

Agriculture - A Metropolitan Cinderella?

Editor's Note:

While serving as western states vice president of the Newspaper Farm Editors of America, Terence L. Day, farm writer for the Tri-City Herald, undertook a personal campaign to get Washington's metropolitan newspapers to pay more attention to agriculture. One of the products was "Agriculture, A Metropolitan Cinderella."

The paper was published by the Cooperative Extension Service at Washington State University and received broad distribution within the state. We felt LANCASTER FARMING readers would be interested in Day's comments. Many of the things he says about Washington State are equally true of Pennsylvania.

In the early Christian era one full-time worker produced enough food and fiber to sustain himself and less than one other person. More than half of the world's workers were farmers. By 1850, American agriculture had progressed to the point where one farmer was producing enough for himself and four others. Then, progress really accelerated. In 50 short years, the figure nearly doubled to seven. Mechanization was beginning to free labor from the farm, triggering the migration to the cities.

In the next 40 years, the efficiency of the farm pushed the figure to 11. During the ensuing 20 years, by 1960, the figure had reached 26 and in 1970 it was 46. Estimates are that in 1971, one farm worker provided food and fiber for himself and 50 others. In the last 11 years alone, farmers increased their productivity as much as they did from the time of Christ until 1960!

Who benefits? Farmers, of course, if they're adept enough to stay in business. If they aren't, they lose their farms and move to Seattle, or Portland, or Chicago, or Detroit, or to some other urban center in search of employment. But the real beneficiary, the man who has gained the most, is the American consumer, two-thirds of whom live in urban areas and 95 percent of whom live in a city of one size or another.

How do they benefit? Well, that's an unpopular story which Agriculture Secretary Earl Butz is being castigated for telling. Our great agricultural progress has reduced food costs by 30 percent during the past 21 years. As a bonus, Americans also get a greater variety of food (hamburger helper) than they have ever enjoyed before, a higher standard of eating (twice as much beef), less kitchen drudgery (frosting-in-the-can), and more meals "out-on-the-town."

Agriculture has given America the lowest-cost food bill in the history of mankind—16 percent of disposable income in 1971, compared with 23 percent in 1950.

America's food bill in 1971 was \$118 billion—a whopping \$51.7 billion less than it would be if Americans still paid 23 percent of their income for food as they did in 1950.

That is \$51.7 billion which Americans spent for second cars, trail bikes, boats, stereophonic sound systems, fancy furniture, summer cottages, dishwashers, color television, and a host of other consumer goods. And how much is \$51.7 billion? It is \$15.1 billion more than the total value of all automobiles manufactured in the United States and of the distribution costs of all foreign-made automobiles sold in the United States in 1969! That is the size of the annual savings in America's food bill.

In other words, the unparalleled efficiency of the

American farm is one of the basic reasons for the high and still rising American standard of living, a principle difference between our standard of living and that of other countries. Englishmen spend 29 percent of their income for food, Italians 45 percent, and Indians 80 percent.

Were it not for the miracle of American agriculture, where would the nation have obtained its rising standard of living? Where would her citizens have gained the wherewithall to put dishwashers in 17.3 percent of their homes in 1970, compared with 4.9 percent of their homes in 1960? Only 12.8 percent of the nation's homes had air conditioning in 1960, but 20.5 percent enjoyed them in 1970. Only 17.4 percent of the nation's housewives had clothes dryers in 1960, but 40.8 percent enjoyed their luxury ten years later. Only 16.4 percent of the nation's families enjoyed two or more cars in 1960, but 29.3 percent had gained that standard of living in 1970. Color television wasn't reported in the United States Statistical Abstract in 1960, but a decade later it reported 29.3 percent of the nation's households watch television in color.

Certainly, there are other factors, such as more working wives, but without the \$51.7 billion a year Americans save on groceries, only a fraction as many Americans would be enjoying these and many more conveniences.

And this isn't all, at the same time that agriculture has done all of this for us, it has far more than doubled its output (which keeps prices low) and reduced the acreage on which its abundance is created. When America had but 107 million people, she farmed 350 million acres. Now, she farms fewer than 300 million acres. If the same number of acres per capita were required today to feed and clothe the nation, farmers would need to harvest more than 500 million acres AND STOP EXPORTING FOOD AND FIBER! A full fourth of the nation's farm acreage today produces food and fiber for export. The acres which modern agriculture has spared from production contribute greatly to our environment and to urban comfort. They provide wildlife and recreation opportunities and make possible the very existence of suburbs and super highways.

As S. W. Martin, an agricultural columnist, puts it, agriculture has not only spared her laborers for the city factory, but her land "for that nice golf club and community center . . . that convenient shopping mall, with adjacent hospital . . . that new quiet industry in the country between county seats . . . that comfortable parkway drive to

grandma's in three hours instead of the twisting, sapping six-hour pilgrimage of the 1940's."

Yes, agriculture truly has more to do with cities than with farms, more to do with urbanites than with farmers. As Archie A. Stone, writing in "Careers in Agribusiness and Industry," put it: "What is agribusiness? It is the world's biggest business, and the most essential. Everyone everywhere depends on agribusiness—all who eat, all who wear clothes, and all who live in houses." And, as William Jennings Bryan said 75 years ago, "the great cities rest upon our broad (plains) and prairies. Burn down your cities and leave our farm, and your cities will spring up again as if by magic. But destroy our farms and the grass will grow in the streets of every city in the country."

