

Part-owner farm operators are increasing

ITHACA, N.Y. — Owning one's own farm — the rural version of the American dream — is a way of life that is being replaced by a different, yet respectable form of land ownership: part-owner operatorship.

The percent of farmland actually owned by farmers has declined dramatically since 1946, while the percent by part-owner operators has been increasing steadily.

These are some of the findings from a Cornell University analysis comparing U.S. Department of Agriculture surveys of farmland owners in 1946 and 1978. Demographic profiles, land tenure, and occupations of landowners were examined by rural sociologist Charles Geisler, agricultural economist Nelson Bills, and graduate students Jack Kloppenburg, Jr., and William Waters, all in the New York State College of Agriculture and Life Sciences at Cornell University.

Owners decline

In 1946, for example, individual farmers owned 70 percent of the U.S. farmland acreage. By 1978, that number had shrunk to 52 percent.

"There is a striking decline in the percentage of farmland owners identifying themselves as farmers

and a precipitous rise in the proportion of partial owners and operators working off-farm," says Geisler, an assistant professor of rural sociology.

The major mode of landownership also has been shifting — in 1946, three-fifths of all farmers were full owners of their land; today less than half are full owners.

Thus, farmland increasingly has been changing hands to non-farmers. The proportion of all agricultural landowners who identified themselves as farmers fell from 65 percent in 1946 to 25 percent in 1978.

Taking other jobs

This dramatic change in the occupations of farmland owners may be attributed to farmers taking other jobs while retaining their farmland, and to nonfarmers who purchase agricultural real estate.

"In the past, business-professional individuals who owned agricultural land rented it to farmers; today, though, more of these individuals are operating it themselves," says Cornell's Geisler.

Consequently, in 1946, 10 percent of the owners were businessmen and professionals, owning 14

percent of the farmland. By 1978, 25 percent of the owners were business-professionals, but they still owned only 14 percent of the farmland.

Female ownership

The Cornell researchers also found that although women owned 15 percent of the farmland in 1978, compared with 11 percent in 1946, men continue to control the bulk of farmland in private ownership.

"Even though women owned

more land in 1978, their land was less valuable on the average than in 1946," Geisler notes.

One reason is that the actual size of farm units owned by women has declined over time and smaller units generally are worth less than larger units.

Another trend observed was the "graying" of farmland owners. The average age of farmland owners continues to rise; by 1978, it was 52 years, up 3 years over 1946.

Although older persons often retire from farming, many are holding onto their land to a remarkably late age as a hedge against economic insecurity, Geisler says.

Rural migration

The net migration buildup of people in rural areas between the 1970 and 1980 Census was accompanied by a shift of older people to the countryside. Thus, there are increases in the proportion of farmland owners

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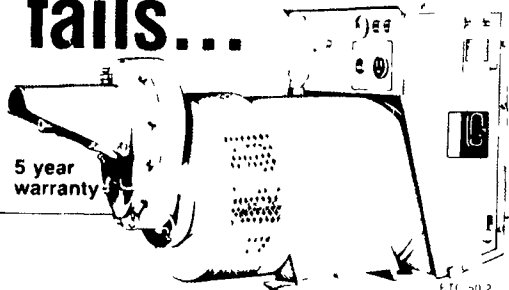
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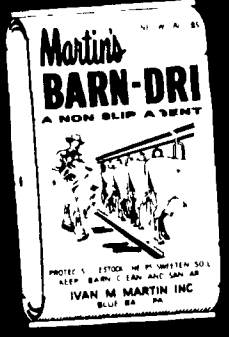
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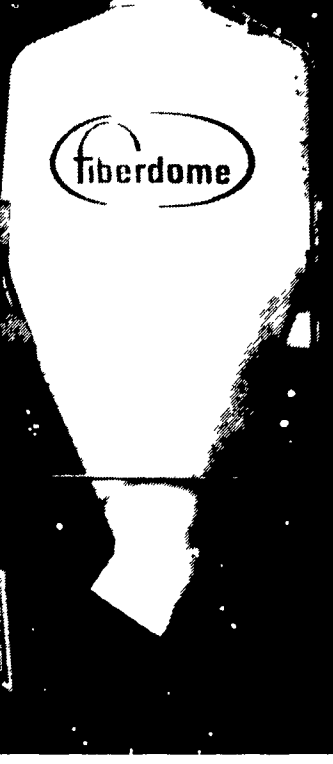
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