



# One Community Making A Sustainable Difference

by James B. Martin-Schramm

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The gentle sweep of Luther College's wind turbine on the horizon guides and welcomes everyone to Decorah, a community with a strong Norwegian heritage and a distinctive history of building sustainability.

### The Power of Cool, Moving Water

One of the things that makes Decorah so attractive is its long-term and wide-ranging embrace of renewable energy. The earliest settlers quickly tapped the power of the Upper Iowa River and the many cool springs in the area.<sup>1</sup> When the Norwegian settlers began to arrive in the Decorah area in the middle of the nineteenth century, two dams had already been constructed and were diverting water to grind flour and saw wood. Eventually more dams were built to power Decorah's developing economy—though not without some growing pains. In 1879, the manufacturing and grinding businesses in town discovered they had to share the local waterpower after the Iowa Supreme Court ruled that the Greer and Hunter dam was impounding too much water to the detriment of the Decorah Woolen Mill.

The cool temperatures in Decorah's caves provided another renewable (geothermal) resource. The Ice Cave Creamery was the first to utilize this natural, year-round method of refrigeration. It soon had to compete with Smout's Creamery, which purchased the assets of the Klein Brewery located near Dunning's Spring. After the state prohibited the sale of alcohol, the cool storage vaults built to store beer were converted to preserve cream and other milk products. By 1894, eighteen creameries in Winneshiek County were utilizing the cool temperatures of the earth.

Farmers who did not have springs on their land used wells to water their livestock. Many of them pumped the water to the surface with windmills, which were manufactured by the Decorah Windmill Company that commenced operations in

1887. Local author and historian, David Faldet, summarizes the important role renewable energy played in driving the local economy in the nineteenth century:

The power of the sun created the produce, the power of earth kept water at a cool temperature year-round, the power of wind pulled that water to the surface, and the firepower of steam [locomotives] moved the produce to market.<sup>2</sup>

The most significant use of water power, however, took place when two hydroelectric power plants were constructed on the Upper Iowa River in the early 1900s. In 1906, the Upper Iowa Power Company built a dam engineered by the Arnold Company of Chicago to impound water above the mouth of Coon Creek east of Decorah.<sup>3</sup> A year later, major flooding washed away the dam and the powerhouse.<sup>4</sup> Undeterred, the electric utility rebuilt the facility at a different site a bit further downstream. The Rich, Carlson, and Fife engineering firm oversaw the new construction at the lower dam site in 1908.<sup>5</sup>

When it became clear that the first dam could not meet the local demand for electricity, the Upper Iowa Power Company rebuilt the dam and powerhouse at the original upper dam site. Together, the two hydroelectric power plants generated 1.1 megawatts (MW) of electricity for Decorah, Postville, Waukon, and Lansing, Iowa. In 1913, Interstate Power Company (now Alliant Energy) acquired the Upper Iowa Power Company. It operated the hydro plants until 1958, when rising power demands and inexpensive coal led the company to build a new 15 MW coal-fired power plant along the Mississippi River near Lansing.<sup>6</sup>



The Ice Cave Mill, making use of the Upper Iowa River for its power.





189.—Concrete Dam, Upper Iowa Power Co., between Decorah and Waukon, Iowa.

Upper Iowa Power Company dam, now gone, between Decorah and Waukon, IA.

### Confronting Unsustainable Growth

The U.S. economy boomed after the Second World War—powered by fossil fuels and nuclear energy. The population of Decorah increased almost 50 percent from 5,303 in 1940 to 7,918 in 2016.<sup>7</sup> Much of this growth was due to the surge in enrollment at Luther College, which tripled in size from its 700 students in the fall of 1952.<sup>8</sup>

Not everyone experienced that growth as good. Disillusioned by the Vietnam War and discouraged by widespread environmental degradation, some young people found their way to the Decorah area with the goal of living more in harmony with nature. Rather than living an unsustainable way of life based on fossil fuels, they wanted to live their lives more sustainably, based on renewable sources of energy. Several decided they would work together to live off the electrical grid and pioneered the use of solar photovoltaic (PV) and small wind turbine technology in the 1980s. They also built modest, well-insulated, energy efficient homes that utilized the passive capture of solar thermal energy for home heating. These young families were ahead of their time and provided inspiration to the next generation.<sup>9</sup>

Concerns about global warming and climate change rose to the fore during the 1990s. The science had become clear—the combustion of fossil fuels produces greenhouse gas emissions that are warming the atmosphere at a rate that is unprecedented in human history. Over the next two decades, this realization (together with fiscal prudence) motivated a host of investments in energy efficiency and renewable energy in Decorah.

