

# INTRODUCTION

MICHAEL MARTIN MURPHEY

PHOTOGRAPHER PAUL MOBLEY JOURNEYED INTO AMERICA'S HEARTLAND as a lone artist with a camera, a seeker of those who live closest to the land, the Keepers of the Keys to our continued survival—our devoted farmers and ranchers. Behind him lay a lifetime of commercial and creative success; ahead of him a vast landscape of forms and faces that challenge verbal description and categorization—the elusive Culture of Agriculture. He took no crew and rarely an assistant, working as a somewhat disenchanted artist in the domain of the most overlooked segment of society, those who live and die by the rhythms of Nature. One man, one camera. Confronting the subjects of his images, one at a time. Questioning, not with words, but with lens, shutter and light.

There comes a time for many artists when this kind of departure becomes necessary in spite of the considerable professional and personal risks. At a time like this, the artist is not repudiating previous work, but mustering the courage to stand on the edge of a chasm and vault towards an unknown Other Side. A photographer who makes this crossing is often startled to confront the images of others who have done the same thing in their own lives. So it was for Paul Mobley. Farmers and ranchers are members of that shared brotherhood and sisterhood of Risk. And like those who have taken that spiritual leap before him, Paul was forever changed to discover his subjects were in fact fellow sojourners, returning his gaze.

When I first met Paul Mobley at an annual meeting of the American Farm Bureau Federation, he simply wanted to take my picture. Not because I'm a known performer, a singing cowboy of the South, but because I'm a child of Texas and a passionate rancher with a family of cowgirls who work hard every day. I agreed, but when he showed me other pictures he had taken, I knew I'd met much more than a documenter of America's farm culture. I'd met a kindred spirit. I, too, had left behind a career that had become far too wrapped up in commercial formulas, and I knew Paul's path had been, and would continue to be, a lonesome trail—at least at first. It was fortifying to find another artist taking the powerful truth of American farmers and ranchers to the public—delivering a message of honesty, integrity, passion, and daily painstaking labor.

Paul embarked on this project when the Culture of Agriculture was far from the center of the world stage. His travels led him away from a society focused on industrial development and high technology, a humanity driven by the urban elite and space age dreams. He went beyond the part of the country where most city-dwellers go on vacation—beyond national parks, and “wilderness” reserves that are sometimes revealingly referred to as “recreation areas”—undeveloped land that we want for playgrounds. He went to the “aggie outback” that doesn't show up on Top Ten destination lists—into fields of wheat, corn, and beans; into orchards and vineyards; into livestock pastures, pens, egg sheds and feed yards. He was far from the fashionable “country” of bed and breakfasts, scenic turnouts and “eco-tours,” among those who toil and sweat to grow the food found on the tables of the advantaged and the desperate alike.

By the time the first phase of Paul's journey was completed, agriculture had moved from nowhere in the theater of the world's drama to waiting in its wings, poised for a major entrance. Mobs in developed and undeveloped countries were loudly protesting the use of land for producing distiller's grains in ethanol plants, instead of food. In the early summer of 2008, panic started spreading about high prices for fuel, fertilizer, farm

machinery, and the soaring costs for the transportation and distribution of fuel. Farmers who had suffered decades of loss and debt were now in a boom/bust cycle and making headlines. Ranchers were taking a beating on the skyrocketing prices of livestock feed. Their products and produce hit record retail highs, threatening to become food for the privileged, not for the People. Politicians were suddenly reversing their position on issues such as ethanol price supports, looking for an out that just simply wasn't there. They were dumbfounded by forces they didn't understand, because modern politics mostly addresses urban plight; elected leaders often have no clue when it comes to agricultural policy, failing to realize the most obvious truth: *the production of food is not a rural issue, it is an essential human issue.*

In the midst of all the mayhem, Paul Mobley's book of arresting images becomes timely and prophetic. American farmers and ranchers are in the spotlight now, and will likely remain there for a very long time. They feed more people than any other agricultural community around the world. Their global counterparts are watching their methods and decisions closely. They know their survival is dependent on American agriculture, in a way that our own urbanites have barely begun to recognize.

Those outside of rural America need to see what is in this book. They need to read the mind-boggling interviews, insightfully conducted and edited by Katrina Fried, of the farmers and ranchers photographed. They'll be astounded to find that those who are close to the land have a startling sense of where they belong in the Universe. They love their lives, accept the inherent struggles, and are surprisingly at peace for those who confront so many daily challenges. Perhaps it is because they know what it is to grow things, have worked to understand and to accept the forces of Nature. It becomes a spiritual quest in the end.

After taking more than 32,000 images of all kinds of farmers and ranchers, from northern Alaska to the Louisiana coast, Paul Mobley's admiration ran so deep that he felt forever changed by the experience. His photographs convey a sense that his journey into the heart of America will never be over. His work will pass on this intuition to others, and perhaps they will be inspired to better understand the sacred connection between the food they consume and those who provide it. Maybe they'll visit a local farm or ranch next time they go on that "country" getaway. Perhaps they'll seek out the farmers and ranchers who sell their products direct to the customer. Hopefully they will never visit a farmers' market again without taking a moment to talk to those who feed them, the caretakers of our land, the Keepers of the Keys.

For the theme song of the public television series *America's Heartland*, Montana rancher Rob Quist and I wrote these lyrics:

*You can see it in the eyes of every woman and man  
Who spend their whole lives living Close to the Land;  
There's a love for the country, and pride in the brand,  
In America's Heartland, Close the Land. . .*

As ranchers who are musical artists, on a lone mission to give a voice to our way of life, our culture, our families and friends out on the land, we reached the same conclusion, on the same kind of voyage of discovery taken by Paul Mobley. It's a dramatic and radical conclusion, but I stand by it, just as Paul does:

Farmers and ranchers are the single most important contributors to the future survival of the human race and the living planet Earth.

M. M. M.  
The Murpheys' Rocking 3M Ranch North,  
June 14, 2008