

And I Will Give Him [Continued from Page 1]

practices must reduce soil erosion to a level no higher than that which would occur if the land were not being farmed.

Soil erosion will soon be against the law, and this may well be reason enough for many non-conservative farmers to install conservation practices. Conservationists have long held, though, that there are even more compelling reasons to prevent erosion. Topsoil is a precious resource, and it cannot be recovered once the rains have carried it away. Topsoil is the source of the farmer's income. If it goes, so does the income. Soil stewardship, the holy duty to maintain and carefully husband the soil is another conservationist's argument.

While these arguments may reach the conservative mind, they do not bear on the central question about the July 1, 1977, deadline. Is the imposition of conservation the will of God or the will solely of the state? And if it is solely the will of the state, does it go against the will of God? Those who bend to the will of the state - who resign themselves to the mark of the beast - will they find themselves the victims of God's wrath? These are questions not to be taken lightly, for who among us would sell his immortal soul for a diversion terrace or a sod waterway?

This is not the place to argue for or against particular interpretations of the Bible. If they are right who say that the world is about to be destroyed in a storm of Supreme wrath, then conservation doesn't make any sense. It also doesn't make any sense to put money in the bank, or to buy seed, or feeder pigs, or to plant crops this spring or to have children.

If, on the other hand, these prophecies were meant for some far distant tomorrow, then conservation does make sense, just as tilling the soil makes sense, just as having children makes sense. We can't say whether or not the end is near. We can only hope, even arbitrarily assume, that it is not. And under that assumption, we must believe that conservation, whether or not mandated by state law, is good for agriculture.

Conservative farmers aren't by any means united on their thinking about conservation. More are indifferent than are opposed, but there are some who definitely favor farm conservation. Lancaster Farming talked to one of those farmers not long ago, the owner of a rather hilly but fertile 100 acres in eastern Lancaster County. "John Martin" is not that farmer's real name, but it's the one we'll use here because he didn't want his real name used.

Two government agencies, the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Soil and Conservation Service (SCS) and the Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Resources (DER), are mainly responsible for seeing that farmers comply with the conservation laws. Martin feels there's bound to be a clash between SCS and DER on the one hand and conservative farmers on the other.

"The average old order farmer won't even try to learn what the SCS and DER are after," Martin said. "These farmers won't sit down and read about how to do conservation, they've got to be shown how to do it, and they've got to be told why they should do it."

Martin feels there are two main schools of conservative thought on the 1977 deadline. "A lot of our farmers feel they have until 1977 to pull up roots and move out. Those that aren't thinking of leaving plan to keep on farming, but they're not going to put in conservation practices. They say they won't have to because there aren't enough jails to hold all the farmers who won't comply with the law. I myself think conservation is a good idea, and a few of us are way ahead in doing things for ourselves. But I do think the state is going to end up moving the deadline back. And even though some of our farmers are against conservation now, I think many of them will change their minds in the years ahead. I certainly hope so."

That Martin is a firm believer in conservation is evident from a tour of his field. "When we came here in 1963, this farm had just about every problem in the book. I put in contour strips, grass waterways and diversions every hundred feet. I still have some problems, but the farm's in a lot better shape than it used to be."

Nearly all of Martin's conservation planning has been a do-it-yourself project. His two main tools are his plow and a sighting level he bought for a dollar many years ago. "Erosion control doesn't have to be elaborate or expensive," Martin said. "The farmer can do most of his own work with his plow and level, if he gets just a little instruction on using the level. Erosion control is just a matter of having water move so slowly it doesn't carry silt with it."

"Farmers should resist the people who want to say which conservation practice passes and which doesn't pass. A lot of us feel that some of the things the government wants us to do are about as hard as getting water to run uphill."

Martin maintains that the SCS philosophy is geared towards big farm operations with huge fields and mechanized equipment. He feels that farmers who do their fieldwork with teams of horses or mules aren't able to adopt SCS plans as readily as those who use tractors. While this fact may be a stumbling block to conservation efforts, it is nowhere near as important, Martin feels, as the deliberate no-change policy which is at the very root of conservative philosophy. Because conservation planning is a change, many conservatives feel that conservation is against them.

"But if these farmers could only see how much conservation can do for them, if they're allowed to do their own work without spending a lot of money, then they might go along with it. Especially if they think it will help keep away the outsiders and the big equipment."

