

## Landless in North Dakota

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When I went to Williston, North Dakota to [report](#) for the *Century* on churches in the oil boom, I had dinner at a place called Banquet West, a free meal on Sunday nights. At my table on that stormy March evening were people from around the country. At some point, talk turned to what each of them would be doing if they were able to accomplish their goals in the oil boom.

Greg came to Williston from Pennsylvania. He had spent his life raising cows to produce a specific kind of artisanal cheese. When he lost his farm, he was too heartbroken to sell his cattle. If he is able to make enough money in the oil boom, he said, he will buy a new plot of land and return his cows, now in the care of a friend, to his land. "In my heart," he said. "I am a farmer. That is who I am. That is my passion."

Larry, 40 years younger, came from Chicago. He also pictured himself on a plot of land, somewhere warmer than North Dakota. He casually mentioned the Dominican Republic.

Stephanie, one of the volunteers, came from Minnesota. Like Greg, she had in mind a very specific landscape for her own dream. She and her husband moved to North Dakota, with three of their four children, when he got a job in the oil industry. She came, she said, because "it is not good for a man to be alone. That is not what marriage is." But she misses Minnesota, and she longs to go home and raise her own vegetables and eggs and chickens.

The irony of all these agrarian dreams came to me as I drove through oil country, watching the flares and the rigs on what used to be farmland, wondering about the future of western North Dakota's top soil and ground water. Oil workers in North Dakota, and they long to be farmers. Will there be land for them?