



Over Land

A documentary by
Steve Suderman

Producer / Director: Steve Suderman
Executive Producer: Robin Schlaht
Written by: Jessica Boyachek
Music composed and performed by: Dirk Powell

English - 2008 - colour - 60 minutes

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Over Land

Synopsis

Short synopsis: (100 words)

Over Land is an intimate and personal portrait of a family facing a crisis in agriculture. Between 1996 and 2006, amidst warnings of an impending food shortage, prices for farm goods dropped to their lowest point in Canadian history, driving many farmers off the land. With a family history of farming spanning generations, the Sudermans now face a challenge that threatens to pull the family apart. As Steve Suderman films his family, the fight for economic survival becomes a touching story of hope, determination, and the search for purpose.

Long synopsis: (340 words)

Faced with ever-shrinking profits and increasingly unpredictable weather patterns, Canadian farmers are in a race to create larger and larger farms, believing that “bigger is better.” The resulting mega-farms become, in essence, subsidiaries of a few large corporations such as Monsanto and Cargill. It is a situation that may compel some to ask, “Who really controls food production?”

In *Over Land*, filmmaker Steve Suderman examines this question through the experiences of his family as they struggle to maintain their farm. Located near the small town of Gladstone (aka Happy Rock) on the flat Canadian prairies, the Sudermans farm 2,000 acres of grain and potatoes. Following a tradition of farming that spans generations, “the farm” is as much a part of the family’s identity as it is a source of conflict.

Running a family farm has been Rick Suderman’s life-long dream, but his three sons have not really found their own place in that dream. As the farm

economy hits its lowest mark in 50 years, the family seems to reach its breaking point. Eldest son Mike wants nothing more to do with the farm, but isn't sure what to do next. Chris and his wife Darlene still dream of a small family farm, but can't reconcile that dream with reality. Somewhere in between is the filmmaker Steve Suderman, who hasn't worked on the farm for several years, but still feels a sense of loyalty to his father and his dream.

After the farm loses several crops to bad weather, and a major potato processor reneges on a contract, the bank threatens to withdraw its financial support. The ensuing year and a half becomes the story of Over Land.

While offering an inside perspective on a crisis in agriculture and the transformation of the modern food chain, Over Land becomes a frank portrait of a family in uncertain times. With intimate access to each family member, Over Land tells the complicated story of a family's love for each other, and the never-ending search for meaning and inner peace.



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Director's Statement

Agriculture may truly be at a unique point in history. In the last year and a half, prices for commodities such as wheat, corn, and soy beans have reached record highs as the world faces a potential food shortage. Contributing factors to the shortage included major crop failures, population growth, and an increase in the amount of land being devoted to growing “fuel” rather than food. As my brother Mike recently commented, “a few years ago we couldn’t give our crops away even though there were people starving. Now that we can turn it into fuel, it’s suddenly worth something again.”

There is still a debate about whether the situation for farmers has actually improved. Some argue that the current jump in prices is temporary and that costs have also increased dramatically, and point out that the structure of the industry as a whole has not changed. Agricultural production in Canada is still dominated by the top 3% of the largest farms, and most farms are completely dependent on petroleum-based chemicals and fertilizers (as was ours). Additionally, agricultural inputs as well as processing and marketing capacities are controlled by a small number of highly consolidated companies. The result, as my dad puts it in the film, is that the farmer gets squeezed in between. These companies use the motto “field to table,” or in other words, taking control of every step, from growing a crop to processing it and selling it on store shelves. In fact, a model becoming ever more popular is “contract farming,” in which a corporation such as Maple Leaf controls hundreds of farms (hog farms in this case), and simply hires farmers to manage local operations. In this way, Maple Leaf controls every aspect of growing, processing, distributing and marketing hogs. This is the model alluded to by my dad at the end of the film when he warns that we will “eventually lose control of [agriculture] and we’ll just be the labourers, the local people.”

My personal feeling is that the current increases in demand for agricultural products will only hasten the corporate takeover of the industry under the guise of needing to produce more through the use of more and more biochemical technology. This has generally been the line used to sell GMO technology thus far, and the message seems to be intensifying.

Of course, it is impossible to separate farming from society in general, and that makes any prediction difficult. Three years ago when I started filming *Over Land*, it seemed like there was no hope of seeing a spike in commodity prices for farmers. The US and Canadian economies were still both strong and most industries were growing. Talking about an ongoing farm crisis just sounded ridiculous. Yet farmers were almost completely reliant on government subsidies and bailouts – both of which were distributed erratically and in inadequate sums. At that time, farmers were sometimes better off letting their crops rot in the field rather than paying the freight costs to take them to market. The situation was so bad between 2003 and 2005 that many farmers actually did start to unite to try to create awareness and to effect change. Farmer rallies took place in almost every capital city across Canada. Of course, these sorts of actions had already been going on in developing countries around the world where farmers are being forced off the land in far greater numbers.

My goal with *Over Land* was always to find a balance between acknowledging some of these larger social/economic forces while maintaining a focus on the day-to-day experiences of my family. Not to use their lives as an “example,” but to look out from that experience at the world around, and to look inside to find the individual person. I think this is how we generally interpret and respond to the world around us. Of course this was quite a grand goal for a first film, but I hope it was at least partially realized.

