

Research Data Given On Farm Family Stress

Editor's Note: We hear a lot about the stress that's placed on farm families do to an economy that forces farmers out of their preferred occupation. Harold Capener, Department of Rural Sociology, Cornell University, spoke on this subject to the Northeastern Ag Communication Conference in Ithaca last week. Here are some of the facts reported by the professor:

There's a mark difference in the nature of the farm families that are going out of farming today from what we have been accustomed to in the '40s, '50s and '60s.

In 1964 a study here in New York state done by Larry Zeitermoff, Department of Agricultural Economics, on farmers who stop shipping milk to Syracuse. He found that these were for the most part in the 20 to 30 cow range of operations. They were older in age. Eighty-six percent of them were over 50. They had relatively little education. Seventy-one percent of them had less than high school. The number of years that they had been in farming was very long. Sixty-six percent of them had been in over 20 years. Their income from farming was low. Sixty-two percent were making under \$2,000 off the farm. Obviously, they were surviving by off farm work. They were doing other things to supplement that kind of a level of income. This was the characterization of these kinds of families that had gone out in 1964. In summary, these were smaller tenant level kind of farms with persons of little education, with limited skills, with low equity, with low income, with little political or economic clout. We came to feel that they did not make that much difference in the farm economy.

Today the current families that are being involved in this depletion represent a group who are rather highly educated, who are very capable and dedicated kind of

farmers who have very alert and promising children, who have been social, civic, and religious leaders in their community. They are farmers and families who are young and capable and aggressive managers. People who one of the midwest bankers said, "They are the kind of families that we were betting on. We had given them our money. We were so confident in them. And when they lost it, it wasn't their fault. It was a set of externalities that were largely beyond their control."

What happens then to the agricultural communities in which these kinds of families live? In Lebanon, Kansas, a population of 500, the school closed, the jail closed, the sheriff layed off four of the eight deputies that he had. And these were the deputies that were needed to attend the auctions and the foreclosures. In Lennox, Iowa, a population of 1,380, for sale signs were up for the residents. Young people left town. Health services and social services were cut. Gravel roads went back to dirt roads. In these communities, the impact on the lumber yards, the hardware stores, the drug stores, the service stations, the beauty salons, the banks, the agri business dealers, the automobile dealers, and the vitality of the social and the civic and the religious organizations were all marketably effected.

In the northeast we have approximately two years of lag time that we've been enjoying since this thing hit the midwest. It's called lag time because we haven't yet literally become conscious of the impact that this farm decline is going to have on our economy. There has been a steady decline however in New York state farms. Our highest number of farms as you know was in 1880 when we had 240,000. Today 100 years later, we have 25,000 of what's called commercial farms. That's about an 85 percent decline in 100 years.

That's pretty steep if you look at the chart. Of the 25,000 commercial farms that we have today, it's estimated we'll lose a quarter of those farms within the next five years. Many of these farms are the cream of the crop. Dedicated, capable, young family farm units that simply got started because they were born at the wrong time. They got started in the mid '70s and in the '80s, the very worst time to try to buy into a high rolling enterprise with everything high. And on the euphoria that everything is going to be roses because it looks so promising. But then comes 1981-1982 and they find themselves leveraged in positions that were impossible for them.

Of course the needs of farm families in stress are different from off farm needs. An interesting comparison was made by Joan Blongdale who is a mental health consultant in northern Iowa. Joan had worked in Rhode Island for many years and one of the last experiences she had in Rhode Island just before she left was to help close down the General Dynamics Boat Division in which some 3,000 people lost their jobs. And she felt that she was pretty skilled in terms of bringing assistance to families in need.

She said when she got out to northern Iowa and began to deal with the farm families there she understood how little she really knew about the differences between farm families and the families who have their occupations in industry. True, all persons who lose their income have the same kind of worries about where the food is going to come from, how the rent is going to be paid, how they are going to pay the school expenses, and the daily elements of living. But she said from that point on there is not very much similarity. What is different with the farm families is that they do not have employment insurance. They do not have a package of fringe benefits that have often times includes medical benefits and other kinds of insurance. They have not had to mortgage their home in order to obtain their job or to work at the factory. Their children have not necessarily had a career expectation to take over the dad's job.

And she said most important of all, when you lose your job at the factory, it is not your fault. It is somebody else's doing that relieve you of a burden of guilt and responsibility. She said she had no

appreciation of that until she began to deal with these families. The sense of image for a farmer is what we know in rural ideology as status based on what we call ascribed characteristics.

It's who you are that identifies you. It's your occupation that identifies you. And so if you are farmer Bill Smith and you live on the Smith farm that's who you are. And if you do not have the Smith farm any more then who are you? What are you? This kind of identity loss, this ego loss, this self image loss, gives you the feeling of being a failure, the feeling of blame, and the feeling of being a poor manager. The eyes of your neighbors on you. These kind of things are talked about in the rural sector, around the kitchen table in terms of the families in the neighborhood. Kids pick up this kind of conversation on the school bus and it's passed along to the other kids and it then goes on into the family context. The children of the family feel the same kind of loss. A young teenager has the feeling that his whole future has just gone down the drain. And who is he? And what is he? He has spent his life career with an expectation that this is what his future is going to be. And so we see the depths of this kind of devastation on farm families.

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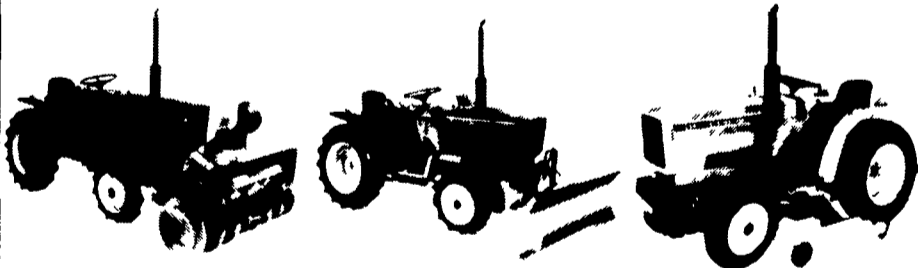
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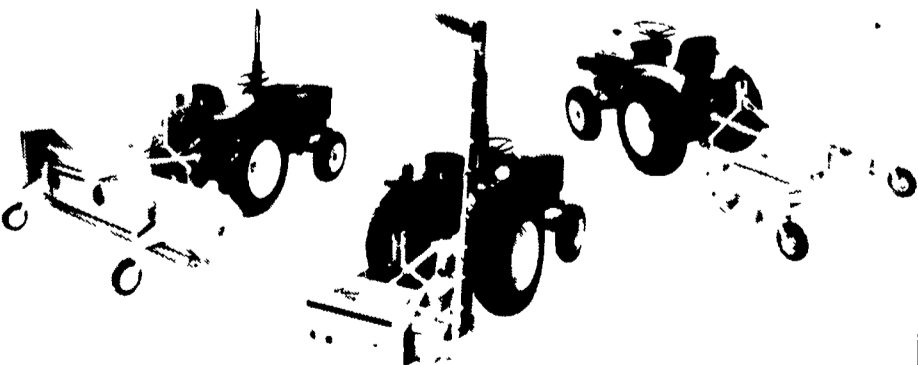
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