

Farm Talk

Jerry Webb

The most efficient way to feed more than 200 million Americans and millions more foreigners would be from the production of a few large farms, but I don't think

that's ever going to happen. At least not as long as Americans cling to the principles of democracy and free enterprise.

You can look around in

some other industries and quickly realize that a handful of companies produce virtually all of the products.

Auto manufacturing is a good example. There probably aren't more than 20 companies worldwide manufacturing virtually all of our automobiles. I read something recently where an expert was predicting that no more than seven of those automakers would survive into the next century.

Auto making, like so many other industries, started out as a backyard business with a lot of shade-tree mechanics tinkering around with old buggies trying to make them self-propelled. As they succeeded and in-

dustry grew, it was characterized by fewer and fewer brands.

Today, in this country, we have the big three and a couple of smaller firms and some of them won't make it into the next century.

But in agriculture, things are different. An economist could probably demonstrate how a few large farms, well-managed and highly mechanized, would be more efficient and would in fact produce more food. On paper, that plant might look quite impressive, but in practice I don't think it would work. And, in fact, it has no chance to work because of the millions of Americans who cling to a built-in, burning desire to farm.

They farm despite economic adversity and better opportunities. They farm long past retirement age even though they don't need the money because they'd rather do that than anything else. They even struggle to get into farming at a time when land prices are outrageous and farm profits are minimal.

Small farmers are here to stay even though their ever-expanding big farm neighbors would like to have their ground and some theorists think the farm system would work better without them. They're here to stay because they like to farm and they're willing to make the sacrifices necessary to stay in it.

In our area farmers have the best of both worlds and maybe at the same time the worst of both. They can cling to their relatively inefficient farming activities by working off-farm jobs that are usually available within relatively easy commuting distance. And while they complain about the encroachment of suburbia, they enjoy the inflated land prices caused by non-farm demand.

When it gets right down to it, many of the small farmers are pretty much immune to the adversities of agriculture in general. Sure, they suffer in a dry year and their prosperity goes up and down with the futures market. But 10 bad years in a row and you'll still find them out there farming, getting what they can from

the land, and paying the bills with off-farm employment. They have no intention or desire of giving up the land and moving to town, even though they may spend most of their waking hours in urban employment and job-related travel.

Given a choice between a run-down farm 50 miles from where they work and a nice home in a development right across the street from the plant, they'll stick with the land.

When you consider sources of income, farming is a parttime business throughout this country because farm families actually earn more from off-farm sources than they do from farming. That's a documented fact, and it simply means that farm families with one or more members working away from the farm and considering investments, savings accounts, and other sources of revenue actually earn more from those other sources than they do from the farm.

Maybe that helps explain why in some of the past disastrous farm years, farmers have been able to get themselves together and go back again for another try.

Some farmers do fail, and some do give up and move to town, and others retire and go to Florida, but at the same time there is a growing list of

people who would like to farm. Many of them have had no previous farm experience. These would-be farmers have their hopes and dreams and they're out there scratching around trying to figure out how to get started. And I'm convinced that some of them will make it.

Big-time farming may be the dream of a lot of people in agriculture, but it's a reality for a relative few. The 5000 acre spreads are fairly rare, especially in the mid-Atlantic area, and some that do exist aren't all that profitable. There also seems to be a point of diminishing return when it comes to agriculture. A farm can't just continue to grow and continue to be more efficient.

Maybe that growth concept works in some other industries, but not in agriculture.

So don't expect super farms to take over in the next couple of decades. Small farmers will have to be reckoned with for years to come. They may be producing a decreasing share of our food, but they'll continue to be an important factor in future farm policy and other rural considerations. And I wouldn't be at all surprised to see a strong resurgence of small activity during the next few years.

USDA to consider price before calling grain reserve

WASHINGTON, D.C. — Secretary of Agriculture Bob Bergland has announced a change in the farmer-owned reserve program which will give the Secretary discretion to consider short-term price aberrations before calling reserves. "Until now, reserves would be called automatically if the five-day moving average price exceeded the call level for five consecutive days. With this change, the Secretary has the discretion not to call reserves if the daily adjusted

average price for any of the previous five days is below the call point," Bergland said. "This applies even if the five-day moving average price exceeds the call level for the required five days."

"This will give additional flexibility to avoid calling reserve loans in cases when erratic market forces push up market prices temporarily," Bergland said.

The regulations making this change were filed with the Federal Register on the morning of December 8.

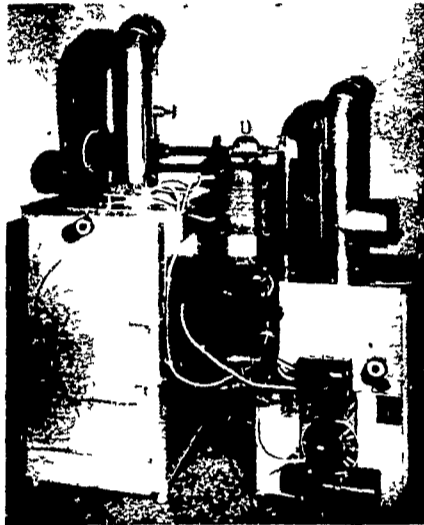
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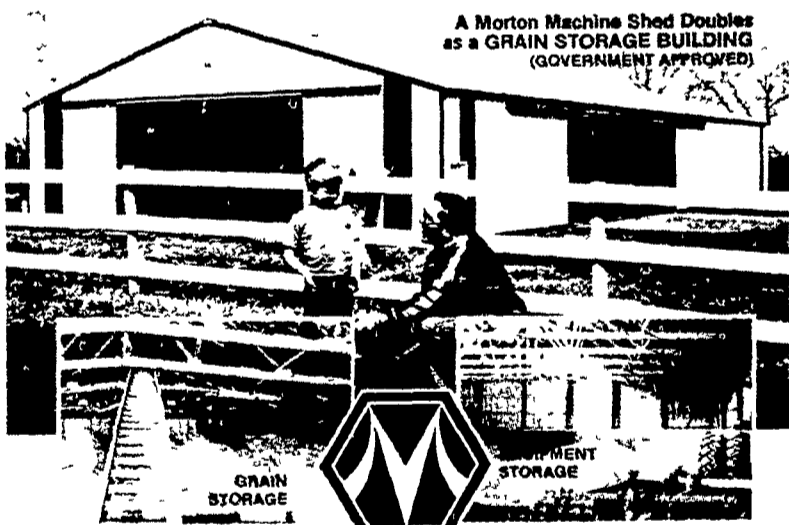
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