

Farm Talk

Jerry Webb

Secretary of Agriculture Bob Bergland set off a big round of discussion about the future of the family farm in a series of "structures" meetings held over the past several months.

What was said at those meetings would fill volumes, but it boils down to an outcry for agricultural policy that preserves the family farm tradition.

That covers a lot of territory and ranges from seemingly absurd suggestions aimed at limiting farm size and farm ownership, to credit systems that make it easier for the family farmer to get started or to hang on.

The family farmer has been at the heart of America's food producing mechanism for many generations, but some feel he's an endangered species. He's defined as a farmer, who with the labor of his own family operates a complete production unit. These units have continued to decline in number and increase in acreage and income.

Today, no more than two percent of the population farms the land and many of those must be defined as larger-than-family farm units.

The old traditional family farm emerged from the horse era as a viable agricultural unit. A farmer

and his wife along with several children could till the land, care for the livestock, produce most of their own needs, and survive with little or no hard money income. The necessities of life that could not be grown on the farm were bartered for with eggs, chickens, and canned goods. Those things that could only be purchased most generally were done without.

Such units survived depressions, recessions, world wars, stock market crashes and other phenomena, and when prosperity finally did come to agriculture in the post-World War II period, they were ready and willing to share in it.

As horses were replaced with small tractors and then with bigger tractors, and as thrashing machines yielded to combines, small family farms began to grow. Retiring farmers were bought out by their neighbors and farmers competed against each other for rental acres.

During the "hard times" period of American agriculture, when there was little or no money and plenty of backbreaking labor, most kids who grew up on a family farm quickly moved on to something else. But then with mechanization and prosperity, the family

farm became a more attractive alternative for farm-reared youngsters.

So, family farms grew as more and more family members became part of the business. Through all that, the out-migration from agriculture continued. The masses of farm workers from the horse and hand labor agriculture of the turn of the century yielded a lot of people to urban employment and other progress became accepted.

Believe it or not, farmers were slow to adopt much of the new fangled labor-saving ways. First of all because they had no money and the new machines were quite expensive, and secondly because they had plenty of family labor. Why buy a tractor when you had plenty of horses and plenty of kids to handle them?

But eventually farmers did replace the horses and the tractors got bigger and better, and the family farmer who started farming on 80 acres back in the thirties now tilled several hundred acres, maybe even several thousand, with no more than one or two helpers.

So the family farm as recalled from the 1930s is gone. Like many other institutions of that period, it adjusted or died.

Today's family farm is larger, better equipped, and better financed even though it still operates mostly on family labor. But that may not be enough to keep it going in the decade ahead, considering the tremendous economic pressure that is being exerted.

What family farmer can pay a million dollars for a moderate sized farm, \$100,000 for a combine, or \$50,000 for a tractor?

What family farmer can continue to bring his offspring into the business to assure continuity and continued growth?

There are many who consider the family farmer an endangered species and who are plotting ways to preserve its existence. Some of those ways are extreme, ill-conceived and probably unconstitutional, but they do point toward a very basic premise in American agriculture—the importance of the family farm and its preservation.

Do we truly believe in this and if so, what can we do to assure its continuance?

These are big questions that will be debated at great length in the years ahead.



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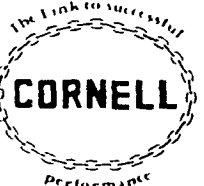
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