### Luther College—Powering the Future of Learning

By the end of the 1990s, enrollment at Luther College was growing at a rate of 1.5 percent per year and the school was running out of room in its residence halls. When the administration proposed building a set of four townhouses in what is now called the Anderson Prairie, the student environmental concerns group insisted that the new student housing facility be as energy efficient as possible. They urged the administration to utilize a geothermal energy system for heating and cooling the proposed 33,000 square foot facility (Baker Village). When the contractors said it was not possible to incorporate the technology at this scale, the student group presented evidence to the administration that proved it was. The students won. Five years later, Luther decided to use a geothermal energy system in its new 60,000 square foot Center for the Arts. To date, both facilities cost 40 percent less to heat and cool on a square-foot basis.

Faced with ever-rising costs for electricity and heating fuel, Luther made a \$1.5 million investment in energy efficiency during the 2003-2004 academic year. Borrowed funds were invested in efficiency projects in 17 academic buildings that had an average payback of seven years. These measures included more efficient lighting, variable speed fans, motors, and pumps, as well as a campus-wide energy management system. Energy savings paid back the loan in 2011 and since then the college has enjoyed an annual \$250,000 dividend. The ongoing savings have been used to fund, in part, the renovation of the Miller and Dieseth residence halls and other energy efficiency initiatives on campus.





Luther College's solar field, wind turbine, and geothermal efforts allow the institution to enjoy an annual \$250,000 dividend.

All of these measures were motivated primarily by the need to reduce campus operating costs and not by concerns about climate change. That changed in the fall of 2006, when President Richard L. Torgerson got a call from his colleague, Loren Anderson, who was the President of Pacific Lutheran University in Tacoma, Washington. He encouraged President Torgerson to become a charter member of the American College and University Presidents Climate Commitment (ACUPCC). The commitment entailed two obligations—to make sustainability a part of every student's learning experience, and to achieve climate neutrality (net zero greenhouse gas emissions) by a future date determined by the college. After some reflection and study, President Torgerson decided to sign on. Asked later why he made the commitment, he said: "I like big goals, big ideas!"

President Torgerson folded the ACUPCC commitment into the college's next round of strategic planning that covered 2008-2012. One of the goals that came out of that strategic plan was to reduce Luther's campus carbon footprint by 50 percent. Luther's Director of Facilities was pleased to discover that the investments the college had made in energy efficiency had already reduced emissions by around 30 percent. At this point, studies began in earnest to find more ways that energy efficiency and renewable energy could help meet Luther's carbon reduction goal. Then a recession hit the United States.

### Every Crisis is an Opportunity

As the U.S. economy came to a grinding halt and teetered on the brink of another Great Depression, the Obama administration looked for ways to stimulate investment and

get people working and money circulating. One proposal focused on the renewable energy sector. Someone in the Department of the Treasury suggested that, for a limited time, investors in renewable energy projects be able to convert the value of the federal Business Energy Investment Tax Credit to a cash grant.

Luther College was able to tap this funding opportunity to complete two major renewable energy projects. In 2011, Luther installed a 1.6 MW wind turbine that generates about a third of the power the college consumes annually. In 2012, Luther signed an agreement with Decorah Solar Field, LLC, to lease a 280 kilowatt (kW) solar PV array to power Baker Village.<sup>10</sup> Both projects qualified for the short-lived U.S. Treasury grant.

At the same time, the Obama administration tried to revive the economy by making more money available to local communities through the Energy Efficiency and Conservation Block Grant (EECBG) program offered through the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009. The City of Decorah submitted a funding request on behalf of a new organization—the Winneshiek Energy District. Modeled after the Soil and Water Conservation Districts that arose after the Dust Bowl, the goal was to offer technical assistance to local property owners with regard to energy efficiency. The request was granted and \$880,000 flowed into the Decorah community.<sup>11</sup>

Decorah's First Lutheran Church tapped around \$100,000 of these EECBG funds to help replace an old and inefficient heating system with a pair of 96 percent-efficient hot water condensing boilers. Subsequent investments

in insulation and a roof-mounted solar PV system have enabled First Lutheran to become one of ten EPA Energy Star-rated buildings in Decorah. Luther College received \$175,220 to make additional investments in energy efficiency, energy metering, data analysis, and energy information communications technology.

