

talkofthesouth

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Books

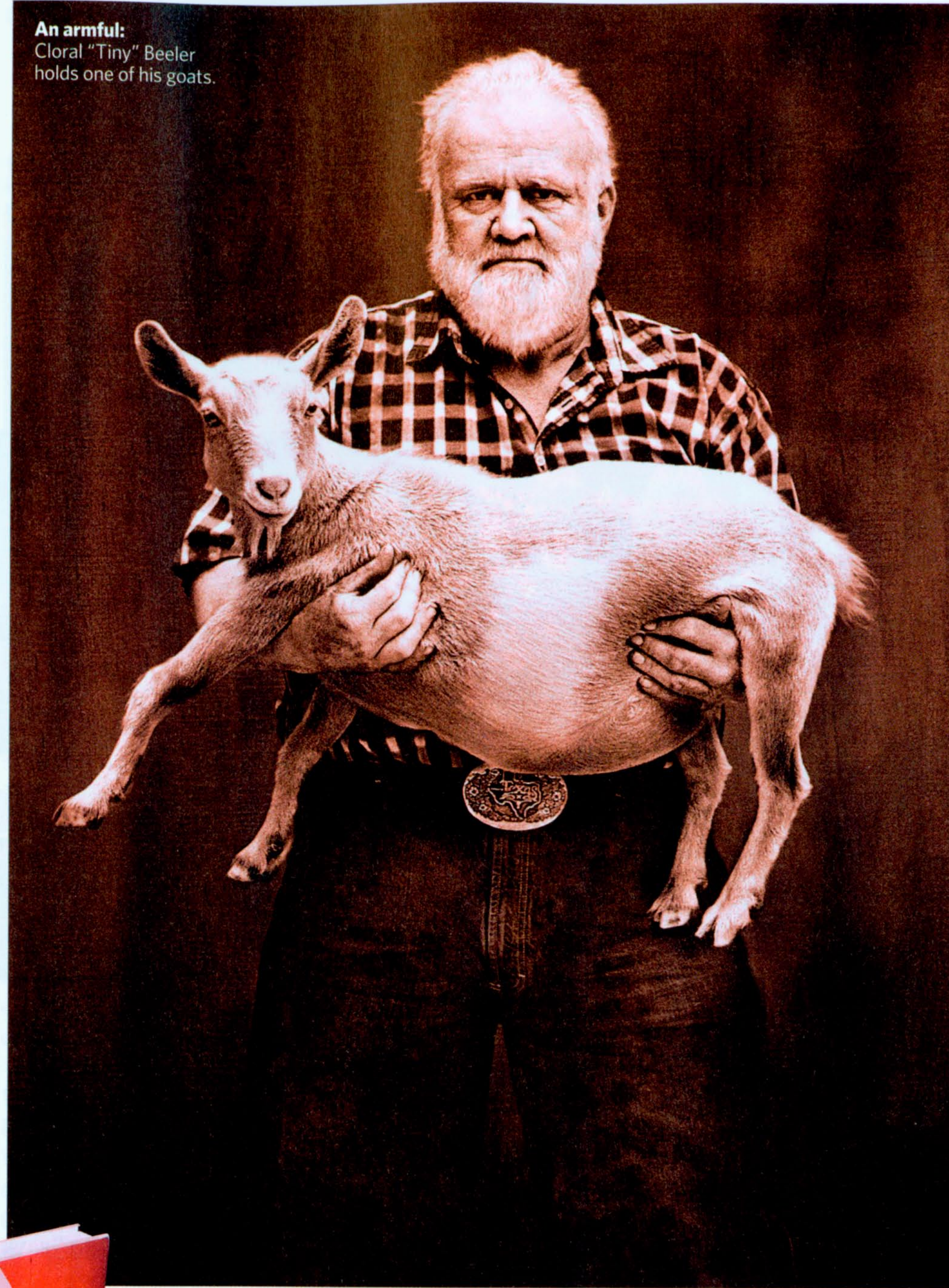
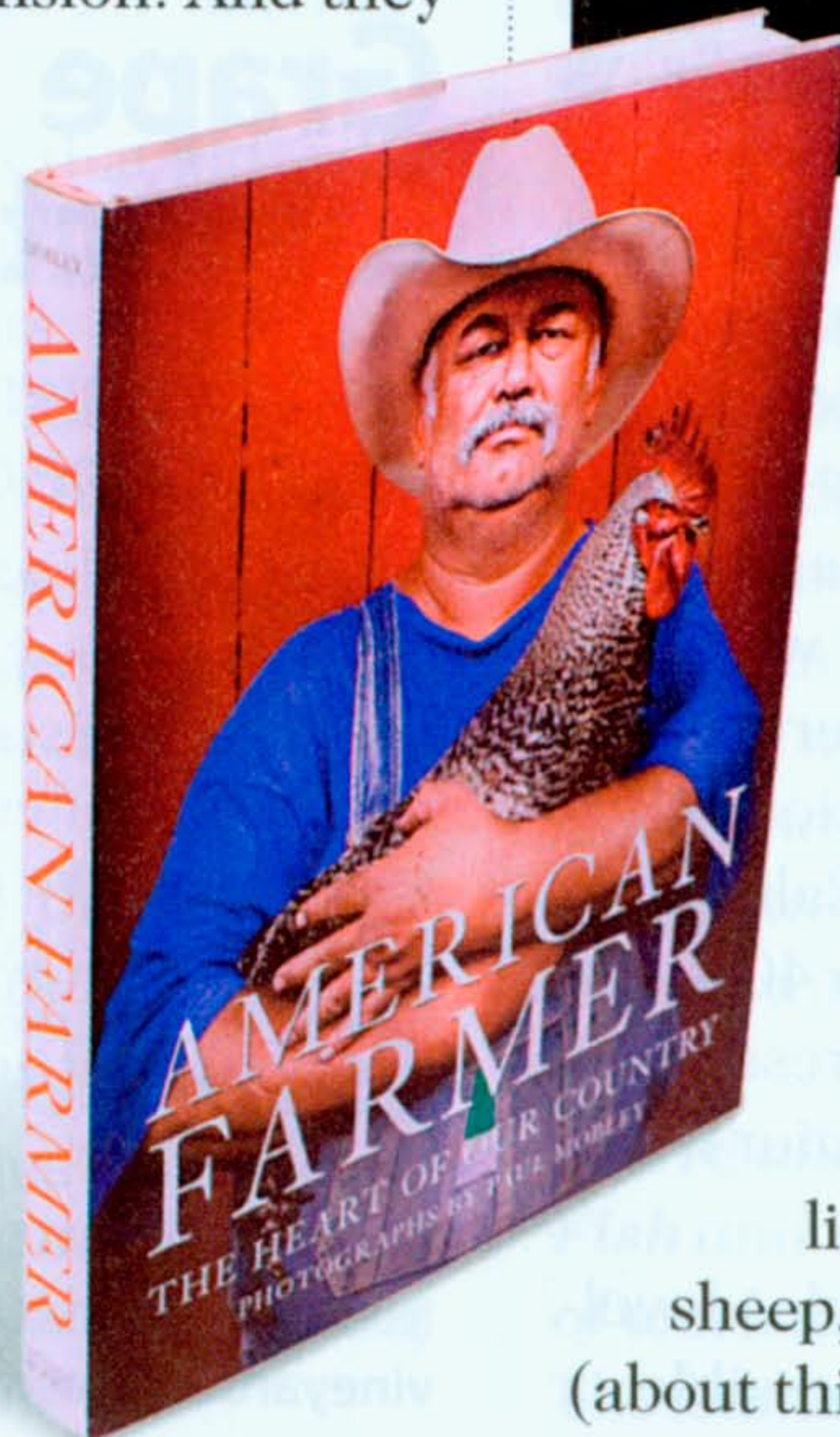
Keepers of the Land

