

## Opinion &amp; Mailbox

# 'Covenant' film shows farmers care

**I** WASN'T there in Kansas City in 1978 when Paul Harvey delivered his now-famous essay "So God Made a Farmer," but I've heard from a number of people who were. They remember it being so quiet, it was almost like a prayer.

I recently joined a non-farm audience for the screening of a short film about farm animals at the Wexner Center on the Ohio State University campus. The reaction to the movie was similar, although it was less glossy and more gritty. It concerns the everyday reality of raising farm livestock.

The film is called "Covenant," and it is the first ever made by Michael Mercil, an assistant professor of art who is trained in sculpture. Mercil, who grew up surrounded by farming in Minnesota, has been exploring agriculture in art in part as a tribute to the 200th anniversary of the land-grant university.

In 2006-08, he planted "The Beanfield," a 500-square-foot plot of string beans at the Wexner Center. In 2008, he rotated the field to "The Virtual Pasture." Specialists from the OSU College of Food, Agricultural and Environmental Sciences helped him establish the miniature farm field. The nook had pasture forages and a white board fence with a large video screen that showed the daily activities of his flock of three sheep, which were housed and maintained remotely at the Stratford Ecological Center in Delaware. Once a month, he would bring the sheep down to graze the pasture.

"People would stop and stare in amazement," he says. "The most common question I got from them was, 'What kind of animal is that?'"

The reaction inspired him to create the film. Like I said, it's about farm animals on small Ohio family operations. Mercil justifies the need for it by saying, "Farm animals are not well understood. People have a romantic notion about what wild animals are, and they have a connection with their family pet, but farm animals are in a gray area in between the two. They just don't capture our attention routinely."

The film is powerful in the unvarnished way it depicts animals from five Ohio family farms — poultry, bees, dairy cows, sheep and goats, hogs, beef cattle. It shows them close up in natural conditions with flies buzzing and mud on their hocks and weeds in the pastures. You see baby pigs suckling and hens chasing bugs in the dirt. In one sequence, a border collie moves the

## Our Say



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cows out to pasture with a nip and a bark. These are, indeed, everyday scenes from smaller Ohio farms.

Interspersed are historical photographs showing the teaching of animal science at Ohio State. The campus is seen at a period when it was changing from a pastoral setting to a scientific laboratory.

It is narrated in part by the farmers themselves, making comments like "There's a lot of dumb between the ears of a cow — at least when you want them to do something. But when it comes to opening a gate to get into another pasture, they can be very smart, too."

Or, "The pigs they raise for commercial production just don't seem to have the personality of the breeds we used to raise. Seems like they are just interested in eating."

The other narrative comes from the reading of the poem "Slaughter" by Susan

Stewart. The poem is based on a manual about butchering, and perhaps the author's own witness to animal slaughter. It is stark and realistic and detailed. When the verses are read, the screen goes black. Every now and then, an old textbook illustration showing the numbered cuts of meat on a hog or cow are shown.

In law, a covenant is an agreement to perform or not perform certain actions. In religion, it was an agreement between God and the ancient Israelites to protect them if they obeyed his commandments. In the film, the "covenant" is between farmer and animal. As Jeff Dickinson, head of the Stratford center, noted after the film, there is an understanding on the part of the animal that they are being cared for to benefit mankind, and their eventual death is part of the deal. Dickinson related that taking animals to slaughter is the most difficult part of farming, but it is part of the job. He claims that some animals seem to understand where they are going as they walk off the truck. Even as they recognize the smell of death.

The movie does a great job of not turning animals into people. It is not about how animals see the world and what they would say if they could talk. They are seen as animals, and as farm animals being raised for food. There is no commentary about the moral right or wrong of this process.

Before the film, Mercil complimented

the Ohio farm community for taking the lead on the Livestock Care Standards, noting it is something other states are following up on. While he said he doesn't think his cameras would have been welcomed at large-scale farms, he said farmers are doing a much better job of explaining how they raise livestock.

Mercil subtitles "Covenant" as "A film about animals and us." Similarly, the producers of the Dodge commercial based on Harvey's speech end their advertisement with the words, "For the farmer in all of us." I would submit that the real covenant is between farmers and consumers. At one point in Mercil's film, a farmer says, "Consumers, at the very least, need to know who the farmer is who is growing their food."

I know who you are and I trust you to do the best job possible because I have seen how you do it. It is more important than ever for farmers to honor their covenant and make sure the consuming public understands how much care goes into producing our food.

## We want to hear from you!

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**FARM ART:** OSU film maker Michael Mercil examines one of his Shetland sheep at the Stratford Ecological Center in Delaware.

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