How can the conservative farmer be convinced that conservation is in his own best interests, we asked Martin. Would it help if influential bishops spoke out in favor of conservation? "Oh, that won't happen," Martin said. "Bishops are peacemakers and they may hardly suggest these things. Bishops keep their influence by finding the most peaceful solution to any conflict. And since there are two different ways of thinking about conservation, the bishops must find a middle way."

Well, then, who will the conservative farmers listen to? Vo-

ag teachers perhaps? "Well, probably not. There's a class of conservative people and there's a class of educated people. And there's a fence between them. Teachers are educated. Some, like Bob Herr at Garden Spot try to understand our side, but not too many conservatives are willing to look across the fence. One reason conservatives keep to themselves is that some of us feel inferior, in some ways. We're dirty and close to the soil, we don't have a lot of education and we work very hard. It's a hard fence to cross."

Those who are members of conservative orders are considered "English" people, Martin pointed out. "Some of our people think the English are trying to force conservation on us because they want us to move out. Some think the English are against us because we stand in the way of progress. But I don't agree. I think the English people want us to stay. It's just a matter of getting the message across the fence."

What do Martin and other conservatives think about the trend towards bigger farms? "Most of us still think we're better off with small family operations than we would be if we had a lot of investment in a big operation. We think a lot of English farmers are top-heavy with equipment and other investments, and that's why a lot of them have to sell out. Conservatives hardly ever sell out because of their debts."

"When a conservative farmer buys a piece of land, he tries to see that it stays in the family. But the new laws might change that tradition. Some farmers might sell out rather than put in conservation practices."

Martin has been encouraged by the response recently of English people to the call for maintaining more open space, and slowing the absorption of farmland by growing communities. "I think it would be a good thing, in some ways, if the government would tell farmers they could only sell their land to other farmers, not developers. But we've got to remember that when government gets a finger into something, they've soon got the whole hand in."

"I think we need laws to protect the farmer, and maybe we need some other laws changed, like the inheritance tax laws. I think the average conservative farmer would like to see farmland stay in farming, but no farmer wants to make a big investment if the government tells him he doesn't own his land so much anymore."

As the interview concluded, Martin consulted some notes he had written earlier. These notes summarized his thinking on some of the more basic points of conservation, land use and farming in general, and they are presented here.

"The true lover of rich land will want to see the land remain in agriculture. He won't want to see it covered with asphalt or concrete. He won't mind selling to another farmer for less than he could get from a developer."

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" - Old order conservatives want to see our culture survive. We'd like to see it continue here, and if not here, then elsewhere. We feel we have a good, spiritually sound, up-building way of life.

" - Government can interfere with our way of life, but the same government can protect it.

" - Our way of life helped make the nation what it is today, more so than many government officials realize.

" - Industry and development should be located on land that isn't suitable for anything else. There's lots of open space like the coal regions where even trees grow poorly.

" - The farmer should be allowed to make a profit. Let the laws of supply and demand rule, and the farmer will make a profit. It's been proven by history that he will.

" - Farmers should realize that they do still own the land and that government won't take it away from them.

" - This land can feed ten times as many people as we're feeding now. People might have to eat less meat and more vegetable proteins, and they might have to spend a greater share of their income on food, but we can feed them. We old order farmers will gladly produce whatever the market calls for as long as we can make a profit.

" - If the family farmer is left on the land, he'll be able to produce food cheaper than the big conglomerates can.

" - If the government ever decides against the family farmer, consumers will have to pay more for their food."

(Editor's note: This is the fifth in a series of conservation case histories, detailing local farmers' experiences with conservation practices. In this series, we hope to examine a variety of conservation plans and opinions.)

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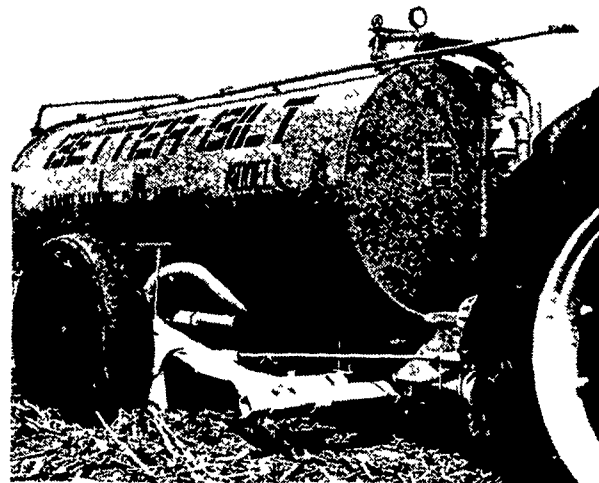
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