

Century Of Farming

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plows that allowed the luxury of riding on a sturdy steel seat. Multiple mole boards increased the speed a field could be covered. The hand hoe gave way to riding cultivators. Disk harrows and other tilling equipment made farming faster and easier.

And a good thing too. The number of people in cities increased rapidly and they demanded food on their tables. This drove farmers to increase production by adding new mechanical devices and turn over greater portions of land with the increased capability. Soon production was increasing every year. The demand was good and prices high in comparison to input costs and soon farmers had money to buy more new machinery and more acres. Not only did the American Farmer feed the people at home; a great deal of the farm production was traded over the oceans.

When the war in Europe drew U.S. soldiers into the conflict, the call went out to dramatically increase food production. Farming became not only a good

business but also a patriotic occupation essential to the strength of our country.

By 1925 tractors started to replace horses. Soon, combines replaced threshing rigs, and corn binders and silo fillers made the storage of feed for winter more practical. Production of milk and meat increased too, as county extension agents made the research findings at the land grant colleges and universities available at the farm level.

But when the Depression hit the cities in the late 1920s and into the 1930s, the economic bust whipped back into the farm economy as well. Credit was tight, debt loads became unbearable, and almost everyone was faced with hard times. But farmers continued to increase production and soon the buzzwords were "supply management." Many of the farm programs that are only now being phased out began in the 1930s and 1940s.

As World War II unfolded, surpluses again vanished, and farmers became the heroes of the decade. Food from the American

Farmers literally fed the allied troops. Farmers were proud to be farmers. And they were honored along with the nation's other war heroes. Production increases were tied to better farming practices. Input costs were relatively low in comparison to farm prices. If a fertilizer was good, a little more couldn't hurt. Excess nutrients in the soil were considered a plus to next year's crop production. Chemicals such as 2,4-D came on the market to kill the weeds. Insecticides could control the bugs.

As the war ended, the industrial production that had gone into the military machine became available to produce agricultural equipment. Larger tractors, along with new tillage and harvesting equipment made farm life easier and helped increase farm productivity. Electricity, telephones, and other modern home appliances came to rural families making them equal with their city cousins.

But again the fervor to feed the world at war had put farm production in such high gear that when the war ended, surpluses brought depressed prices to farm products. This scenario was later

repeated with the Korean War.

The trend moved toward fewer farmers farming larger farms. The felt need to produce more to make up for the lower prices continued through the century. Soon, the credit lender and the farm consultant became necessary partners in the everyday life of the farmer. Government subsidies, population growth, and exports only partially helped to offset the cost of the farmer's debt load.

Input costs increased dramatically. Both fuel and fertilizer costs doubled within a decade, but commodity prices reverted back to Depression levels. In the 1990s farmers were still pinched between the cost of production and the prices received at the farm gate. And new forces were at work. Environmental concerns over excesses earlier in the century were shaping government policy. Nutrient management laws began to restrict farmers' abilities to farm efficiently. Recommendations for low input and organic farming became more commonplace. Some farmers were backing off from maximum production in favor of lower input costs. Chickens could be seen out on range again in these operations. Rotational grazing of dairy and beef cattle became popular discussion topics at farm meetings.

But in tremendous contrast, biotechnology shaped the other side of farming. Genetic engineering so affected plant production that Bt corn eliminated the need for pesticides. As this writer stated: "The corn plant now eats the corn bore."

Cloning of animals gave focus to new and uncharted paths to future animal husbandry. Farmers become more specialized with larger concentrated operations. This caused opponents of agriculture to decry the methods and mechanics of the modern farmer. Instead of applause for feeding the world and being the best example of efficiency in production, farmers are accused, often falsely, of non-point pollution of our streams and waterways while excess nitrates from city and industrial sewage plants go unnoticed by public opinion.

When the century began one farm worker supported himself and one city worker. In 1999 one farmer supported himself and 360 city workers. "Farming as a way of life" was replaced in the middle of the century with "farming as a business." But farming never lost its feeling as a way of life. The feel of wheat in a bin when you plunge your hand in to your elbow. The smell of new mown hay or corn silage in the manger. The joy of a newborn calf, or kid, or foal. The feel of the night as darkness settles over the fields, with only tractor lights and the stars in the sky to give orientation to the night work at hand and communion with nature. The pure pleasure of watching hogs eat.

Yes, farming is a business. But the farmer is so tied to the earth--the seedtime, the harvest, the cold and the heat, the summer and the winter, the day and the night--so tied to the spirit of farming that his business is his way of life.

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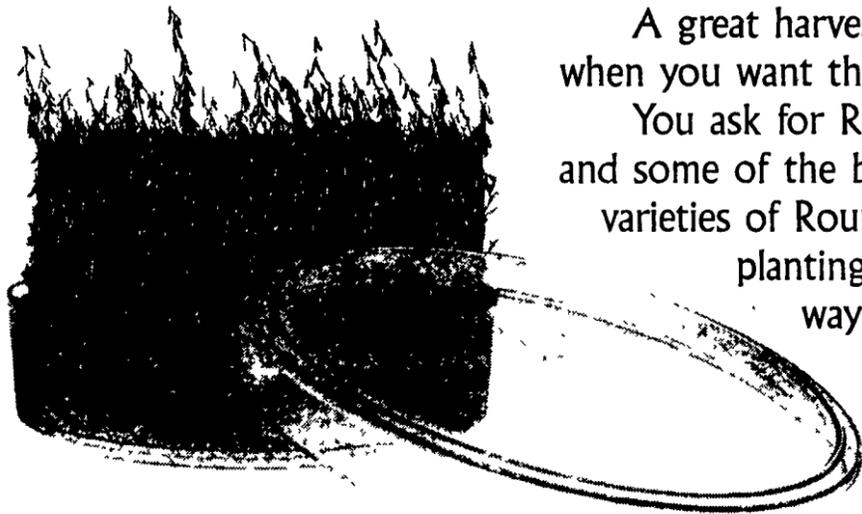
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