

NATIONAL FARM FAMILY OF THE YEAR relaxes in the living room. Renea and Barbara, wife Tina, and sons Dennis and Eddy of their Hyde County, N.C. home. L. to R., Gerrit Boerema, daughters

National Farm Family of Year — A Story of Modern Pioneers

It has been a long time since America's farmers began their westward trek, opening new lands to agriculture while battling adverse conditions that would have made less hardy men give up in despair.

Gerrit and Tina Boerema, who visited Lancaster County recently, faced a different set of adverse conditions in 1949 when they began a westward trek from Holland to America, and these conditions, too, might have caused less determined people to give up.

Instead, the Boeremas clung to their belief that America offered them hope if they worked hard. As a result, they have been named "National Farm Family of the Year" by the Farmers Home Administration (FHA).

It's quite a success story that Gerrit and Tina have to spin. After graduating just prior to World War II from a Dutch University where he studied dairy husbandry, Gerrit worked on his family's 50-acre farm which supported his parents, five sisters and a brother. He knew his future was to be in agriculture; but in Holland, that future just didn't appear to be too promising.

DECIDE TO COME TO AMERICA

At the close of the war, land in Holland was selling for around \$3,200 an acre. Acreage was rarely available, and when it was, any piece of land attracted 125 to 150 bidders. Gerrit and Tina were married about this time and, realizing that opportunities in Holland were becoming more and more scarce, made the decision to come to America.

"We certainly didn't leave our homeland because of financial hardship," Gerrit recently said, "we just felt that America offered a good opportunity for us." Reflecting on this country's free society, he said "Communism was con-

stantly coming closer to us, and we felt sure that Communism would never come to America. At that time, many people in Europe felt the same way and they just wanted to get away from it."

They migrated from their native Holland while they were in their mid-twenties and anxious to see what the "new world" had to offer.

When the Boeremas first arrived, they were understandably homesick and, just to complicate matters, they couldn't speak English.

Tina tells of one of her first American "experiences": "We tried ordering from a menu once in a restaurant, but we really didn't know what we ordered until it came. And we couldn't stand it! Finally, we ordered from others plates—indicating to the waiter that we wanted some of this on this plate and some of that on that plate!"

Springfield, Mo., was their first home in America, where Gerrit had a job working on a dairy farm for a small wage, a free house, and a half share in a flock of chickens. After nine months, they moved to Minnesota where they settled on another dairy farm. Gerrit took a part time factory job, and for seven years, they worked hard, saved, and built for the future.

"HEAVENLY LAND"

The Boeremas always wanted to have their own

farm. Opportunity to realize this came through their active affiliation with the Christian Reformed Church. A newsletter mentioned that land was available in the Grassy Ridge section of Hyde County, N.C., in an area known as Terra Ceia — translated 'Heavenly Land' in their native Dutch language.

A trip to North Carolina convinced Gerrit that there was the opportunity he had been working for, and he moved his family to Tar Heel Country in 1957.

There was very little "heavenly" about the land they ultimately leased. It was marshland heavily covered with reeds and scrub pine. High in sand and organic matter, the low, black, tidewater soil requires tremendous amounts of lime to adjust the acidity. To make matters worse, wood from centuries of decay lay just under the surface, making tillage of any kind all but impossible. But, just as their Dutch ancestors had pulled back land from the sea, the Boeremas started to reclaim land from the useless marshes about them.

The first livestock they were able to acquire was seven dairy cows, a number they raised to

thirty within a year. "We didn't have any feed, so I looked everywhere to find peanut hay," recalls Gerrit. "And the cows lived on this until spring. We worked hard to get some pasture established and the cows used this pasture and helped clear the land of marsh reeds during the summer months."

Commercial credit was unobtainable; they simply didn't have the required collateral. The land wasn't worth anything unless cleared, and clearing land — leased at that — without heavy earth-moving equipment was a backbreaking, endless task.

