

Farm Talk

by
Jerry Webb
Delaware Extension

Small family farms may not be very profitable, but there sure are a lot of people who would like to have one. I'm talking about young men and women who would like to operate their own farming units, perhaps starting a sharecropper or renter, and eventually becoming owners. It's part of the great American dream, and even though it's infinitely more difficult to get started than it was a generation or two ago, it's still being done. And it's being done often enough to provide encouragement for some would-be farmers.

In the pre-World War II period a young man with a strong back and a good team of mules could get a start. He would become a sharecropper, work hard, build his reputation, save his money, and eventually move on to his own place.

Glenn Hawkins was that kind of a guy. He sharecropped my grandfather's farm back in Missouri after the old man got too tired to manage it. That was back in the thirties. Glenn came to the place with an old truckful of furniture and a team of horses. Ten years later he made a down payment on the adjoining farm and retired a few years ago a fairly

wealthy man. Not only had he been a successful farmer, but he happened to have purchased a farm on the edge of a small city. That farm eventually became worth at least a million dollars.

Those kind of rags-to-riches opportunities don't come along every day, but they are out there.

Once in a while I see an ad in one of the farm publications where someone is looking for a young man to work into an existing operation. Typically it's an older dairyman wanting to slow down and gradually work a younger person into the business. Sometimes there's been a death or disabling accident or illness and a replacement is being recruited. In many of these situations the owners are even willing to supply financing.

I know that every farmer approaching retirement age doesn't have an heir apparent to the farm business. The right young man or woman with potential should be able to find these opportunities. Like everything else, farm financing is difficult to obtain, but that's not to say that the business of farming has to be handed over to the conglomerates or the Wall Street investors. Family farms can

continue if their operators or potential operators are hard-working, trustworthy, and a little creative in their approach to getting started or to hanging in there.

I see stories all the time in the farm press about farmers who are making it on a few acres. They're diversifying, intensifying, double and triple cropping, combining hogs and strawberries, dairy cows and alfalfa, chickens and fruit trees, and all sorts of strange combinations to get the maximum dollar return from their investment.

The potential farmer who wants to grow corn and soybeans is probably looking at the most difficult way of all to get into farming. He's looking to start at a level that requires an investment and a risk far beyond most young people's abilities.

If the desire to farm is limited only to corn and soybeans, then I would say the young man or woman seeking entry is in for a difficult time. But if that beginner is willing to do some other things like dairy cows, fresh vegetables, pick-your-own fruit trees, hogs, or maybe even sheep, then there is some hope for getting started and some chance of success.

It used to be that almost all farmers diversified. That old saying about all the eggs in one

basket applied particularly well to farmers. And those who weathered the difficult years of the thirties were very reluctant to limit their activities to one or two crops. Instead, they had some of everything. So when beef prices were down, maybe the hogs would cover their loss. Or when wheat was in surplus corn would pay the bills.

Some farmers stick very doggedly to that philosophy, claiming even yet that diversity has allowed them to grow and prosper. Other farmers have opted for specialization. In this area in particular, that has meant corn and soybeans and lots of acres. It has also meant clinging to the hope

that good years would outweigh the bad ones.

Some farmers who made big expansion moves in the early to mid-seventies know very well the lesson from that kind of optimism. What looked like the beginning of a great agricultural boom triggered expansion and caused record farm machinery sales. But that boom soon turned to bust, and those same farmers found themselves riding those new tractors to Washington in an effort to get them paid for.

A farmer need look no further than recent livestock prices to see the advantage of diversified production.

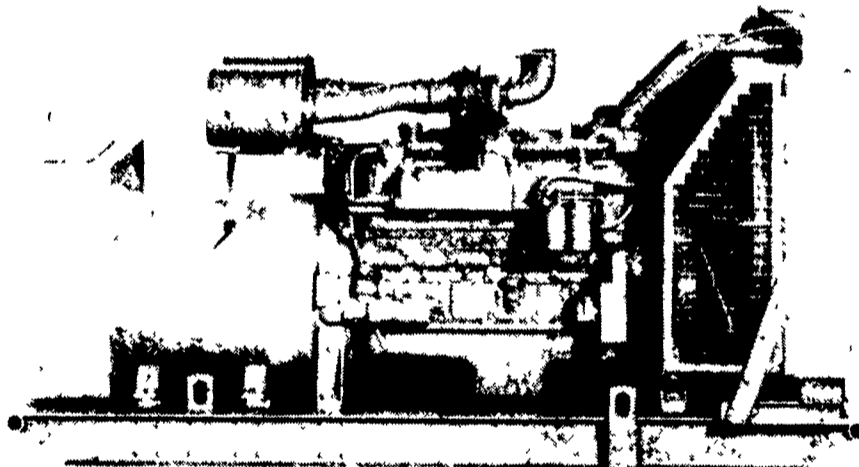


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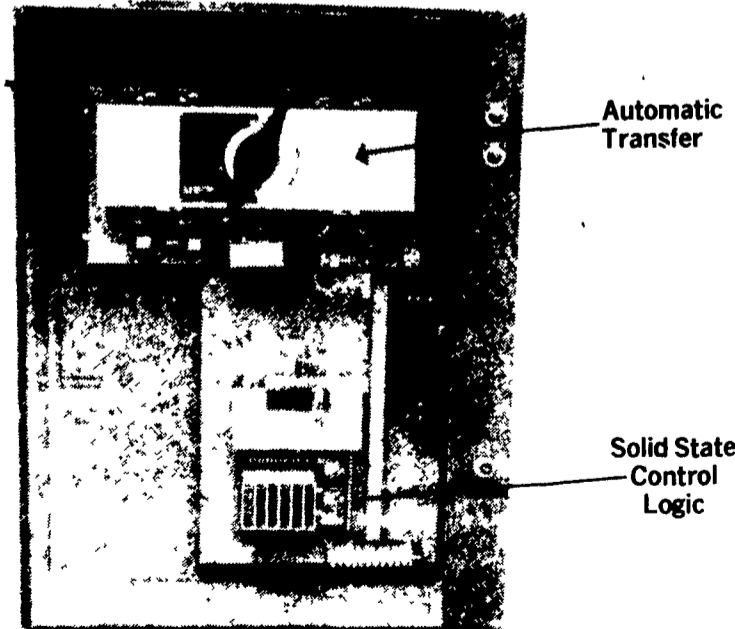
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