

FOCUS ON AGRICULTURE

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American Farm Bureau Federation

The Image of Farmers

By Stewart Truelsen

When Chicago lost to Brazil in its bid to host the 2016 Summer Olympics, many residents were disappointed. Now, the city has suffered another disappointment with the removal of a 25-foot tall sculpture of two farmers from a small plaza along the city's Magnificent Mile.

"I hate that it is gone," said one person to the *Chicago Tribune*. The three-dimensional sculpture by J. Seward Johnson Jr. spent a year on loan to the city and attracted many passers-by. It was named "God Bless America," but almost everyone recognized it as a version of Grant Wood's famed painting, "American Gothic," which coincidentally hangs in Chicago's Art Institute.

What is it about "American Gothic" that has so captivated people over the years? Could it be the couple's stoic expression, which seems reassuring in hard times? Maybe it is their obvious self-reliance that we envy.

Wood did not intend to paint a classic portrait of an American farm couple; certainly not one that would have such lasting effect. His sister posed as the woman in the 1930 painting and a local dentist was handed a hayfork and enlisted to be her farther or husband or brother (depending on the story you hear). Farmers weren't quite sure what to make of the painting. Some thought Wood was mocking small town life, as Sinclair Lewis had done earlier when he wrote the novel *Main Street*.

Like it or not, the picture is one of the most-recognized paintings in the world. Sure, it would have been nice if Wood had painted the man and woman with smiles on their faces, but there wasn't much to smile about then. Crop and livestock prices were plunging as Wood finished his work and the Great Depression gripped the nation. Besides, Mona Lisa's famous smile had already been painted.

"American Gothic" along with the red barn, moldboard plow, milking stool, and tractors like International Harvester's Farmall series, are icons of American agriculture. Like Wood's painting, the red Farmall tractors also date back to 1930. In some ways, the American public's appreciation for and understanding of farming never really left that era.

The American Farm Bureau Federation and other agricultural organizations have worked hard to update the image of the American farmer and paint a portrait of modern agriculture, its importance to our economy, and the environmental benefits we derive from it. But it is difficult to overcome nostalgia.

No doubt there were people who missed the plow horse as mechanization transformed farming a century ago, and there are similar feelings today as agriculture is transformed by science, technology and global markets. These feelings are understandable, but they provide fertile ground for critics of production agriculture.

Yet, some things haven't changed. The vast majority of farms today are still family-owned and operated, and the traits we've admired in farmers and ranchers—on canvas or in real life—are still evident; the values they hold dear are the same. In this way, American agriculture is drawing on the best of the past to meet the challenges of the future.