The lion's share of the EECBG funding, however, was used by the Winneshiek Energy District to incentivize and enable investments in energy efficiency in Decorah and elsewhere in Winneshiek County. Over the next three years, the Winneshiek Energy District mobilized over \$1 million of investments in energy efficiency that are saving property owners more than \$3 million over the life of the equipment.

### State Incentives Spur Investment in Solar

Not to be outdone, the State of Iowa also stepped up its support for energy efficiency and renewable energy. In 2010, the Iowa Utilities Board required Alliant Energy to launch a five-year pilot program that offered rebates to customers who improved the energy efficiency of their homes or businesses while also installing a renewable energy system. In 2012, the Iowa Legislature passed a Solar Energy Systems Tax Credit that was designed to work in tandem with the federal government's tax credit programs for renewable energy systems. Together, these two sources of financial support reduced the cost of new solar and small wind projects by up to 65 percent.

The Winneshiek Energy District played a crucial role, providing information about these financial incentives and helped put local installers in touch with potential customers through a series of public events. By the end of 2015, over 30 businesses and nearly 100 homeowners had installed solar PV systems, which led *The [Cedar Rapids] Gazette* to describe Decorah as a "community with a legitimate claim to be Iowa's

solar power capital."<sup>12</sup> Today, the Winneshiek Energy District's online renewable energy map contains 125 listings totaling over 1.4 megawatts of solar energy capacity—and the map is far from comprehensive.<sup>13</sup>

Drive through any neighborhood in Decorah and you will see many homes with solar PV mounted on a south-facing roof or on the ground in the back yard. If you look to the north while waiting to get your treat at the Whippy Dip, it is easy to spot the solar PV on the roof of Weis Buick. Driving north, the same goes for the big arrays on the roofs of West Side Dental and Pizza Ranch. Visitors to Good Shepherd Lutheran Church and First Lutheran Church can also see the visible commitments both of them have made to "care for creation." Lots of systems are hard to see, however, due to their flat roofs. For example, customers at the Oneota Community Food Co-op, T-Bocks, Decorah Bank & Trust, and Oneota Valley Family Eye Care may not even know that these businesses have also invested in solar PV systems.

That said, the largest solar PV system in Decorah is hard to miss. The most visible portion of the 822 kW system is mounted in a field owned by Luther College on the northeast corner of US-52 and Pole Line Road; other smaller portions are mounted in the field to the east and on top of Preus Library. All of the electricity generated by these three arrays helps to power the Regents Center and Preus Library. Luther College buys this electricity from Oneota Solar, LLC, under a third-party power purchase agreement. This financial arrangement became a legal option in the summer of 2014, after a landmark ruling by the Iowa Supreme Court.

### Motivations and Motivators

The sole investor in Oneota Solar, LLC, is one of Decorah's most prominent and forward-thinking citizens,



Businesses like Pizza Ranch and Weis Buick are reaping the cost benefits of solar panels.





Mike Bockman amid the solar panels high on the roof of T-Bocks Sports Bar & Grill, the popular restaurant and bar that he and Dominique Bockman own and operate in the heart of downtown Decorah.

Larry Grimstad. After retiring from his role as President of Decorah Bank & Trust, Larry has devoted much of his life to promoting sustainable living and economic well-being in and around Decorah. He and his wife, Diane, have built a beautiful home on the west edge of Decorah that showcases a variety of energy-efficiency and renewable-energy technologies as well as sustainable building features. Larry has also made additional investments in wind and solar projects in the area—including Decorah Solar Field, LLC, which leases to Luther the solar PV equipment that powers Baker Village. Larry also gathered together the folks that ultimately constituted the inaugural board of directors of the Winneshiek Energy District. When asked what motivates him, Larry talks about the future well-being of his grandchildren and the Decorah community he loves.

Luther College's motivations spring from its mission statement: "Founded where river, woodland, and prairie meet, we practice joyful stewardship of the resources that surround us."<sup>14</sup> Like the early settlers of Decorah and the indigenous peoples who lived here long before, Luther wants to live in greater harmony with the diverse and abundant renewable energy resources that are available in this beautiful little corner of northeast Iowa. At the same time, Luther wants to be good stewards of the precious financial resources provided by students, parents, and donors. Luther's investments in energy efficiency and renewable energy stem from dual goals—to reduce campus operating costs while also reducing greenhouse gas emissions.<sup>15</sup>

Good financial stewardship and fiscal responsibility motivated the Decorah School District to make a \$20.7 million renovation to the high school in 2013. This work included an innovative hybrid geothermal heating and cooling system that is the second largest in the nation.<sup>16</sup> The system is so efficient that it now costs the same amount to heat and cool the school as it did in the past simply to heat it. The school also installed skylights and other daylighting technologies to reduce electricity consumption and to increase the quality of light for the students.<sup>17</sup> Every dollar not spent on energy is a dollar that can be spent to promote and enhance student learning.

