

Looking for love in dwindling farm country

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TULSA, Okla.—Until Rubert Kerl's wife left him two months before the couple's 35th wedding anniversary, the soybean and corn farmer thought his dating days were over. Then, sullen and down 20 pounds fretting over the breakup, Kerl, of Mazomanie, Wis., happened to see a notice in his local paper about a group for single farmers seeking a social life.

"You got to do something," he remembers telling himself.

The ad was his ticket to meeting an unattached farm girl. "It was love at first sight," Kerl, 75, says of Charlotte, 71, and before long they were married.

In recent years, dating services for people of different ages, interests and religious backgrounds have proliferated thanks to the internet.



In this April 13, 2013 photo, Elynor Stagen, of Gibson City, Ill., shares a laugh with Ed Erbes, of Sublette, Ill., during a Singles in Agriculture social event at the Silver Spur Dance and Reception Hall, in East Moline, Ill. Singles in Agriculture is a group for single farmers seeking a social life or even a spouse. Chapters are active in 11 farm states in the Midwest and West, each of which holds three to six social events a year. ((AP Photo/Matthew Holst))

But one of the most resilient groups of all goes back to the 1980s and focuses on an increasingly challenging niche: farmers in rural areas, whose numbers are shrinking with the farm population and who don't tend to live very close to others.

Today, the Singles in Agriculture group has several hundred members and holds get-togethers in rural communities for people who want to live on the land. The participants tend to be older than those in other singles groups and favor a style that's more small town and traditional.

The gatherings are "kind of like being in a small town ... and the common denominator is that farm history that helps everybody to blend in and kind of blurs the edges so we can all be friends," says member Cara Maschmeier, 53, who grew up on a 1,400-acre wheat and milo farm in the Oklahoma Panhandle.

Single farmers face an especially difficult task finding others like them. In recent years, many farm families have sold out to corporations and moved away; the rural population has been gravitating to the cities, leaving small towns to wither, cafes to close, social organizations to decline. Meeting people is harder than ever.

"Farming is not an easy life. Your (dating) pool is very small to begin with," said member Kevin Lilienthal, 50, who farms soybeans and corn on 160 acres near New Liberty, Iowa.

Many young people who leave the farm "never want to come back. Any type of relationship is just a challenge."

Singles in Agriculture at one time had a membership of around 1,600, but the demographic trends have taken their toll.

Chapters covering 16 states in the Midwest and West are active; each holds three to six social events a year.

The rules for the get-togethers are simple: No cussing, no drinking, no smoking. What's allowed: square-dancing, bowling, card games. Small-talk tends to run to commodity prices and hedging your grain crop, cow-milking equipment and combine maintenance.

While the organization doesn't exist strictly as a dating service, a fair number of single farmers have met their significant others through the group, mainly because they feel comfortable among like-minded folks.



Cara Maschmeier, who serves as secretary on the Singles in Agriculture national board, poses for a photo in Oklahoma City, Wednesday, March 27, 2013. ((AP Photo/Sue Ogrocki))

At gatherings, "you end up finding someone you never knew you were looking for," Maschmeier says. "You get so attached to these people. You hurt for the ones who are left, you hurt for the ones who are gone—everybody knows everybody else."

Donna Chumney, 58, of Burnet, Texas, saw an ad for the group in a co-op magazine, and eventually found her fiancé, Gerald Dorn, at a chapter meeting.

Dorn, who fancies himself "a very young 75," farms corn and soybeans in Nebraska, and has logged thousands of miles on his pickup driving the 750-plus miles between the couple's homes.

In Donna, Dorn said, he got "an over 6 feet tall, blonde, blue-eyed Texan."

He swept her off her feet by taking her to Iowa to see the bridges of Madison County and other sights.



In this April 13, 2013 photo, Glenn Ackeberg, of Lindon, Ill., talks with Pam Fjeld, of Mineral, Ill., during a Singles in Agriculture social event at the Silver Spur Dance and Reception Hall, in East Moline, Ill. Singles in Agriculture is a group for single farmers seeking a social life or even a spouse. Chapters are active in 11 farm states in the Midwest and West, each of which holds three to six social events a year. ((AP Photo/Matthew Holst))

Now he's thinking about a move south to consolidate operations.

"I very much could become a great Texan," he says, between picking cactus needles out of his arms after clearing brush on Chumney's property.

Roberta Statler-Meierotto, of Mount Pleasant, Iowa, met her second husband, Gilbert, through the club. He died in 2007, but Roberta refuses to close the door on the possibility of another husband with a farming background.

"I know what kind of lifesaver this group was to me, and I want to keep that going," she says.