Farmers—and their dirt, dogs, boots, and jeans—shine from the pages of a new book

by Clyde Edgerton

THE PHOTOGRAPHS IN *American Farmer: The Heart of Our Country* (Welcome Books) are so genuine, so real, you feel as though you are reading them—that is, you feel you understand something about the subjects not shown directly—and you *hear* the first-person narratives written there. The book, alive, will move around in the room where you leave it; and leave it on the coffee table if you must (it's big), but this is *not* a coffee-table book. It is beyond that. The narratives have suspense and tension. And they don't go on and on. The book sings with a visual poetry, and crops, and dirt, and animals, and hard work, and a direct, plain simplicity.

In 2004, Paul Mobley, a commercial photographer who'd spent fifteen years working for Ford, Compaq, Max Factor, Citigroup, American Express, Chevrolet, and other industry giants—we're talking umbrellas, bright lights, dim lights, assistants, light meters,



An armful: Cloral "Tiny" Beeler holds one of his goats.

tripods, all that—took a simple photograph of a farmer. He immediately thought, *This is the most pure, honest photograph I've ever done.* Then he went out and did this masterpiece, *American Farmer*. Three years on the road—and out of more than 32,000 photographs, Mobley picked about 150 for us to look at. Farmers; farm families; farmers with chickens, horses, sheep, and crops. From thirty-two states (about thirty of the farmers are Southern).

Mobley visited with and got to know each farmer and family before touching his camera. This book brings to mind James Agee and Walker Evans's *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, Eudora Welty's *Photographs*, and Studs Terkel's *Working*.

The writer (and editor) for *American Farmer*, Katrina Fried, made editing decisions that shape the narratives just enough to preserve the robust power of the language of farmers—a robust power that's rare in most professions. Her art guarantees that you listen to talk rather than read a transcript.

Here are a few words the photographs



bring to my mind: *family, hard work, gentleness, honesty, pain, meanness.* I don't mean *meanness* as in cruel. I'm speaking of a directness and a clarity that come from daily life with animals, soil, and plants. A directness that is often tinged with humor. A father is quoted as saying to a son who's looking hungrily around the table, "If you don't see it, you don't need it." In the Carolina Piedmont of my upbringing, the "real life" of farming belonged to many families but to many more grandparents and great-grandparents. From centuries back, farming is the heritage of most Americans, and a great product of this book is a reader's remembering that heritage. Another product of the book may be the sprouting of backyard gardens and chicken pens across this great land of ours. My uncle Calbert is of the opinion that that's still possible. He says, "Our confused culture is not yet entirely washed down the drain by shallow, vain, abysmally dull entertainments. I'd rather watch my chickens than TV any day. Chickens are stupid. But not that stupid."

There's a movement afoot in this country supported by groups like the Carolina Farm Stewardship Association, the Rural Advancement Fund International, and Slow Food USA—and it's not a small movement. It's a movement that says, "Pay attention to what you eat; realize that you can eat cardboard-like tomatoes from three thousand



Above left: Aaron Bell and Carly DelSignore with their son, Henry, at their organic dairy farm. **Above:** Charlie Rainwater, cattle farmer.

miles away or you can eat delicious tomatoes from farms down the road; and for that matter, you can't be too poor or

rich to grow your own tomatoes. You can become an urban farmer." The movement also says, "Remember where you came from." *American Farmer* helps us remember that and helps us know our country's heart—what must remain our country's heart if we're to keep breathing. For that reason alone it's a profound document.

This book's close attention to human beings allows a glimpse into the preciousness of *the single human life*. When we look into these faces and listen to these dramatic human stories, we suddenly realize that other humans on our round earth—with similar stories—are every day instantly snuffed away by needless war and disease. In reading *American Farmer*, we find that our glibness about how we treat our neighbors (community, national, world) is blunted, called up short.

I promise you this: Before going to sleep on the night of any day you read from *American Farmer* and study its photographs, you will see and hear its images and words in your head. And those images and words will not be haunting. They will touch a strength and hope in you that may be surprising. ☪