Even as it preserves the accomplishments of the past, Vesterheim Norwegian-American Museum is dedicated to building a sustainable future and is exploring geothermal, solar, wind, and other alternative energy and energy-efficient technologies as it contemplates major upgrades to its downtown Decorah complex.

## Conclusion

Saving energy. Living sustainably. Being good stewards. Facing climate change. All of these factors have motivated many in the Decorah area to make investments in energy efficiency and renewable energy. Decorah is a unique place that wants to be a model for, rather than a mirror of, society. It is one community making a sustainable difference.



## Larry Grimstad: Decorah's Godfather of Green

Perhaps no single person is more responsible for helping the Decorah area embrace alternative energy models and reduce its collective carbon footprint than Larry Grimstad, and the community holds him in great respect for his efforts. Grimstad invested in Oneota Solar, LLC, and several other local wind and solar projects and was instrumental in organizing the Winneshiek Energy District.

“We want to make the biggest impact we can on environmental change,” Grimstad explains. “Once you study the opportunities to build large wind power and large solar power, then it’s just a matter of how you put the projects together. So we were able to do that and the projects have been successful. They are financially reasonable, and they’re the right thing to do, so it has all worked out pretty well.”

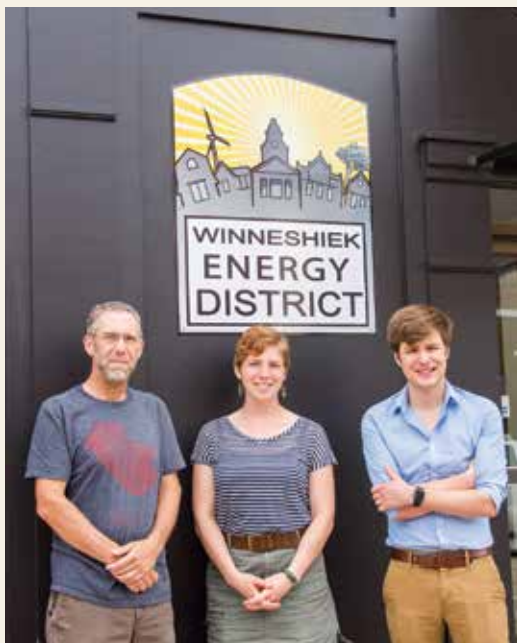
In the 1990s Larry and his wife Diane began reading works by Al Gore and others. After becoming curious about the future of non-renewable energy, they immersed themselves in researching climate change and global warming. This resulted in some big changes in the way they lived their lives and in a resolve to drastically reduce their carbon footprint.

Their beautiful home is roofed with cedar shingles, which degrade in the ground faster than generic oil-based ones. These cedar shingles, laid in a wavy fashion that evokes thatch, also give the house its distinctive Hobbit-like look and blend in with the surrounding woods. The solar panels in their side yard generate 11 kilowatts of solar production and the small wind turbine on their land adds an additional 10 kilowatts.

Grimstad’s Norwegian grandfather immigrated in 1912. His grandparents settled in Minneapolis, built a little house, raised three boys there, and never owned a car. “I think there’s a correlation between our past and our future, and the amount of energy that we used to use and the energy that we’re going to use in the future,” Larry reflects, “because we won’t be able to live on this planet if we don’t significantly reduce the amount of energy we’re using—to get back to the past, sort of.”



Larry and Diane Grimstad in front of their delightful solar-powered home, *above*. The Grimstads’ solar field, *below*.



The Winneshiek Energy District is the original pilot energy district, founded in 2010 on the Soil and Water Conservation District model. The effort grew out of extensive community conversation and history, a founding board that included Carolyn Corbin, Larry Grimstad, Jeni Holtan Grouws, Paul Johnson, Jim Martin-Schramm, and Craig Mosher, and the vision of founding Executive Director Andrew Johnson.

The organization strives to build local leadership and consensus around a vision of 100% locally-owned renewable energy by 2050, providing technical assistance, community engagement, market transformation, and policy advocacy.

Winneshiek Energy District staff members, *from left to right*, Executive Director Andrew Johnson, Kristin Eggen, and Joel Zook.