I was often surprised at how willing my family was to have me follow them around with a camera, though I suspected that they really just wanted to spend time with me and so they tolerated the camera. The four or five weeks of harvest is always extra stressful with one long day after another, and while spending that time with my brothers was bittersweet, there were moments that it truly felt more like a celebration than anything else. It was a wonderful experience that I will always cherish. Of course there were also difficult moments over the two years of filming, and a couple of times when I simply had to put the camera down. It was these times when I felt most torn between being a part of the family, and being a documentarian. I don't think I was ever able to reconcile the two roles.

When I first started working on *Over Land*, I did so because I felt that what was happening to farmers and agriculture in general was a form of social injustice, not to mention a bit scary. I wondered why farmers had so little market power, and I worried about how democratic our system of food production would be when completely controlled by a small number of corporations. But I was also worried that I might be exploiting my family in making the film, and I felt too close to the situation to answer the question objectively. I depended a great deal on my loving partner Jessica Boyachek for help with these sorts of questions, and I am extremely grateful to her. And even though my family didn't see a single piece of the film until it was finished, they also encouraged me to see it through to the end. Upon finally seeing the finished film, their responses were completely and overwhelmingly positive, which was, of course, a huge weight off my heart.

In the end, I believe that *Over Land* is an honest documentary, and I hope it is both moving and informative. I especially hope that it can be in some way meaningful to the many other families who have had to leave their farms.

Steve Suderman
June 2008, Regina

About the filmmakers

Steve Suderman - Director / Producer

Steve grew up on a farm in rural Manitoba, Canada. He started his career teaching high school mathematics and science before moving to Regina in 2002 to pursuing filmmaking. He has worked on several Saskatchewan based productions including assistant director on the Gemini-nominated documentary series *Landscape as Muse*, and assistant editor on the recently released feature-length documentary *To Be Romeo & Juliet*. *Over Land* is Steve's first full-length documentary. He has written for *Splice* magazine and served as president on the Saskatchewan Filmpool Cooperative's board of directors from 2006 to 2007.

Robin Schlaht - Executive Producer

President of Zima Junction Productions Inc., in Regina, Saskatchewan, Robin Schlaht graduated from the University of Regina's BFA Film and Video program in 1992 with an array of honours and awards. Among his productions, *Sons and Daughters* is a documentary exploration of childhood in seven different countries. It has appeared at many international festivals and won several national and international awards. The feature length documentary *Moscow Summer*, shot in Russia in 1995, was named Best Foreign Film at the 1996 WorldFest International Film Festival in Charleston, South Carolina, and the video documentary *The Heart Becomes Quiet* (co-produced/directed with David Christensen) is about survivors of the Union Carbide gas disaster in Bhopal, India. Robin's first dramatic feature film, *Solitude* (co-produced with David Christensen and Heather Malek), starred Lothaire Bluteau and Vanessa Martinez, premiered in 2001 to rave reviews. Robin is a member of the Directors Guild of Canada and of the Saskatchewan Motion Picture Industry Association. Robin lives and works in Regina with his spouse, editor and filmmaker Heather Malek, and there he is a prominent activist with the Regina Peace Action Coalition, and an active member (and frequent board member) of the Saskatchewan Filmpool Cooperative. In 2001 Robin was named a Distinguished Alumnus of the University of Regina in recognition of his career achievements and community involvement. [www.zimajunction.ca]

Dirk Powell - Composer

Dirk Powell has expanded on the deeply rooted sounds of his Appalachian heritage to become one of the preeminent traditional American musicians of his generation. In addition to acclaimed releases on Rounder Records, he's recorded and performed with artists such as Loretta Lynn, playing several instruments on her Grammy-winning release "Van Lear Rose," Sting, Jack White, Levon Helm, Jewel, T-Bone Burnett, Ralph Stanley, and Linda Ronstadt, among others. His ability to unite the essence of his culture with modern sensibilities has led to work with many of today's greatest film directors, including Anthony Minghella, Spike Lee, Ang Lee, Victor Nuñez, Steve James, and Edward Burns. [www.dirkpowell.com]

Over Land
Complete Credit Roll

For their courage, honesty, and love

Mike, Serena, Lydia
Chris, Darlene, Sarah, Zoey, Olivia
Mom & Dad
Jessica

Produced, Directed, Filmed by
Steve Suderman

Writers
Jessica Boyachek
Steve Suderman

Executive Producer
Robin Schlaht

Original Music composed
and performed by
Dirk Powell
with Danny Devillier, drums
Anna Laura Edmiston, vocals

Additional Cinematography
Cam Koroluk
Ryan Good
Jason Britski

Editor
Steve Suderman

Editing Consultant
Heather Malek

Sound Mix
Twisted Pair Sound

Colour Correction & Online
Java Post

Photographs
Agatha Suderman
Jerry Suderman
Darlene Suderman
Charlie/ETC Group
Colleen Ross

Stewart Wells

Newspaper Article
Grainews, April 1979

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Audrey Froese
Cam Koroluk
Jason Nielsen
Charlie Fox
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Brian Stockton
Nettie Wiebe
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