

The Farmer Has the Wheat—but Where is the Bread?

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Abstract

Speaking before the Dairy Industry Association at Burlington, Vermont, last September, Under Secretary of Agriculture J. Phil Campbell said, "No other major American industry has ever operated with such little concern for the market as has been the case with American agriculture."

The Farmer Has the Wheat — but Where is the Bread?^{1 2}

CHESTER J. TELLER

SPEAKING BEFORE the Dairy Industry Association at Burlington, Vermont, last September, Under Secretary of Agriculture J. Phil Campbell said, “No other major American industry has ever operated with such little concern for the market as has been the case with American agriculture.” This was not the first time the Under Secretary of Agriculture has made this statement and it is doubted if it will be his last.

Underscoring this concern, Rep. Carl Albert, house majority leader, was quoted in a new newsletter, *Agriculture, USA*³: “The goal of gaining access to the economic mainstream has eluded the American farmer for more than 40 years.”

These statements, by respected and knowledgeable individuals, should spark our efforts to redefine the role of the American farmer in the milieu of the 1970’s and 1980’s. Is there a contradiction here? Is “agriculture, the nation’s largest industry,” in such marketing difficulty?

One of the paramount reasons for agriculture’s lack of concern for the market is its paucity of **products for sale** and its usual surplus of **supplies to move**. Another important reason for this (un)economic phenomenon is the farmers’ relative inability to pass on increased costs of doing business. These elements make the terms “agrimarketing” and “agribusiness” grossly misleading when applied to production agriculture.

The Summer/70 issue of *The New Agriculture* featured an

¹ Reprinted from *The New Agriculture*, Miller Publishing Co., Minneapolis, Minnesota.

² A footnote is a mark of erudition; “bread” not only comes sliced and wrapped, it is used to pay off mortgages, buy tractors, and send kids off to college.

³ Published by the National Educational Institute for Agriculture, Washington, D.C.

article entitled "Paradox: Agriculture's Ambivalent Image," referring primarily to the fact that the American farmer is not getting his story across to the other 94 per cent of the population. It is this writer's contention, however, that agriculture's credibility gap is equally as wide as its communications gap. Our "ambivalent image" is a direct reflection of our schizophrenic behavior!

The basic paradox is, that for all its efficiencies — for example, output per man hour has increased 600 per cent in the past 40 years — agriculture has never been able to reap its harvest in the market place, the cornerstone of the free enterprise system.

Agricultural leadership apparently lacks the will or the understanding, or both, to redefine the word "agriculture" in the light of the dynamic changes of the last half century. This period of time seems reasonable when one recalls that the U.S. Department of Agriculture has been keeping score for over a hundred years.

Returning to "communications" and "public relations," the National Rural Electric Cooperative Association, (again of Washington, D.C.) recently ran a half page advertisement in the Sunday *New York Times*. Illustrated by a closeup photo of an overalled "farmer," the bold type lead exclaimed, "Meet a Leading Industrialist." Here is the copy: "The American farmer. Today, he's one of fewer than three million . . . yet an integral part of *America's largest industry, agriculture.* (Italic is mine.) He's a friend of the American consumer. He sets our tables with an unequalled variety and quality of food at a smaller proportion of take-home pay than at anytime in history anywhere . . . all through a miracle of efficiency. His investment is higher per worker than the rest of industry. His rate of productivity in recent years has been double that of nonfarm industry. He has to be good. He's squeezed between soaring operating costs and a marginal return for his products. Even though food prices have risen, his share of your food dollar is steadily declining. . . ."

We of the agricultural establishment nod our heads in unison saying, "That's a great P.R. job!" Meanwhile, a few more farms disappear, and the food industry continues to laugh all the way to the stockholders meetings!

We are "undergoing an identity crisis" and it would behoove us to start now to clarify our terms. It is suggested that the words "food industry" be substituted for the word "agriculture."

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That word “agriculture” falls far short of the mark — a real myth. “Farming,” on the other hand, is a viable activity that supplies **ingredients** to the food industry, mostly at the lowest wholesale prices. Once we are able to bring farming into the dynamic food processing industry on a businesslike basis, a new industry will have evolved — “agrifactoring!” Until that time comes, our frustrations will compound our irrelevancies, stretch our credibilities, and sustain our schizoid tendencies.

It is time to admit, at least to ourselves, the quasipolitical nature of agriculture. In the early 1930’s, the period of doubt, drought, and depression, the Agricultural Adjustment Act was needed, and it was courageous legislation. The idea of parity seems as reasonable now as it did then (not employing the 1910-14 base, of course) but there is still disparity, with farm incomes roughly only two-thirds that of nonfarm. But now we’re down to three million farms, the bottom half of which can only account for about one per cent of the cash receipts. Or looking at it another way, the top one-sixth of the farmers account for over two-thirds of the cash receipts. And finally, through a gentleman’s agreement in Congress, a limit of \$55,000 per year per farm was considered a reasonable payment for not planting certain crops. Not a green giant step for mankind but a forward one, nevertheless. This agreement was reached at a time when it had been widely reported that five per cent of our population is malnourished! (And we ask why our image is ambivalent?)

When the publication of *Silent Spring* suggested that there might be something Carson-ogenic in our environment, and that agriculture might be a contributor, we responded with hysterical denials. (And we ask why our image is ambivalent?)

When government price support programs have generally been limited to those commodities grown in districts of committee members, and that these members and chairmen of appropriations committees under the seniority rule are usually politically unopposed at home and remain with increasing Congressional influence for years. (And we ask why our image is ambivalent?)

When a decade passes leaving Edward R. Murrow’s unforgettable television documentary, “Harvest of Shame,” still up-to-date as evidenced by Chet Huntley’s recent disclosures in the Sunshine State . . . when someone shouts HUELGA, the agricultural establishment quivers but remains silent during the five-

year struggle . . . the answer to the question of ambivalent image becomes fairly obvious.

"Agriculture — America's Largest Industry Employing 20,000,-000 People" — 3,000,000 farmers, 17,000,000 others in allied fields — is the title of a brochure distributed by the American Foundation for Agriculture. If one were to stop a trailer, loaded with frozen food or fresh vegetables, swinging into Hunt's Point (New York) terminal market at 2 a.m., and ask the driver by what industry is he employed, and if he answers, "agriculture," the Farm Bureau will send a birthday card each year to Mr. Hoffa. Workers in processing, packaging, distributing, warehousing, and retailing of foods are simply not in agriculture. They are in processing, packaging, distributing, warehousing, and retailing.

We may boost our morale, shore-up our sagging institutions, attempt to resuscitate our organizations, and erect a facade of well-being by this masquerade — but it does not solve "the farm problem." Actually, attrition and consolidation are solving the problem for us. When only 500,000 commercial farm enterprises remain, but capable of feeding our nation — with some excess capacity for exports — the agricultural establishment will probably lean back, thumbs hooked in their galluses, and take credit for the achievement.

The industrialization of agriculture is just about complete. It will make as great a contribution to America as did the industrialization of the nonfarm pursuits, possibly greater for it has been the release of manpower from food production to other endeavors that has been responsible for our high level of living — unequalled in history.

The new agriculture is here. Without new leadership, however, the new agriculture will not be able to cut the mustard! Or is that lettuce?