# Generations in Harmony with the Land

Sustainability is not only about alternative power, but about our relationship to the land and the way we produce the food we eat. For decades in and around Decorah, one generation has encouraged and advised the next on what it means to live sustainably and grow organically, sharing know-how and exploring new options together.

## "It's A Gift to Be Simple": The Sliwas

Perry-O and David Sliwa and their University of Michigan classmates Pat and Paul Johnson were at the tail end of the 1960s "back to the land" movement and were drawn to living a simpler, more sustainable life. "We were four people who were idealistic and had experiences abroad," David explains. "So we thought maybe we ought to do something together sometime." The four got out some maps. "'Well, we certainly want to grow tomatoes,' we said, 'so it has to have a growing season. We love to ski, so there has to be snow, not so big on population density, not so much pollution.'" Finally they settled on an area between Winona, MN, and Dubuque, IA—but there were no jobs immediately, so instead the Sliwas moved to Ithaca, NY, where David found excellent work as the state entomologist for the state of New York.

A year later Pat Johnson found a job in Decorah and she and Paul located a small farm there. Just before the Johnsons were to move from Ann Arbor, they invited the Sliwas to Iowa for Memorial Day to see the farm. They spent the weekend walking the land, and that was all it took. When the Sliwas returned to

Ithaca, David quit his job—which was a difficult thing to do, risking security for a dream. But the person who had hired him told him that, if things didn't work out, there would still be work for him in Ithaca. "He couldn't have said anything better that would have encouraged us," David says. "So we said we'll give it five years and see what we can do."

In 1974, the two couples headed for Decorah at the same time, with five children between them. The Sliwas established themselves in town for a while, but in just a few years they found a place in a beautiful valley to start building their new home. They lived off the grid, relying on a basic system of solar panels and a wind turbine. They lived almost twenty years without a refrigerator. They considered it a great adventure and never thought of it as "doing without." Here Perry-O lightly sings a couple of bars, "'Tis a gift to be simple, 'tis a gift to be free. . . ."

Well, perhaps their daughter may have felt some minor deprivation, Perry-O confesses with a complex smile. "We had no electricity at the stage when she had discovered an electric hair-curler, which was pretty important. And in seventh grade,



David and Perry-O Sliwa in front of their solar setup, holding their son's seventh-grade science project explaining how a solar cell works.



one of her assignments was to list all of your electrical appliances and figure out the volts or the watts, and she was a kid with no electrical appliances and that's tough on a junior high kid."

Their son weathered that storm more easily, because by the time he was in seventh grade, the Sliwas were generating and using DC power. "When our son had the same assignment, he was the only kid in his class who knew the difference between AC and DC power," David relates. "In fact, I still have one of his posters for his science projects showing how a solar cell works. I looked at it the other day and he really knew what he was talking about."

Over the years, Meadow Farm, which is what their valley home was called, grew in both beauty and comfort. David built a new house using Norwegian energy-saving design techniques. There were the gardens where they grew organic produce and flowers, and David established an apple orchard.

The Sliwas were very active in the community. In 1976 Perry-O helped found Decorah's Farmers Market and served as its first manager—a Farmers Market that is still booming today. David worked a three-year stint establishing the orchard at Seed Savers Exchange. And the couple became mentors to many young folk, especially after their children grew and left to start lives of their own. "Lots of people have come through here, after our kids left home," David says. "We had a few extra bedrooms and we either had Luther College students staying with us, or people who were working on the farm with us who wanted to learn how to live off the land and take care of it as well."

Perry-O explains that she is a valley person, comforted by the embracing woods, while David is a ridge person, exhilarated by the open expanse. Being an orchardist is somehow built into David's genes, she says, and though the apple orchard at Meadow Farm was productive, the valley frost was an issue and limited the possibility of growing other fruit trees, like plums.

"So we talked for many years about just buying some land on the ridge top, where there's good air drainage and perhaps better sites for orchards," David says—someplace where he could have a little orchard and maybe a place he could stay overnight. "We didn't pursue it to the extent of actually finding anything, and then three or four years ago, and I don't remember what brought it up, but Perry-O said to me, 'Well, if you're still interested in going to the ridge, let's find a place and I'll go with you.'"

They found a four-acre piece of land on the top of a nearby ridge. Leaving Meadow Farm in 2016 was difficult after over 35 years of calling it home, but they found buyers (the Sandhorst-Jensens, see page 11) who truly knew the value of both the land and the lifestyle, and that made it easier.

