



Farm Talk

by
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Vacant farmhouses mean fewer farmers

There is something sort of sad about a vacant farmhouse. Not that a vacant city dwelling is any great joy—but in the city, if it's a recent house, someone will move in shortly. In the country when a farmhouse stands empty it means a change. A farmer has been replaced, his land taken over by someone else and his house and perhaps even his farm buildings no longer needed.

They don't shoot displaced farmers and they don't tear down their homes right away. No, instead it's a very slow process—those vacant farm buildings you see scattered around farm country have probably been empty a long time. Slowly they've gone through the transition from the com-

fortable, well-kept farmstead they once were to the rural ruin they have become.

The ones that stand empty now were probably never showplaces, but they were adequate farm dwellings in their time. But then through death or displacement—call it process—that little 80-acre farm with all its buildings became part of a larger neighboring farm. The new owner used the barns and rented the house for a while. But that wasn't very handy and it was hard to find good renters and the house was starting to need repair.

So the new owner, who by now owned 3 or 4 of these small farms, developed one central farmstead on his home place. All the others were left for occasional storage

and to whatever fate time, weather and vandals had in store.

At first it was a broken window, then some tin blown off the barn roof. And the paint that was so badly needed never came. Then the doors started sagging and the front porch fell down and one Halloween some kids set the barn on fire.

And so it goes. A once proud farmstead stands in ruin waiting for the final insult—a bulldozer or a torch to end its misery.

The heavily populated East has a minimum of these agricultural derelicts. There are so many people who want to live in the country and who are willing to fix up or put up with a house in less-than-perfect condition. So a farm dwelling finds a renter rather easily and seldom falls into such disrepair.

But in many parts of this great country that isn't the case. When a farmstead in Kansas is vacated, chances are pretty good it will stay that way. Few people want to rent a home so far from the few cities that exist out there. The farmer who now owns that farm doesn't need the buildings. He's probably a grain farmer who tills hundreds of acres by himself where once dozens of people worked. Or the new owner is a city investor who owns land and rents it to local farmers. He may not even know where the farm is or that a serviceable house stands empty. He's certainly not going to spend money on paint and repairs.

During a trip across Iowa some years ago, I was impressed—maybe saddened is a better word—

by a number of empty farmsteads. Rolling along endless miles of countryside with only an occasional village, it wasn't hard to understand why the dwellings stood empty. No one wanted to live there.

The farm families that built those places and lived there for generations are gone. Maybe they were victims. Maybe they were winners, but for some good reason they're gone. One day they sold their farms and another day they auctioned off their livestock and equipment. Today they're living in the suburbs, working in a factory, or they're sitting in an old folks home remembering the way things used to be back on the farm.

Agriculture has made tremendous strides over the past 50 years. Mechanization has allowed farmers to cover more

ground, make more money and have a better life. But as some farmers have expanded and prospered, others have been squeezed out. Call them war orphans—the battle is over and they are no longer farmers. The precious ground is tilled with great care and speed and treated with the best of pesticides and fertilizer. But the buildings are unnecessary. So they stand vacant and crumbling—sad reminders of a kind of farming that many of us remember fondly.

We can't go back to that era and we wouldn't want to. An 80-acre farm complete with cows to milk by hand, horses to feed and harness, and hot days in a hayloft holds no fascination for me. Nonetheless, it saddens me whenever I see one of those nice old farmsteads falling down.

West gets ample water

WASHINGTON, D.C. — Water supplies should be adequate to abundant for much of the West this summer, the U.S. Department of Agriculture and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration reported today.

Peter C. Myers, chief of USDA's Soil Conservation Service, said the favorable outlook has been tempered somewhat by a lack of snowfall in some areas.

However, late January storms along the California coast spread snow inland as far as Arizona and New Mexico. Another storm added significant snowpack in the Pacific Northwest. Elsewhere there was

little additional snowpack in the western mountains.

Myers said streamflow forecasts have been revised downward due to sparse January snowfall. The two agencies forecast spring and summer runoff to be generally 85 to 110 percent of normal. A few streams in Montana and Colorado may flow as low as 60 to 70 percent of normal.

Reservoir storage remains good to excellent throughout the West and should be adequate to offset any shortages in water supply caused by below normal streamflow.



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