



It's Saturday

It's Saturday in Franklin, and William Nielsen isn't about to spend the day as mayor of the south-central Nebraska town of 1,170.

Saturdays are for rest and relaxation. They are days that allow you to forget. Forget about the sagging farm economy. Forget about what the farm problems are doing to Franklin's businesses, which line the four-block main street of the town. Some already have closed, others could follow, as they have in many small Nebraska towns.

Nielsen said that after some morning business, he'll drive to Red Cloud for a gun show and then out to watch the sandhill cranes that make a yearly pitstop in Minden.

"Today isn't going to be all screwed up with problems."

It's Saturday in Franklin and Greg Choquette has been feeding livestock since 7:15 a.m. He and his father, Richard, have 1,780 acres of land and 400 to 500 head of cattle. While south-central Nebraska farmers are having problems paying debts and securing loans, Choquette said, he and his father are a couple of the lucky ones.

Despite his luck, Greg still might have to start teaching school this fall and farm only part time, if he can find a job, to support his wife and children.

Since graduating from UNL in 1983, Greg, who is in his mid-20s, has watched the value of land in the Franklin area drop from \$1,000 an acre to about \$450. Farmers have been forced to sell their land. The number of farm auctions has skyrocketed.

But Greg remains optimistic. Things will get better, he says as he savors his chewing tobacco. Government officials can't overlook the farmer forever.

"I can't see them beating on us for too long," he said, "unless they don't want to eat."

It's Saturday in Franklin and State Bank President William Slocum is working on an income tax report at his brick bank building on the northern edge of main street. Slocum has a tough job. Often, town residents despise the local banker — he is the bearer of bad news.

Local bankers must hand the farmer or businessperson the foreclosure papers or cut off loans. Slocum has done it, and he says it isn't fun.

But compared to other small-town bankers, Slocum said, his job is easy.

He estimated that only 3 percent of the Franklin-area farmers who were in operation last year will have to quit. He also said 90 to 95 percent of those seeking loans will receive them.

The Franklin State Bank is solid financially, he said. "It's an enviable position," he said.

The foreclosures have totaled about "half a dozen" in the past two years, he said. Most times, the borrower knows the foreclosure is coming.

But telling someone a loan has been denied is what makes the job difficult. "Nothing is 100 percent," he said.

If people can hang on, Slocum said, things will get better.

It's Saturday in Franklin and Bob and Lue Mallowney are preparing for another day at the Lincoln Hotel.

Lue will do bookwork, while Bob makes repairs. At noon, Lue will wait tables in the cafe, while Bob cashiers. Later, Bob will cook and tend bar.

The Mallowneys moved to Franklin in 1981 and reopened the 68-year-old hotel, which has 14 rooms, four apartments, a cafe and a bar. So far, business has been OK, they said.

While the hotel isn't making money, the cafe and bar are. Hard work will keep the hotel open, Bob said.

A walk through the hotel reminds visitors of Franklin's past. Antiques and worn carpet fill the hallways, and a 1947 Rock-Ola jukebox sits along the back wall of the wooden bar. It still plays 78's for a nickel, Bob said, boasting. In the entryway, a black antique stove greets visitors. Ann-Margret cooked on that stove, claims Lue.

The hotel preserves part of Franklin's past — good times and bad. Things will get better, Bob said. People just have to work hard.

It's Saturday in Franklin and Deb Gooder already has delivered two pieces of farm machinery for an auction in Gothenburg. He hopes to sell a car in the afternoon.

Gooder owns Case International. He sells Case International farm machinery and Pontiac cars. Sales have been slow because people don't have money to spend.

While new car and farm equipment sales are rare, Gooder says,