David started an orchard with a few trees, and this year began a second one—twenty-five varieties of pear. After doing extensive research, he built a new energy efficient home, again based on Norwegian design, one that is totally electric, run on renewable energy via their solar panels and a wind turbine, and complete with refrigerator, range, washer—most of the usual amenities. The Sliwas have since dialed down their garden production, mostly growing food needed for their own consumption. They have downsized from Meadow Farm's forty acres to just four, but they are still following their separate passions together and enjoying their reciprocally sustaining life on the land. "'Tis a gift to be simple, 'tis a gift to be free."

## Sunshine and Gravity: The Kittlesons and Their Search for a Neighborhood

Dale and Frances Kittleson and their neighbors happily discovered that, when it comes to energy, sometimes sustainable choices are simply the most practical ones.

Dale and Frances met at Camp Ewalu near Strawberry Point, IA, and Dale remembers, "We were sitting on a bench looking out over the sunset on a nice summer evening and somehow just started imagining our lives together and having



Dale and Frances Kittleson in front of their garden.





a place out in the country where we would raise a family.” That surprised both of them, Dale says.

Years later, after they were married, they realized that what they really wanted was something fairly unique. They had lived in Minneapolis and knew city life wasn’t for them. They tried the relatively solitary country life outside a small town and that didn’t suit them either. What they longed for was a real country life—but with neighbors, a rural neighborhood.

After bouncing around the Midwest, the Kittlesons came to Decorah in 1991, and the people they met there sealed the deal. Eventually they were able to join three other couples in purchasing adjoining parcels of land about eight miles from town. It was the farthest thing from a commune. Each family wanted to live separately. They didn’t necessarily share spiritual, political, or economic ideals. What they did share was simply a desire to live in the country, and to have neighbors.

The land they bought was indeed so undeveloped that there was no infrastructure in the area—no power lines, no phone lines. According to Dale, the power company told them they were too remote to be hooked up to the grid—unless they came

up with an impossible amount of money. “Being off the grid became a requirement, then,” Dale explains. “We didn’t come out here thinking ‘Let’s live off the grid and be independent. No, we were completely set to hook up to the grid. Because a.) you need a well, and b.) how do you do a well without electricity?’”

But necessity became the mother of invention, and the small rural neighborhood turned to sustainable power. They did their research, dug a well, installed a solar-powered pump for it, and placed a 4,000 gallon tank on the side of the hill. Every time the sun shines, the pump comes on, pumping water up to the tank until it is full, then gravity sends it down to each of the neighborhood homes. “Sunshine and gravity, two really, really dependable energy sources,” Dale says, smiling.

“Having a rural neighborhood is a great way to live in the country. You get all the advantages of the wide-open spaces, but you have a neighbors next by,” Frances beams. “We knew we’d made it when Kristen from next door came over in her pajamas wanting to borrow a cup of sugar. We just felt like now we’ve really got a neighborhood.”





Erik Sessions with crew-members Clara Muggli-Toyloy and Jen Griffin at Patchwork Green Farm.

### Erik Sessions, Sara Peterson, and Patchwork Green Farm

Erik Sessions's family came to Decorah when his father took a teaching position at Luther College in 1977, and the family started a little homestead. "My folks had a garden. We milked goats. We had chickens and cows and ducks and a couple pigs," Erik remembers. "And it was all back-to-the-land!"

Erik met Sara Peterson at Macalester College in 1990. After college, Erik started working at a historical site in Minnesota while Sara finished her teaching degree. She found her first teaching job with the Howard-Winneshiek School District, so they moved to the Decorah area in 1998. Erik had experience working at a CSA farm in Wisconsin and decided to try his hand at it. When they attended their very first farmers market, they earned a grand total of \$12.75 on radish and spinach sales, but things picked up. In 2001, the pair purchased the land they are on now and worked up five acres. Today Patchwork Green Farm is a successful going concern, concentrating on farmers markets and CSA shares and supplying produce to Decorah's Oneota Community Food Co-op and a few local restaurants.

"In a small community, everyone has to find their niche. If we're all growing radishes for the Co-op, we're all going to go out of business, because they are only going to buy 30 bunches a week," Erik says. "I feel like I fit into the local market scene at just the right time. Our farmers market, and just general awareness of organic foods, was growing like crazy, so we came in at a little bigger scale and had some big ideas and people were excited to get the lettuce and wanted more and more. So it was easy for us to scale up to the five acres we're at now and find a demand for it all."