And what is agriculture's reward for all of this? J. Henri Fabre, the French entomologist and author, summed it up this way: "History . . . celebrates the battle fields whereon we meet our death, but scorns to speak of plowed fields whereby we thrive; it knows the name of the king's bastards, but cannot tell us the origin of wheat. That is the way of human folly."

Much the same thing could be said of today's metropolitan newspapers and of the television industry. At one point or another in relatively recent years, the mass media have decided that agriculture is no longer important because there aren't very many farmers any more. At least that is what one must conclude from the disappearance of farm editors from metropolitan newspaper staffs, and the token space which so many metropolitan newspapers give to agriculture.

In many respects, agriculture is Seattle's Cinderella, a little-seen, seldom-praised stepchild who toils unseen and unrewarded in the background while her more glamorous sisters (such as Boeing) claim the limelight. Here the analogy suffers a bit in that her more glamorous sisters are worthy workers, whereas Cinderella's step-sisters were drones. But the point is, agriculture works hard for King County's economy and receives little recognition or reward.

Economists recognize agriculture as Washington's largest industry. As the state's principal city, and financial center, Seattle plays a major role in the statewide industry. Her banks and insurance companies are the center for financing much of the state's agriculture; and as home or regional office for so many companies, Seattle is a major benefactor in the jobs which agriculture creates within the state.

Knowing just how many jobs

are created would be, not only interesting, but extremely valuable to the state, the county, and the city. Yet, incredibly, state departments have no idea of how many urban jobs are generated by agriculture in this state or its political subdivisions, nor can they estimate the dollar impact of agriculture on the state's economy.

The state's largest industry apparently is without measurement, and without knowledge of her dimensions, how can she be best utilized to the state's advantage? What enormous potential may lie untapped and unsuspected by those who would create jobs and improve Washington's (and Seattle's) economy?

Washington's farm products in 1971 were worth about \$940 million, and when food and feed processing are added, the agricultural industry produced about \$3 billion a year. A joint Washington State University, University of Washington study indicated about 25 percent of all jobs in Washington are directly or indirectly related to agriculture. Some are jobs on the farm; most are in cities or in towns.

Dr. James Nielson, director of WSU's Agricultural Research Center, says: "Agriculture is the biggest industry in the state. Contrary to what some people imagined, it continued to be the biggest business in Washington even during the height of the Boeing boom."

Some idea of the impact of agriculture is gained from the Columbia Basin Project where irrigation has increased the population of that region twenty times. It would take a sophisticated scientific study to determine how many jobs that creates in King County, but surely no one would deny that there is an impact. Metropolitan areas grow with the entire region

they service, and feed on. The jobs farm development in Washington creates in Seattle are at the ports, in the transportation industries, in banks, insurance companies, petroleum, services and many other areas.

But now, how about your primary interest, King County?

The Port of Seattle calculates more than 6,190 port-related jobs tied to agricultural exports. That isn't as dramatic as Boeing, but it is worthy of considerable attention in and around Seattle. The 500 jobs which Peter Fisher, vice president, Fisher Mills, Inc., Seattle, reports directly employed by his firm may be included in that figure. Another major source of farm-related jobs in Seattle is the Western Farmers Association.

In addition to these, a hasty search of the Seattle telephone directory's yellow pages reveals at least 256 agriculturally-oriented firms. They range from agricultural consultants to food brokers, from farms to food processors, from farm equipment dealers to agri-chemical companies.

How many jobs do they provide in King County? It must be a tremendous number.

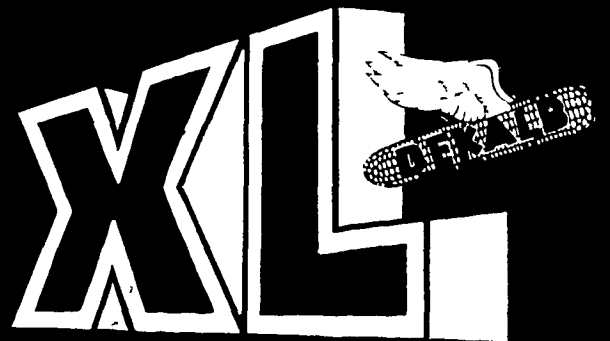
According to the Seattle-Everett Labor Market report of the Washington State Employment Security Department, agricultural employment in the Seattle-Everett area averages 5,700 jobs a year, fluctuating between 3,800 and 11,700 jobs. For our purposes, the report is fatally weak because it makes no attempt to ascertain what other jobs depend upon agriculture.

For instance, the report also lists an average of 10,000 jobs in "manufacturing, food, and kindred products." All of those jobs obviously are tied to agriculture. (For example, if the product to be processed is grown in the Yakima Valley, then the people who hold those jobs have a vested interest in the health of the agricultural economy of the Yakima Valley.)

The report also lists an average of 4,600 jobs in paper and allied products. Since we literally farm

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