

## Farm Talk

By  
Jerry Webb

### No one wanted to quit

Most farm people who give up farming feel they have no other choice. That's the conclusion of a team of rural sociologists from the University of Missouri who conducted detailed interviews with 40 displaced Missouri Corn Belt farm families. Asked if they wanted to give up, all of them said no. They were instead forced off the farm by adverse economic conditions that had prevailed since 1979.

Bill and Judy Hefferman conducted their study earlier this year in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Agriculture. They chose a section of north central Missouri because of its good quality farmland and because it was more than 50 miles from a

metropolitan area where high-paying jobs often keep otherwise failing farmers from going under. They developed a list of 40 families who had left farming during the five years between January 1980 and January 1985. The sociologists then contacted those families and subsequently conducted in-depth interviews.

There were some striking similarities. All were fairly new to farming, relatively young, operated primarily on rented land and concentrated on crop production. Almost all of them grew up in farm families.

That profile would describe the majority of failed farms throughout the United States. It

certainly applies in this area.

The Heffermans found that most farmers who had gotten out got into farming during the boom years of the 1970s and early 80s, nearly three-fifths rented all of their land when they started, and more than half began farming with another family member, usually a parent.

Those interviewed range in age from 22 to 64, but three-fourths of the husbands were under age 45, and 84 percent of the wives were younger than 45. That means that 10 or 15 years ago when they started out, they were 30 to 35 years old with a number of years of partnership experience with other family members.

And that they were taking advantage of the good opportunities that existed in those days to make it on their own. Borrowed money, rented land, a short inventory of well-used farm equipment partially paid for, and an understanding that a hungry world would consume all of the corn, soybeans and small grains they could produce—those were the elements needed to make it on their own.

These weren't small part-time farms. The average operation when each farm was at its peak consisted of 500 acres; 200 owned in the sense that the farm family held title, and 300 rented. In the atmosphere of the 70s, the prospects

looked good for these farmers. They had farm backgrounds, experience, and an operation large enough to support a family and thrive during those prosperous agricultural times.

But then came a new decade and some serious new problems. One at a time, these Missourians left the land, some by choice, salvaging what they could and starting over somewhere else. Others were liquidated—sold out by their creditors. And yet all of them said they did not want to give up farming.

Many of the farmers thought they could have stayed on the land with just a little help from outside. Many said lower interest rates would have made the difference. Others said higher commodity prices or more favorable government policies could have kept them going.

Almost one-fifth claimed they could have continued if the Farmers Home Administration had reorganized their loans. One-tenth said they would have stayed on the farm had they been able to find off-farm jobs to supplement sagging farm incomes.

Are these families better off now that they're no longer struggling to make ends meet on an unprofitable farm? Probably not, at least in their own opinions.

Over half said they were not able

to pay off all their debts, even after their assets were liquidated. And almost two-thirds of the families said they were either worse off or much worse off now than they were in 1980.

Almost one-fifth said that even after liquidation and a new start away from agriculture, their incomes were not at all adequate for basic living needs. In fact only 28 percent described their finances as better now than when they were farming.

All of the families interviewed acknowledged the tremendous stress they felt when they finally had to quit farming. Many of them faced immediate relocation while others stayed in their homes but were uncertain about the future. And most of them felt the loneliness and extreme anxiety of the situation with very little outside support and even a lack of understanding among family and friends.

This Missouri profile doesn't describe all farmers who have left the land or who are in serious financial trouble. It does however support other reports of farm families who are being displaced. The sociologists and other behavior experts say many of these families leave the farm with a great feeling of personal failure and with financial obligations they cannot possibly meet. No doubt some failed because of their own lack of ability or willingness to change, but others were simply in the wrong place at the wrong time.

In the world of business, companies fail with great regularity. In fact, a small business that survives in this day and age is a rarity. And there are plenty of business people who will tell you it takes a bankruptcy or two just to gain enough knowledge to manage a successful business. Maybe that's true for farming also.

The farm family that has lived through a failure might not ever want to try it again, but on the other hand some of those farm families have gained some valuable knowledge that could serve them well in a future farming enterprise.

One final thought. It would be interesting to check back on those 40 families five or 10 years from now to see what they're doing and how they feel then about what happened.

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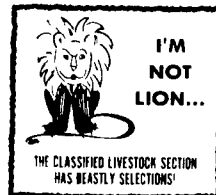
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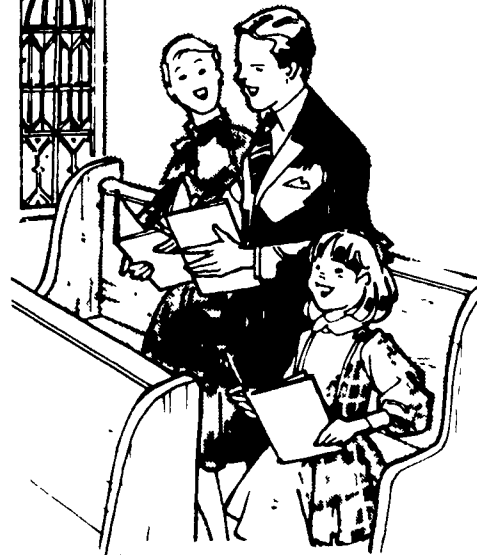


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