



Farm Talk

By
Jerry Webb

Greeley foresaw tractors

The holiday season usually provides some leisure time to catch up on agricultural reading. As usual, this season I had a growing pile of farm magazines and other agricultural publications to look through. One book that I found particularly interesting was titled simply "Harvest." It's a collection of agricultural writings going back as far as Christopher Columbus and including several presidents, some noted poets and historians, and some of the contemporary agricultural writers of the 1900's. The book copyrighted in 1964 was written by Wheeler MacMillan, former editor of Farm Journal magazine.

I highly recommend "Harvest" as a treasure of agricultural history, wit and folklore. Quoted in the book are such notables as Captain John Smith, Benjamin Franklin, George Washington, Thomas Jefferson and Abraham Lincoln.

Today I take the liberty of quoting from one noted writer who more than 100 years ago put his finger on one of the great needs of future agriculture.

Horace Greeley is perhaps best known for having told someone to go west. That one quote is about all anybody really knows about him. In fact, he was the founder and editor of the New York Tribune and at one time tried to earn a living from his own farm at Chappaqua, New York. In 1871 Greeley published a book on agriculture titled "What I Know About Farming." In it, he described the need for a machine which has turned out to be today's tractor. Here's what he said:

"What our farmers need is not a steam plow as a

specialty but a locomotive that can travel with facility not only one common wagon roads but across even freshly plowed fields without embarrassment and prove as docile to its manager's touch as an average span of horses. Such a locomotive should not cost more than \$500 not weigh more than a ton when laden with fuel and water for a half hour's steady work. It should be so contrived that it may be hitched in a minute to a plow, a harrow, a wagon or cart, or saw or grist mill, a mower or reaper, a thresher or stalk cutter, a stump or rock puller, and made useful in pumping and draining operations, digging a cellar or laying up a wall as also in ditching and trenching. We may have to wait some years yet for a servant so dexterous and docile, yet I feel sure that our children will enjoy and appreciate his handiwork."

That phrase was written more than 100 years ago and, as Greeley predicted, his children—perhaps his grandchildren—did enjoy such a machine—the modern tractor which by the early 30's achieved the dexterity and docility demanded by the 1870's editor.

Published in the book "Harvest" is also a farm creed written by Henry Ward Beecher and published in "Country Life Reader" in 1916. Perhaps it will provide inspiration for some of today's farmers as they face another year.

A Farm Creed

We believe that soil likes to eat as well as its owner and ought therefore to be liberally fed.

We believe in large crops which leave the land better than they found it—making the farmer and the farm both glad at once.

We believe in going to the bottom of things and therefore in deep plowing and enough of it all the better with a subsoil plow.

We believe that every farm should own a good farmer.

We believe that the best fertilizer for any soil is a spirit of industry, enterprise and intelligence. Without this, lime and gypsum, bones and green manure, marrow and guano will be of little use.

We believe in good fences, good barns, good farmhouses, good stock, good orchards and children enough to gather the fruit.

We believe in a clean kitchen, a neat wife in it, a spinning wheel, a clean cupboard, a clean dairy and a clean conscience.

Why would anybody want to be a migrant farm worker? I ask myself that question every time I read one of those touching stories about the plight of the migrant worker. If the pay is so bad and the work so miserable, why do they do it? Why leave home and family and the security of a familiar environment for the uncertainties of migrant work?

The stories I read tell of hardship, deprivation, substandard living conditions, back-breathing work, abusive crew chiefs, unsympathetic farmers, and average incomes well below the poverty level. Put that on a recruitment poster and how many join up. But something makes them join. For

some reason, whole families will climb into an old car somewhere in south Texas and follow the harvest through Kansas, Iowa, Michigan, Minnesota, the Dakotas, and Washington. They follow the harvest wherever it takes them—to the sweet corn and snap bean fields of Wisconsin, the apple trees of Oregon, the berry patches of New Jersey, and the processing plants that go along with fruit and vegetable farming.

The stories tell of squalor, of back-breaking stoop labor, of little children who must work from dawn til dark, just to put food on the table. And always it seems the migrant worker gets less than he deserves. He is often robbed of his wages, charged outrageous prices for commodities he must have, and is shunned in the communities where he visits. And still I find myself asking, why does he do it?

Migrants have been around for more than a century. They've harvested crops in virtually every state, and certainly they've made their contribution to American agriculture. Before the turn of the century, migrant workers had grown in importance in areas where large amounts of seasonal labor were required. Farmers were concentrating on specialty crops that required huge amounts of labor for short periods of time. Crops like wheat, sugar beets, and a long list of vegetables were being grown in concentrated areas. And workers who followed the harvest were the salvation of these farmers. These early migrants followed the harvest, in groups and as individuals, at a time when all farm work was back-breaking stoop labor. In the early days, migrants came from a variety of ethnic backgrounds, and many of them graduated out of the migratory status into full-fledged farmers.

The need for migrant workers grew steadily during the first half of the twentieth century. In fact, during World War II when there

was a serious labor shortage on American farms, a concentrated recruitment effort went on. The Emergency Farm Labor Program was established in 1943 and continued until 1947. Through it thousands of foreign farm workers came into this country.

Along with this, technology was working to reduce the need for hand labor. Machines were being invented that did many of the backbreaking jobs. A farmer could sit on a tractor seat and harvest a crop in a few days that had previously required weeks of stoop labor by dozens of migrants. Cotton pickers, combines, tomato harvesters, and chemicals that eliminated the need for thinning, weeding, and other hand work were available.

America's migrant worker population peaked about 1950 with a million workers. It's been a steady decline ever since to the point where there are probably no more than 200,000 today. That's out of a total of less than two million farm workers. There are still areas where migrants are important, but not like they used to be. Here in the mid-Atlantic region there are a few crews each year who work the vegetable crops, but that's not a very large acreage and it doesn't require very many of them.

Farmers who used to grow vegetables and use migrant workers have switched to the relatively easy production of corn and soybeans—work that can be done by one man from the seat of a tractor or a combine. There are no labor camp worries, no health department regulations, no social pressures. So fewer migrants make the trip to Delaware, Maryland, Pennsylvania and some other states that used to employ thousands of migrant workers every year.

No doubt this trend will continue as new machines are developed and new crop varieties released that will withstand the rigors of (Turn to Page E7)

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