

AGRICULTURAL GUIDE

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The central theme of American agricultural history

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As a historian, my task is to supply a peculiar perspective on the matters you will consider in this important program. Their attention focused on human affairs, historians have their own way of looking at them, one that emphasizes development or change over time. The development of agriculture and rural life is a very big subject, one of the largest in the American story. Once nearly the whole of the nation was rural; the rural population is now only a small part, and that change is a fundamental part of American history. Farm people were the American majority; now they are only a minority, and no other group in American history has experienced such a change—a change from majority to minority status. And agriculture's people have been dynamic in other ways. They have been significantly involved in two gigantic population movements—the move to the American West and the move to the American city. Rural people have become increasingly productive over the course of our history, doing so by building a large number of farms and then by consolidating many of them and applying technology to them. And this productivity has been a problem as well as a great blessing. It has pressed down on farm prices as well as served needs and conferred power.

American agricultural history is not only the story of change. Tradition has also been important. An agrarian tradition took shape in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries that exalted farming and rural life, looking upon them as having great importance for the nation's welfare. That tradition glorified—and still glorifies—the family farmers and portrays independence as one of their greatest qualities, yet as agriculture and rural life were modernized, some of our farms have become large corporations and even the

surviving commercial family farms have not only become large in size but also have become parts of an agribusiness complex in which much of the significance in supplying food and fiber takes place off the farm.

Two concepts—tradition and modernization—help us organize and understand American agricultural history. The interplay between them and the eventual triumph of modernization form the central theme of that history.

In the beginning, the United States was almost entirely rural, and agrarian ideas made great sense to many Americans. About 95 percent of the population in 1790 was rural, and nearly all of those rural people lived and worked on farms and plantations. The opportunity to make a farm was one of the great attractions of America, and ideas that had been available since the days of Ancient Rome and had been given new life by English literary people of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and the French physiocrats encouraged Americans to believe that farming was the best way of life and the most important economic activity. To agrarians, the United States seemed to be a superior place because it supplied more and better opportunities to farm than any other part of the world.

Thomas Jefferson's Democratic Agrarianism

Thomas Jefferson, more than any other person of the time, democratized the agrarian ideas. He argued that family farms—farms owned, managed and worked by families with little or no non-family labor—had great political value. Conferring independence and requiring industry and self-reliance, they nourished the personality types needed in a democratic political system. Such farms were the essential foundations of democracy.

Jefferson did not preach self-sufficient or non-commercial farming. In fact, he believed that Europe's great and growing needs for food and fiber provided a rich opportunity for American farmers and were therefore important for the health of the American republic. American farmers should produce more than they needed, and part of that surplus should be sold to Europe. No barriers should stand in the way.

Jefferson viewed the vast amount of American land as a valuable and distinguishing feature of the nation. He favored removal of Europeans and Indians from that land and the sale of it in small units and at

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low prices. As president, he purchased a vast area into which American farmers could move, brushing aside constitutional inhibitions to do so. To him, such a policy seemed to guarantee that for generations the United States would rank above all other nations.

This agrarian came to accept manufacturing for the United States but only on a small scale. He wished to keep it limited, with the people involved only a minority of the population, and he hoped that Americans would maintain agriculture as the main industry and farmers as by far the largest group of people.

This democratic version of agrarianism had several major dimensions. It involved a theory of personality formation. It assumed that the nation needed a large number of family farms with each endowed with the resources required for families to lead good lives. It stressed the importance of land ownership. It insisted that a family farmer must not be obligated to others, such as landlords, must be free to do what he wished with his land and its products but should have no more land than his family could use. And family farmers deserved large roles in government and special attention from it.

In its fully developed form, American agrarianism had economic and social as well as political meanings. It looked upon agriculture as the major if not the only source of wealth and the producer of the essentials of life and upon the purchasing power of farmers as crucial for the health of the entire economy. And rural society, according to the agrarian view of things, supplied the cities with the quantity and quality of people required for survival, growth and success.

During the nineteenth century, the democratic version of agrarianism had to compete against alternative visions of both rural life and American life as a whole. Plantation agriculture was one of the alternatives. It became the dominant form, though not the only form, in the South. In contrast with the family farm, the plantation was large and slaves supplied its labor. According to its champions, the plantation system gave the few the leisure required to be good citizens.

The Civil War did not destroy this system. The war destroyed slavery, but Southern landowners quickly replaced it with sharecropping. Sharecroppers supplied the labor for fragmented plantations.

Industrialized agriculture represented yet another vision of what American agriculture should be, and it emerged most significantly in the Central Valley of California before the end of the nineteenth century. Here also the units were large. On them, large numbers of wage earners did the work.

And the vision of an urban industrial nation competed with Jefferson's vision of a rural agricultural one. Cities and factories developed rapidly in the nineteenth century, so rapidly that though farms also multiplied at a fast pace, farmers were a shrinking percentage of the total population and increasingly dependent on others for things they needed, such as loans and supplies, and on remote markets. And farmers did not resent their dependence, at least not

all of the time. Eager to succeed as business people, they moved away from self-sufficiency as quickly as possible and entered the marketplace.