Mike and Katie Bollinger, center, with River Root Farm crew members Phil Flaskerud, left, and Amanda Rubasch, right.

### The Bollinger Family and River Root Farm

Nestled just inside the city limits of Decorah sits River Root Farm, established in 2009 by the Bollinger family. Katie and Mike and their two kids, Oliver and Adeline (and barn-cat Jimmy) run the certified organic family farm and greenhouse.

After returning to Decorah from the Peace Corps, the couple's commitment to sustainability found new expression when they started growing basil and a few vegetables for the acclaimed Seed Savers Exchange, also in Decorah. Neither had grown up gardening, but they say their time in the Peace Corps taught them about hard work and what it takes to pull weeds and seed the land.

In their first season, they sold just ten flats, around 150 plants. Now, with lots of community support, they are

supplying around 140,000 plants and produce to restaurants and grocery stores in the surrounding area and are the major supplier of plants to Seed Savers Exchange.

Katie and Mike agree on the importance of community over competition in Decorah's gardening and farming niche—and they enjoy how their starter plants help introduce others to the joy and rewards of gardening.

“What you'll notice when you talk to others in the area is that we all do something a little different, we're all feeding into the community in a little different way,” Katie explains. “Our focus is on farm-direct wholesale to restaurants and grocery stores, and our spring plant sale. We're all trying to find our niche and contribute in a way where we can all be here and all do things that lift each other up.”







Hannah Breckbill, *left*, and Emily Fagin, *right*, at Humble Hands Harvest.

### Hannah Breckbill, Emily Fagin, and "Humble Hands Harvest"

For mathematician Hannah Breckbill and physicist Emily Fagin, living off the land wasn't the initial plan. They both finished their undergraduate work, yet neither felt right in their careers. Breckbill got tired of "living in her head" and found farming. Fagin decided that it was "better for my sanity to not be on a computer inside all day thinking about abstract things." Each separately began exploring their love of growing food. In 2017, Breckbill bought the eight acres of hayfield that has become "Humble Hands Harvest." With the help of Fagin, they are now starting their second year as a partnership and a worker-owned cooperative, hoping to attract more like-minded people.

At "Humble Hands Harvest," the main enterprise is organic vegetables, though they've recently added livestock—lambs and pigs. The women sell CSA shares, participate in farmers markets, and even sell to restaurants wholesale. Breckbill says that there are some skills in farming that women aren't expected to know and she's had to work through those hurdles herself. However, being able to tough it out and ask for help are keys to their success, she says.

Eating locally-grown food is both healthier and more sustainable, the pair explain, but it takes a shift in priorities. To eat locally you can't eat the same things you eat in June as you eat in January. Breckbill and Fagin stress the importance of not only developing new personal habits, but shifting our nation's culture of food as well. Helping your own health is helping the planet and helping the planet is helping your own health.







### Seed Savers Exchange

Since 1975, Seed Savers Exchange has been working to protect the biodiversity of our food system—and our planet—by preserving rare, heirloom, and open-pollinated varieties of seeds in a seed bank at Heritage Farm in Decorah and encouraging gardeners and farmers worldwide to grow, harvest, and share heirloom seeds as well as recount the inspirational stories behind them. Today, Seed Savers Exchange focuses on stewarding and sharing the large collection of open-pollinated varieties the organization has amassed over the past 45 years. In addition to sharing seeds with gardeners and farmers, the organization's stewardship also encompasses depositing seeds in the Svalbard Global Seed Vault in Norway, which acts as an insurance policy or "back up" for Seed Savers Exchange's collection. The varieties are truly priceless—some represent a family's immigration story, while others produce cherished, flavorful food dishes. Together the seeds of these varieties comprise an irreplaceable genetic resource that may well guarantee the security of our future food supply. These rare, diverse seeds ensure that we have varieties adapted to different climate conditions and resistant to certain diseases. When seed diversity is strong, our food system is protected, because this diversity increases the probability of having crop varieties that thrive in adverse situations. Today, amid the rolling bluffs just outside Decorah, Seed Savers Exchange houses the nation's largest nongovernmental seed bank of its kind, where thousands of rare, heirloom varieties are safeguarded for generations to come.

### Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> The following information is drawn from David S. Faldet's magnificent book, *Oneota Flow: The Upper Iowa River & Its People*, University of Iowa Press, 2009.
- <sup>2</sup> *Oneota Flow*, 133.
- <sup>3</sup> Ellery M. Hancock, *Past and Present of Allamakee County Iowa: A Record of Settlement, Organization, Progress, and Achievement*. Chicago: S. J. Clarke Publishing Company, 1913, 193.
- <sup>4</sup> G. E. Knudson, *A Guide to the Upper Iowa River*. Decorah, IA: Luther College Press, 1971, 50.
- <sup>5</sup> "Iowa Engineers Solve Problem with Model Dam." *The Decorah Republican*, Aug. 10, 1909.
- <sup>6</sup> In *Oneota Flow*, 175. David Faldet notes that in 1946 Interstate Power "considered building a coal-powered generating plant in Decorah, but the Upper Iowa offered too low a volume of water to serve for cooling."
- <sup>7</sup> Population of Decorah, Iowa, <http://population.us/ia/decorah/>. Accessed April 8, 2018.
- <sup>8</sup> Wilfred F. Bunge, *Transformed by the Journey: 150 Years of Luther College in Word and Image*. Decorah, IA: Luther College Press, 130.
- <sup>9</sup> Associated Press, "Off the grid: Decorah community lives on solar, wind power," *The Courier*, July 5, 2015, [http://wcfcourier.com/news/regional/off-the-grid-decorah-community-lives-on-solar-wind-power/article\\_2674579d-92d0-5cba-8f89-5868c5352e66.html](http://wcfcourier.com/news/regional/off-the-grid-decorah-community-lives-on-solar-wind-power/article_2674579d-92d0-5cba-8f89-5868c5352e66.html). Accessed April 8, 2018.
- <sup>10</sup> Heated by the earth and powered by the sun, Baker Village may be the largest carbon-neutral facility in Iowa.
- <sup>11</sup> U.S. Department of Energy, "A College, a Church, and a Nonprofit Encourage Energy Efficiency in Northeast Iowa," May 6, 2010, <https://www.energy.gov/articles/college-church-and-nonprofit-encourage-energy-efficiency-northeast-iowa>. Accessed April 8, 2018.
- <sup>12</sup> *The Gazette*, "Tour showcases Decorah's leading solar efforts," October 24, 2015, <http://www.thegazette.com/subject/news/government/local/tour-showcases-decorahs-leading-solar-efforts-20151024&c=3537748588867873983&cmkt=en-us>. Accessed April 14, 2018.
- <sup>13</sup> Winneshiek Energy District, "Solar Energy Map," <http://tools.energydistrict.org/rmap/>. Accessed April 14, 2018.
- <sup>14</sup> Luther College Mission Statement, <https://www.luther.edu/about/mission/>. Accessed April 14, 2018.
- <sup>15</sup> The college's Climate Action Plan, approved by the Board of Regents in 2012, challenges Luther to reduce emissions 50 percent by 2015, 70 percent by 2020, and to achieve net-zero greenhouse gas emissions by 2030. Luther has met the first goal and is working assiduously to meet the 2020 goal.
- <sup>16</sup> Appliance Design, "Decorah, Iowa High School Installs One of Nation's Largest Hybrid Heating and Cooling Systems Using LG VRF Technology," February 25, 2016, <https://www.appliancedesign.com/articles/94939-decorah-iowa-high-school-install-one-of-nations-largest-hybrid-heating-and-cooling-system-using-lg-vrf-technology>. Accessed April 14, 2018.
- <sup>17</sup> Iowa Communications Network, "District unveils \$20.7 million high school renovation project," September 5, 2013, <https://icn.iowa.gov/about-icn/news-and-media/media-activity/district-unveils-207-million-high-school-renovation-project>. Accessed on April 14, 2018.

### About the Author

**James B. Martin-Schramm** joined the religion faculty of Luther College in 1993. He is an ordained member of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America and holds a doctorate in Christian Ethics from Union Theological Seminary in New York City. He is the author, co-author, or co-editor of several publications, including *Eco-Reformation: Grace and Hope for a Planet in Peril* (Wipf & Stock, 2016), *Earth Ethics: A Case Method Approach* (Orbis Books, 2015), and *Climate Justice: Ethics, Energy, and Climate Policy* (Fortress Press, 2010).

Jim served on the inaugural board of the Iowa Wind Energy Association and recently completed terms as chair of the board of Iowa Interfaith Power & Light, as well as the Winneshiek Energy District. Jim coordinates the Colleges and Universities page for [lutheransrestoringcreation.org](http://lutheransrestoringcreation.org), directs energy and climate programming for Luther's Center for Sustainable Communities, and serves on the board of Luther College Wind Energy Project, LLC.