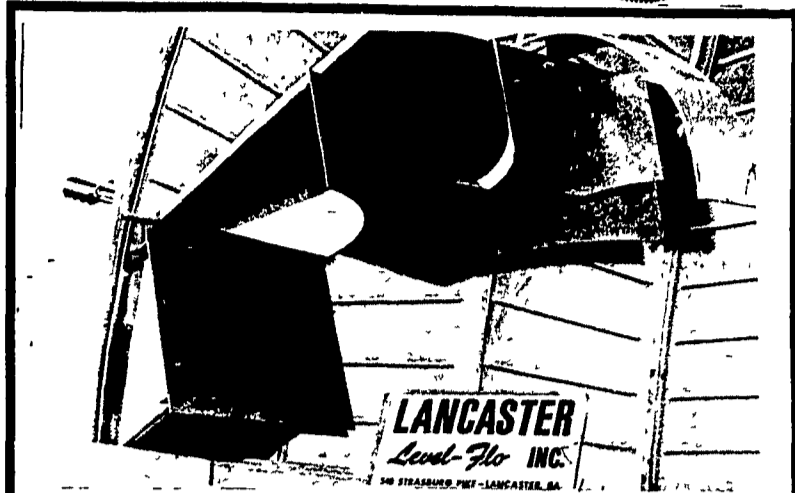


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## The Dairy Worker's Image

There's a lot that can be done to improve the mental picture of dairy work.... and it could provide dividends to dairy operators in their search for good workers.

Needed: better labor management on dairy farms.

That's one of the indications from interviews with nearly 200 dairy farm workers and operators in New York State, the Nation's third largest milk producer.

The interviews were part of a USDA study into job images in dairy farming—a study brought about by farmers' complaints that they are having increasing trouble finding good dairy workers.

"We're on the threshold of an era when we have to pay attention to the fact that farmers are having to compete with industry for workers," comments the rural sociologist who headed up the study.

"In the Northeast, the reservoir of farm-raised people is declining. Manufacturing is dispersed so that everyone is able to commute to a non-farm job.

When it comes to attracting and keeping employees, dairy work had two big assets that the employees didn't believe they'd find in comparable nonfarm work: a sense of involvement in their jobs and a feeling that their work was interesting. In fact, 85 percent said they'd pick the same career all over again.

On the other hand, both employers and employees on dairy farms agreed cash pay was lower, hours longer, and vacations shorter than for comparable nonfarm jobs. The "comparable jobs" they cited included mechanic, construction worker, and truck driver.

Answers differ. But while employers felt shorter hours, higher pay, and more fringe benefits were the best workers, employees concentrated on items that involved better labor management, an answer that employers put forth on their list.

Very few of the workers interviewed had any specific understanding with their employers on the way they'd get paid, on pay raises, on what work they were to do, on fringe benefits, sick leave, incentive plans, and bonuses.

Operators tended not to like to supervise employees... and tended not to pay much attention to it, which led to misunderstandings and conflicts among employees and between the employee and employer.

Although agriculture is generally characterized by a lack of formal structure in the work force, perhaps nowhere is this more evident than in this study of medium and large dairy farms in New York State.

There were no written contractual agreements between employers and employees, and oral agreements were extremely varied in content. Job titles and job content were not standardized.

Part of the problem. This lack of structure was responsible for a number of the problems plaguing dairy employers, the study reported.

For instance, while most of the operators interviewed had fewer than three employees, and consequently should have little personnel turmoil, more than half said they'd had such problems as jealousy among workers over assignments or pay

differentials, attempts of one to boss another, personality conflicts, and conflicts among wives and families of workers.

Dairy farm operators said they felt less equipped to handle these problems than any of the others they faced as farm operators or as members of their communities.

Another finding was that farmers tended to regard workers as part of the family or as neighbors and to look after them, helping them in emergencies—an attitude that modern workers tended to resent, considering it paternalistic.

So where does a farmer turn for guidance on better management practices?

The study conceded that most successful models for labor organization and management are really set up for large companies.

Farms slighted. "The investigation of small firms in commerce and industry or farms with small numbers of hired workers in agriculture has been slighted," the sociologist commented in the study.

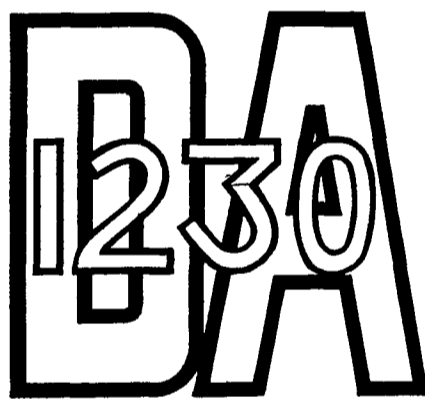
However, a similar study of California dairy farms shows that greater reliance on standards and organization have shown some signs of success there.

A typical California dairy farm rarely involves any more workers than those in New York, but in Southern California, written contracts between employers and employee unions are the rule.

Spell it out. These contracts specify wage rates based on a complex formula allowing for variations in number of cows milked, type of barn, or milking equipment. Job titles are specific, and some of the responsibility of labor supply management is assumed by the unions.

(Continued On Page 18)

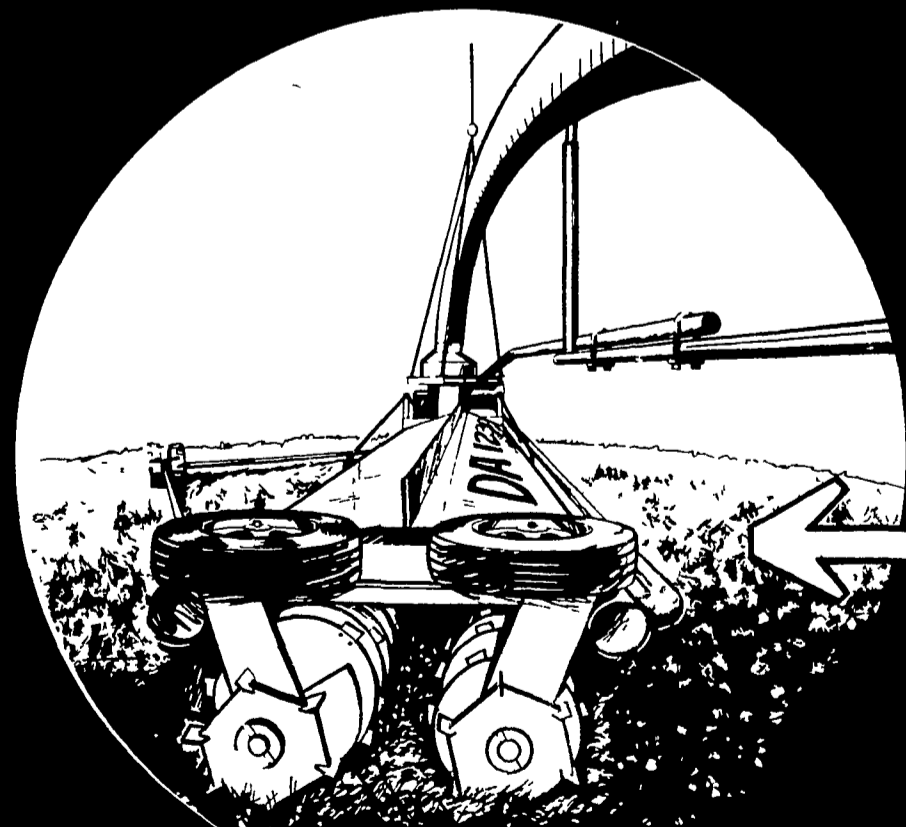
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