made out of." He began to ask himself some soul-searching questions: *How can I make my life amount to something? How can I keep this paralysis from totally defeating me?*

The night before his operation, believing he would never walk again, he made up his mind that he'd do everything he knew how to get the farm back to the state it was in when he was a child. "It was a time," he says, "when we had birds, trees, and living soil."

Lyman had been watching the soil die for some time. "When you are with living soil," he explains, "it is like a magnet. It just draws your hands to it. You want to put your hands in it. [But on my farm] I had watched the texture of the soil change. I saw the earthworms disappearing. There were fewer birds, and the trees were dying." He makes the analogy of watching your grandparents die, slowly. "You don't see a phenomenal change in them, just deterioration a little bit at a time." His pending surgery had forced him to stop kidding himself about what he already knew was true about the long-term effects of chemicals on the family farm.

Miraculously, Lyman emerged from the surgery able to walk again. He viewed this as a gift from God — and in the mornings when he'd swing his legs out of bed and feel the cold floor on the bottoms of his feet, he felt as if he'd been given a second chance.

He was living in a house built over the old garden as he made plans for returning the farm to its organic state. His first step was to do some reading, and the first book he read was also the most influential: Rachel Carson's groundbreaking *Silent Spring* (Houghton Mifflin Company, \$13).



Digging Up the Dirt on Our Soil

According to Scott Miller, CEO of BioFlora International, Inc. in Goodyear, Ariz., a soil analysis on a typical American farm shows a shocking lack of key minerals required to grow a nutritious crop. His company, which owns the world's largest certified organic farm and is the world's largest manufacturer of liquid organic fertilizer, regularly tests soil for farmers. The tests determine mineral levels so farmers know whether and what kind of "foliar feed" (a mineral supplement applied to the leaves of a plant) is necessary for a crop to produce fruits or vegetables that are as healthy as they may look.

BioFlora's director of research and development, Mike Lindsey, offers some clues about why most soil is in such sad shape. "Ever since we tilled the soil to start growing crops in 1824, we have been going downhill. First we grew cotton, then when we couldn't grow that anymore, we grew tobacco, and later we added salt fertilizers and wiped out the microbial activity," he reports. "But we thought it was okay because we just expected the next bottle, can, or jar to fix it. As a result, we've sterilized the soil." Although every state, every farm and even every row on a farm will be different, Lindsey says, it's safe to say that you will find serious deficiencies in every one.

Is it a safe logical leap to assume that because, for example, a tomato was grown in mineral-deficient soil it is also low in nutrients vital to humans? "Absolutely," says Miller. "That is the whole point."

How can you combat such a problem? Two hints: Buy or grow organic produce and take a quality mineral supplement. In choosing your supplement, keep some simple guidelines in mind:

- The minerals should be from a plant source.
- The supplement should contain both major and trace minerals.
- For best absorption, the minerals should be in an ionic state.

One of Carson's chapters begins, "As man proceeds toward his announced goal of the conquest of nature, he has written a depressing record of destruction ..." The book explains our ecosystem and explores humans' often deadly impact. Originally published in 1962, *Silent Spring* is said to have been the firestarter for the environmental movement, and certainly it spurred the banning of DDT.

As Lyman read this and other books, such as Bill Mollison's "Permaculture" series (Tagari Publications), his eyes were opened to the effect his farming methods were having on the soil and thus our food supply.

"I still didn't know very much, but I knew we'd been going in the wrong direction," Lyman remembers.

Determined, he went to see his banker, who had supported him at the height of his success. When he submitted that he wanted to borrow some money to convert his booming agribusiness back to an organic farm, the banker laughed. "You want me to give you money you won't be spending with my other customers, the chemical and fertilizer companies?" Lyman's loan was denied.

After struggling with the farm for another four years, Lyman finally sold most of it in 1983. He saved his great-grandfather's homestead, however, and turned it into a wildlife sanctuary, then went to work lobbying for farmers in financial trouble. Today, Lyman makes a career of warning other people not to make the same mistakes he did. As the director of the "Eating With Conscience" campaign of the Humane Society of the United States, he works to create a "producer-consumer alliance" that will help influence public policy. He helps educate people about organic sustainable agriculture and cautions farmers and consumers alike about the dangers of current methods of food production.

Recently, Lyman found himself at the center of a mudslinging contest, the object of a lawsuit by the Texas Cattlemen's Association. He was in fine company. The organization was also suing Oprah Winfrey.



"Who produces my food? What are they using on it? What's it doing to me, the environment and the animals?"

In 1996, Lyman had appeared on an episode of Winfrey's daytime talk show. The subject was health scares associated with food; Lyman had been brought in as an expert to talk about the potential risk of "mad cow disease" (or bovine spongiform encephalopathy, which spread in England and causes serious illness and even death in humans who consume tainted beef) springing up in the U.S. Not entirely impossible, he argued, since until recently, cattle ranchers engaged in the practice of "grinding up" dead cows into a powdered meal for other cows to eat. As he argued that this would be a simple way for an undetected disease to be passed into our food supply, he inspired the wrath of the Texas organization, which asserted that he'd been intentionally inaccurate in his statements and is now suing him under the recent food disparagement laws passed in Texas.

They had reason to be angry, although it may have more to do with cash than cows. After the show aired, beef futures plummeted temporarily. Lawsuits were filed against Winfrey and Lyman, and Winfrey followed up by giving the organization's representative a second shot at explaining the procedures to a national audience. Part two of the "food scares" show aired without Lyman present. (And Winfrey's trial began as this article went to press.)

But Lyman insists he never said anything he believed to be false. He was merely encouraging the audience to examine the practices of an industry that has a significant effect on most Americans' health.

"Who produces my food? What are they using on it? What's it doing to me, the environment and the animals?" Lyman asks. "People have to understand that the most dangerous weapon in the arsenal of the *Homo sapiens* is our fork. The purpose of my statements, and of the Humane Society's Eating with Conscience campaign, is not to turn everyone into vegans; we just urge you to do better tomorrow than what you did today."