Farm Talk

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Agriculture has taken a strange twist over the last 100 years or so, particularly in the South. And that includes the Delmarva peninsula. Perhaps some would quarrel with the concept that the peninsula is part of southern agriculture. But when you look at its history, climate, soil type, and some other natural factors, it's obvious that the coastal plains of the Delmarva peninsula are a lot closer agriculturally to the Carolinas than they are to Pennsylvania or New England.

A century or more ago southern agriculture was dominated by large plantations with tenant farmers doing the work. Each tenant had a small plot of ground that he could till with hand labor and a mule or two. He was closely supervised by the plantation owner and usually owed his success or failure to the owner's generosity.

Over time, our land inheritance system and the economics of farming changed all that. It changed it so much, in fact, that today we have almost a complete reversal with small landowners and large tenants.

It's not unusual throughout the South, and that includes Delmarva, to find big-scale farmers who own very little land but till thousands of acres. In tiny Delaware, with its three counties, there are a number of these big operators who rent farms from dozens of landowners and who, with a little hired help and a lot of expensive machinery, handle two, three, even five thousand acres of corn and soybeans.

Some of these tenants still farm on shares but most pay cash rent. And instead of a domineering plantation owner hovering over them, the tenants are calling many of the shots. Most of the meaningful negotiations take place when terms of the rental agreement are established. At that point, the landowner and the renter get together and negotiate price and other terms including length of contract, application of lime and fertilizer, use of buildings, general care of the property, and other considerations. In some instances, the rent is paid and that's the only contact renter and owner have.

That's quite a switch when you think about it. And it's a switch that worries a lot of the thinkers in agriculture. They remember the good old days when a farm was about 80 acres and it included a home and a large family who sent their kids to the local schools, shopped in the nearby town, attended the crossroads church, and were, in general, a part of the community.

Contrast that with the current system of absentee landlords and large-scale tenant farmers. It's a sort of phantom agriculture. You can ride for miles in the heart of Delmarva and never see anyone who looks like a farmer, unless you pick those peak periods when planting or harvest is going on.

It's not at all unusual for these big operators to come in with two or three combines and a fleet of farm trucks and harvest a whole farm in one day. Likewise, in the spring they roar in with huge diesel tractors and once-over tillage systems that allow them to do everything, including seeding, in one or two passes. They strike quickly, planting an entire farm in a day or two.

The end product from all of this bigness and mechanization is a highly productive, efficient agriculture, but one totally different from 50 or 100 years ago.

Rural Delmarva is lucky to have a large nonfarm population that keeps it alive and well. Otherwise it too might look like some of the grain deserts of the south and midwest where even the big-time farmers live in town. Here at least most of the suitable dwellings are occupied, even if by renters who work somewhere else. And the crossroad villages and towns bustle with commerce even though the feed store and the farm supply center have long been closed.

Almost every Delmarva town is a bedroom community of sorts, meaning that people live there and work somewhere else, and the farm-to-market roads are dotted with strip developments, mobile homes, and other kinds of housing for rural residents who travel 100 miles or more a day to good paying jobs. And obviously the tremendous recreational industry that abounds on Delmarva's water edges has great impact on nearby rural areas. Hunting and fishing rights, camp-grounds, cottages, roadside markets, restaurants, are slanted toward the recreation market. And those dollars spill over into the rural areas.

Meanwhile, the business of producing food and fiber goes on even if the principles involved do appear almost ghost-like. But with all the changes that have come and gone in agriculture, one thing remains constant--the land. And whether by hand, by mule, or by 4-wheel drive tractor, those same acres are tilled year in and year out, becoming steadily more productive.

A hundred years ago half the people in this country lived and worked on farms. Today, according to the latest census estimates, less than three in a hundred do so. The others who used to farm are now doing something else. Maybe they still live in rural areas, but they aren't farmers. And those who are farmers are growing bigger and becoming more efficient. They're the phantoms who appear out of nowhere astride large green or red tractors, gobbling up the production of a whole farm in a

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