FHA HELPS OUT

In 1959, ten years after coming to America, they turned to the government for help. And help came in the form of an operating loan from the Farmers Home Administration. FHA makes operating or land loans when, as was the Boeremas case, no other lending agency will take the risk. Using his dairy herd as collateral, Gerrit and Tina were approved for the loan that was the toehold they needed for success.

About the same time, the

land company that had leased them their tract offered to lend the Boeremas a considerable amount to purchase the 176 acres, and to equip their farm with the necessary machinery, livestock and fertilizer. Gerrit and Tina accepted.

Now four in number, the family worked hard to clear their land, often spreading the necessary lime by hand. Most of the work was manual labor, and the hardest chore was working the submerged wood free and burning it. Overcoming adverse conditions was a daily ritual. For instance, in the area it's not uncommon for more than a foot of rain to fall in a single 48-hour period. Such torrents can undo in two days what took months to build.

Yet, by 1962, the hard-working family, now with five members, had cleared the land and made it productive enough to qualify for a FHA land loan.

With the FHA behind them, and commercial credit sources giving them a second look, the Boerema family started building what is now one of the

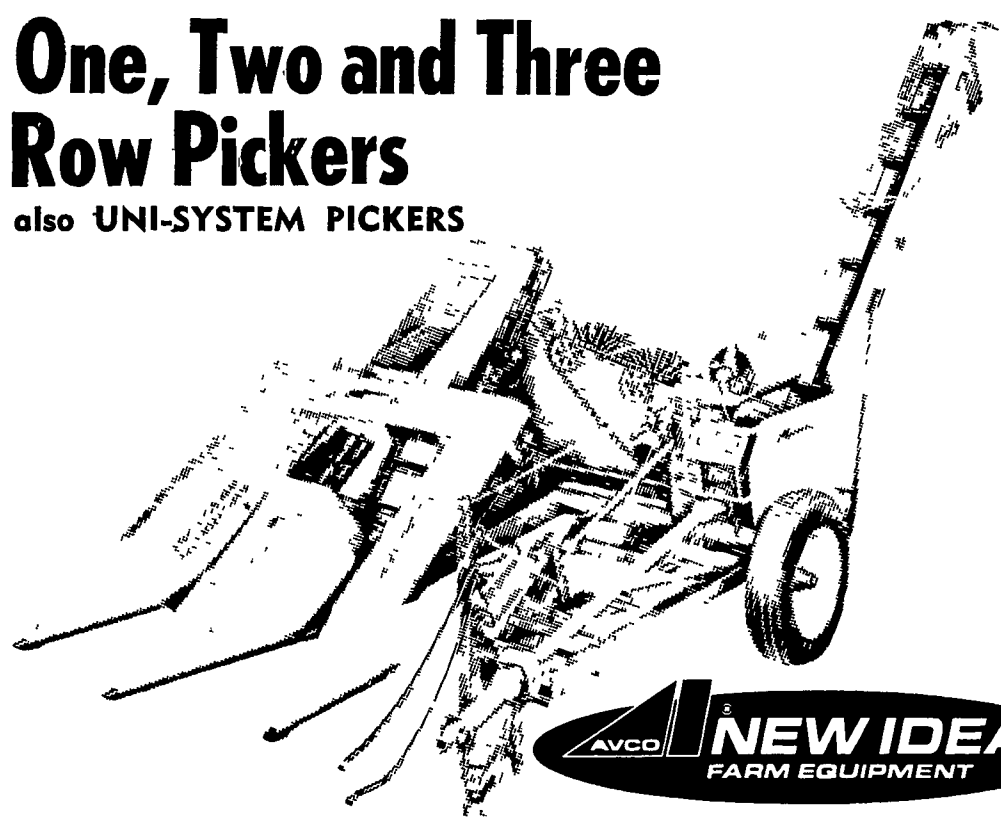
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MODERN FARM MACHINERY, self feeders and computerized record-keeping have made the Gerrit Boerema family farm one of the most successful dairy operations in North Carolina.

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