

Farm Talk

Jerry Webb

Transferring a family farm from one generation to another is not as simple as waiting for the older generation to retire or die.

Farming is a complicated business that requires skill, understanding, dedication, and experience. And in most farming situations, that develops through a father-son arrangement.

That's been a tradition in agriculture for many generations as farms are passed from one generation to the next with at least one son or son-in-law always

being available to take over the farming operation. There are farms here in the mid-Atlantic area that have been in the same family for more than 200 years.

If this method for passing the farm from one generation to another has been going on so long, you'd think it would be working pretty well. Maybe in most situations it is. But recently some farmers have been speaking up about their dissatisfaction with the plan, or lack of plan, for handing

over the farm responsibilities.

It's kind of like going against motherhood to say anything about father-son farming arrangements. It's part of the American way of life, and for many farmers it's their great dream to develop a working farm and have a son grow up as part of that farm, work into the business and then take it over when the father decides it's time to retire.

Sounds like a good idea, but some farmers are realizing that at least in today's complicated farming operations, the old ways may leave something lacking. And so they're speaking out for better arrangements.

A young man who grows up on a farm and wants to farm is usually encouraged by his father to become part of the business. He's given some livestock at a young age to take care of, or perhaps a piece of ground is turned over to him. Then as he proves himself, Pop may expand the business by

adding some acres or taking on a new enterprise so there will be enough work for everyone and a decent living for all concerned.

By the time this youngster reaches manhood there's an agreement, written or otherwise, as how the work will be handled, who pays the bills, who shares what expenses, and how future plans will be made. By the time Pop is ready to retire, the next generation is well established and ready to get on with the business of running the farm.

That's the ideal situation. But now some farmers are saying that what they wind up with is not just that.

Young farmers tell of promises that are not kept, of working for years at very low wages, and then being expected to buy out the parents at full value when they reach retirement.

Other farmers tell of the difficulty of getting along with parents; or looking at it another way, the problem the parents face when the young farmer wants to move

ahead too fast and take what seem to be unwarranted risks.

Few of us are given the opportunity to choose our relatives and certainly this applies to sons or daughters who might become farming partners.

Why should a young man become a good working partner simply because he was raised on that farm?

Maybe it's expecting a lot for him to spend a large chunk of his life as his father's helper and then have to buy him out at retirement time.

Likewise, it may be expecting a lot for a father to give away the business he spent a lifetime developing just because he's 50 years old. It may be equally difficult for Pop to share decision making, or turn over an important enterprise to a son that he still thinks of as being a boy.

Then the problem is complicated by a young farmer's wife who is sud-

denly brought into the business and who is not blinded to the false hopes and inequities. She must suit her husband, her husband's parents, and maybe even other brothers and sisters and still try to be herself.

She must raise her children the way her mother-in-law would, while at the same time being a farmhand for her husband, a bookkeeper for the family business, and a spokesperson in community activities. Not an easy task.

It's a miracle to me that so many father-son farming operations work. It says a lot about the integrity and character of farmers. And the fact that some farmers, both farmers and sons, are talking about problems is not altogether bad. To me it means there are some inequities that need to be rectified, and the place to start is through discussion.

The next step is probably some kind of written agreement between all parties involved so that it's clear what is expected.

Not many people would enter a business partnership without written guidelines, and perhaps farmers are expecting too much when they develop a father-son farming operation on faith, promises, and expectations.

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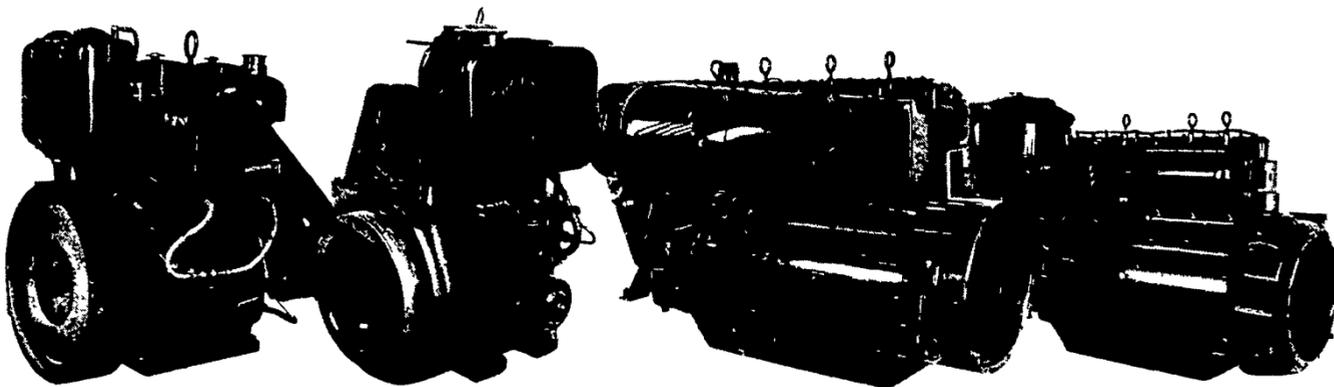
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