

Farm Talk

Jerry Webb

Farmers are gamblers. That's what I've always heard. They're willing to bet against Mother Nature, Uncle Sam, the landlord, and almost anyone else, that despite the odds they can still come out on top.

Yes, I've always heard that farmers are big gamblers and I accepted the philosophy and the comparison without question, because I had never really seen a gambler. At least, not until I passed through Reno, Nevada a few weeks ago as part of a cross-country vacation.

The experience was unreal, unlike anything I had ever seen or even anticipated. Thousands and thousands of people thronged into these casinos, bellying up to the slot machines and crowding around the gaming tables. Hour after hour they sat, or stood or leaned, pouring their hard-earned money into hungry machines that seemed to consume it all and regurgitate nothing. Or they stacked it on green covered counters where fast talking dealers raked it up with long sticks.

For as long as I could stand it, I watched a cross section of Americana gamble what they could with a sort of self-destructing

determination that kept them there long past their normal bedtime.

casinos never close and that people stay there for days in those gaming rooms without ever checking into a hotel or getting a full night's sleep.

If farmers are gamblers, I reckoned there would be some stereotypes I would recognize. So I watched for similarities. There were the big talkers who could be heard for considerable distances, usually crowded around crap tables, harrasing the other players and hoping for miracles.

"Let it ride," seemed to be their byword.

Then there was the happy-go-lucky type who gladly poured silver dollars into a slot machine and considered the watchful eye of a curious tourist as a good luck omen. He won and he lost, and he won some more, and he never lost his sense of humor.

You could be sure he wasn't pouring the rent money into that piece of junk.

There was the cautious little lady who played Twenty-One with all the reckless abandon of a Calvin Coolidge. She always bet two dollars and would stick on 14 or 15, hoping the dealer

would go bust. She almost always won.

There were winners and losers in those great games of chance, and it was easy to tell the difference. The losers that glum expressionless look on their faces as they went through motions of trying to win. Occasionally, one would be totally defeated and would be led away in shock or in tears.

Some are more determined and more opportunistic than others. I watched one would-be millionaire running three nickle slot machines at the same time. It was like an assembly line. She walked from one to another, inserting nickles and pulling handles.

She so fascinated me that I checked back two or three times and never found her money pail to be overflowing.

We looked for big-time gamblers in Reno, Virginia City, Lake Tahoe, even Las Vegas. And we saw these same types and a few more. And I guess some of them were like farmers, or maybe farmers are like them.

Maybe farming is just a big gamble, but I don't think so. It's my conviction that what most farmers do has an element of risk involved, but virtually no element of gamble.

I'm also convinced that those farmers who think they are gambling should be told that the dealer has loaded dice.

Consider the South Dakota rancher I talked with who was ready to go to market with a lot of beef on a couple of different occasions when the administration opened up the door on imported beef and killed the price.

What about the corn farmers who could see a nice profit at the end of the

season only to find a Russian grain embargo thrust upon them?

Even now, the uncertainty about dry weather and the potential size of the crop causes markets to fluxuate and growers to gain and lose hope.

Now that I've seen gamblers up close—thousands of them—I'm sure I don't want to be one and I'm sure there's a big difference between gambling and risk-taking.

Perhaps there are farmers who are out-and-out gamblers. They bet their money and they roll the dice and they take what comes up. Those kind probably lose a lot more than they win. But risk-taking farmers have a well thought and properly financed system. Barring

the unforeseen, they expect to win.

Having observed farming

for many years and gambling for only a few nights, I'm convinced I'd rather be farmer.

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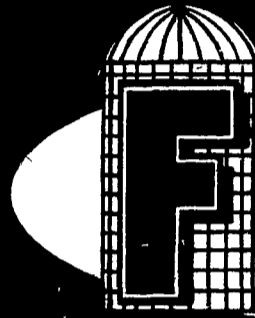
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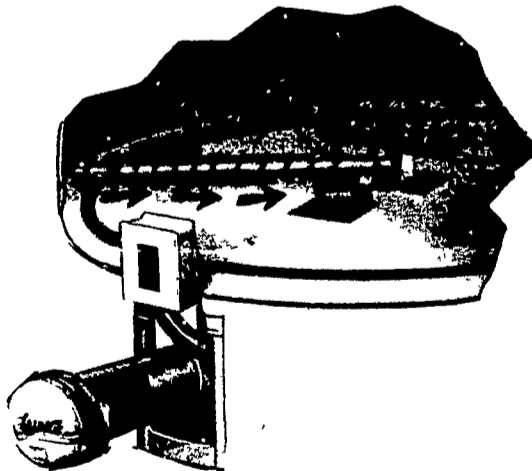
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