

Small farming is risky these days when good years are only one in three or four. But Eagle farmer Dick Janak and his wife Elva say it's worth the risk for the country life — and the chance to be their own boss.



David Creamer/The Sower

Even when you roll snake eyes . . .

Farming still a respectable gamble

There isn't much to do between planting and harvest on a small Nebraska farm.

Of course, you have to feed the stock. And some machinery probably needs fixing.

Maybe you can find a farm sale and get some equipment cheap.

Dick Janak won't do much today. It's a drizzly morning, and the

55-year-old Eagle farmer wears an old orange sweatshirt to protect sore joints from the chilly, damp air. He hasn't shaved yet.

Janak sets a couple of buckets in his mud-splattered Ford pick-up. He stares at the ground a minute and kicks a few black clods. Then he looks up and surveys his farm.

Elva Janak calls it the "garden spot." She and Dick farm 380 acres altogether, but the Eagle property is home.

There, the Janaks keep part of their white Charolais herd and grow some alfalfa, wheat and milo. There, too, is the turn-of-the-century white farmhouse that is beginning to show its age.

Inside, though, it's a cozy home that smells of warm velvet cake and lasagne. Elva says she doesn't like to cook much, but her kitchen is full of homemade goodies. At 9 a.m., she is working on Colleen's 18th birthday dinner.

Colleen is on the phone. She usually is. In the living room, her 19-year-old brother Doug lounges on the sofa in front of a video-taped soap opera.

The Janak home is comfortable. The rooms are filled with knick-knacks, scrapbooks and 4-H trophies. Elva's refrigerator is plastered with funny signs and cartoons, pictures of the kids and many newspaper clippings. There's Doug on the Waverly High School football team. There's Colleen at the State Fair.

Doug now works on a dairy farm seven miles from home. In January, he will start a diesel mechanics program at Southeast Community College in Milford.

Next year, Colleen also will leave the farm to study nursing. She'll miss her busy high school days, when every minute is spent at some practice, game or meeting.

And she'll miss her family — her father's shy smile, and the late-night chats with her mother at the foot of her bed.

Being a farmer's daughter has been hard work at times, Colleen said. But she wouldn't think twice about marrying a farmer.

"I've gone out with a lot of different types of guys," she said. "And I can always talk easier with the farm guys than the city guys."

"I don't think I could live in town," she said. "I like people when I'm around them, but at night, I like quiet here."

Dick said most young people couldn't make it in farming these days.

"It's too expensive," he said. "The only way young people can even think about farming is to take over what their dads have."

But the Janak farm won't go to Doug or Colleen. Doug said he never really wanted to be a farmer.

"It's a hard way to make a living — a hard life," he said. "I guess I'm too lazy."

"There's no bigger gambler than a farmer," Elva said. "...At least it's a respectable gamble."

Amid this happy clutter is posted a prayer: "God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change . . ."

It might be called a farmer's prayer.

Dick and Elva expect this fall's harvest to be their worst in 14 years of farming.

Spring rains forced them to plant late, and a dry summer stunted yield. Then an early frost nipped much of the grain that did grow.

The milo crop should be down about 50 percent this year, Elva said. At least 20 acres won't make it at all.

After expenses, the Janaks usually make \$15,000 to \$20,000 a year. This year, however, the family expects its income to drop 25 percent.

"There's no bigger gambler than a farmer," Elva said. "You bargain with the weather. Someone else dictates the prices."

"At least it's a respectable gamble," she said.

Despite their losses, the Janaks seem content. They figure good years will come. They've had good years before.

Both children of Butler County farmers, Dick and Elva bought their farm in 1959. They farmed some of the land themselves, and rented out the rest because they had jobs in Lincoln. Dick was a carpenter, and Elva was a registered nurse. In 1970, the Janaks decided to farm full-time.

During harvest and other busy times, the family is up at dawn and works until dark — often after dark, Dick said.

But the family makes time to enjoy the fun side of country life — the fairs, the kids' school events and "all the socializing there's time for," Elva said. In winter, when the farm can be left, the Janaks travel. A trip to Hawaii or a Caribbean cruise takes them away from the snowy cold.

The winters are starting to bother Dick. So are the long days and back-bending work.

"I don't work like I used to," he said. "Guess the arthritis is getting to me."

Dick is considering early retirement. He doesn't have plans yet, he and Elva probably will stay on the farm and rent out the fields. After the kids are gone, Elva might go back to work part time.

Dick said he doesn't worry about passing time in retirement. He said he will probably keep going to farm sales.

"There's been a lot of them the last couple of years," he said. "And there's going to be more."

So far, none of the Janaks' friends has had to sell out.

"But there's some we hear are in pretty bad shape," he said.

Small farming is risky, Janak said. It's hard to pay debts with only one good year in three or four.

"And there's always got to be a payday," he said. "You've got to use a little smarts — a lot of the younger people don't know when to quit spending."

— Ann Lowe

