

# Iowa Women on the Farm

Phyllis Carlin

On July 22, 1995, a hailstorm severely damaged 960 acres of corn and soybeans on the Mehmens' northeast Iowa farm. Three days later Karmen Mehmen surveyed the damage. "...The debt we have on this, I don't know if I can handle [it]. How am I going to live until the end of the year? They can't continue to borrow me money on a crop I don't have."

Crisis on the family farm sets in motion rituals that communicate the strong presence of community within an agricultural neighborhood. Seventy people visited Karmen, Stanley, and the three children the day after the storm. Friends, neigh-

bors, clergy, hunters, former employees, and members of their card club came to offer encouragement, bring food, help repair a grain bin, and express concern. Karmen sees the community response as similar to support given at the time of a funeral: "A church lady brought a cake. Our minister's been here twice. And you know when people are around, then you get to talking about other stuff, and you kind of get off of it a little bit."

In subsequent months Karmen, as the farm's accountant, pursued a disaster emergency loan (for which the family ultimately did not quali-

fy), switched banks, refinanced operating loans, waited for the actual losses to be tallied at harvest time, and tried to cope with the uncertainty of economic recovery. Her response to the hailstorm expresses the voice of the farming culture: "This is what we do. We risk it. And sometimes you lose."

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Karmen Mehmen surveys the family's corn crop after a hailstorm hit their farm near Waverly. Photo by Phyllis Carlin