The Westward Movement

All of these visions entered into one of the most spectacular parts of nineteenth century American history—the westward movement. Planters with their slaves as well as family farmers moved west; some Westerners developed large farms employing wage earners, and western lands were used for cities and industries as well as farms. The federal government gave huge tracts of land to one industry with which farmers had a love/hate relationship, the railroads, and many farmers had to buy their land from the railroads and other large landowners. Before the end of the century, the cost of land in the West forced some farmers to become tenants, contrary to the dreams of Jefferson.

To the disciples of Jefferson, however, just as to Jefferson himself, the westward movement had special meaning. It was the way of developing a vast agrarian democracy. The construction of that depended not only upon the eagerness of individuals and families to acquire land and build farms. Its construction depended also on federal policies, including policies on Indians and on land. The Federal government removed the Indians from land desired by farmmakers and sold land to them in small units at lower and lower prices until, with the passage of the Homestead Act in 1862, it gave land in 160-acre units to those who would farm them. Such gifts seemed justified by the benefits that would come to the nation, its people and its land from the interactions between people and land. People had a natural right to land, agrarians like George Julian and Horace Greeley argued, and labor gave land its value. And they also maintained that urban workers would benefit from western land. It would function as a "safety valve" by offering workers an alternative to their jobs. Because they had the alternative, they would not be subservient like European workers and would develop the personalities required to make a democratic system successful.

During the course of the nineteenth century, millions of people poured into the Middle West, the lower Mississippi Valley and beyond. They were lured by land and the promise of good markets, in the East, the South, and Europe, and of access to them; they were eager to take advantage of opportunities and were not tied down to families and places. They even established farms in an area known as "the Great American Desert," encouraged by a theory that "Rain follows the plow." From 1860 to 1910, the greatest period of farm building in our history, the number of rural people increased from 18 to nearly 50 million, and they enlarged the number of farms from 2 to 6.4 million.

By the beginning of the twentieth century, American farmers had developed a complex as well as a large

agricultural system. Influenced by varied land, weather and transportation patterns, the system was divided into several regions emphasizing different kinds of farming and ranching. In the Northeast, dairying was most important. Cotton was the chief cash crop in the Deep South. Midwestern farmers raised a wide variety of crops and livestock but emphasized corn and hogs. On the Great Plains, wheat was dominant, cattle important. Rural people in the Rocky Mountains focused their energies on livestock while those in the Far West raised many different things. That vast area contained several quite different sub-regions.

Rural America contained ethnic and racial as well as economic divisions. Among the whites, the largest groups were English, Scotch-Irish, German and Scandinavian in origin. There were also large numbers of blacks, nearly all of them in the South.

The agricultural system was in the late stages of its first technological revolution. It had begun before the Civil War, had been accelerated by it, and had moved forward rapidly after the war. The revolution involved the development of machines such as cultivators and reapers and the substitution of animal power for human power. By 1900, even the horse had lost one of its jobs as the steam engine was now widely used in the threshing of wheat. The new technology permitted farmers to work faster and accomplish more, but work with horses was hot and hard, and there was still much hand labor, especially in the South. Women and children as well as men had much work to do, and farm families, unlike many city families, did not have the benefits of running water and electricity.

Jefferson's Dream and Rural Society

With farming still demanding much work by people, the agricultural population was large, as Jefferson had hoped it would become, but rural society did not conform with his aspirations in every way. Midwestern agriculture, dominated by commercial family farmers, resembled his vision most closely. The Cotton South diverged from it widely. There, a large number of farmers were sharecroppers who farmed very small units, did not own the land on which they worked or the shacks in which they lived and even depended on their landlords for supplies. Dependence and poverty characterized the lot of these black and white farmers. And the scene in places like Appalachia or the Ozarks would also have depressed the great apostle of the American agrarian tradition for there most farms were largely self-sufficient and very small and the people were poor.

The nation as a whole had moved far from what it had been in Jefferson's day. Although the farm population had grown rapidly, the urban population had grown even faster. Fed by immigrants from abroad and migrants from rural America, the urban population had grown from 22 percent of the total in 1860 to 51.4 percent in 1920. Although many of the places that the census taker called cities were small, the urban trend was clear and strong. By 1920, less

than 30 percent of the people lived on farms. The farm people had become a minority in America, although a large one.

Farmers themselves had contributed significantly to the dashing of the dream of an agrarian nation. By expanding production enormously, they permitted and helped cities and industries to grow. City people could get the food and fiber they needed from American farmers, and industrializers could get capital from abroad, for exports of American wheat, cotton, and other farm products balanced the flow of European funds. And by moving away from self-sufficiency, the rapidly expanding farm population gave American manufacturers a large home market. Furthermore, by giving birth to large numbers of children, farm women produced many people who, when they became old enough, moved to the city, finding its economic and cultural opportunities better than those available in rural America.

The Populists

Late in the nineteenth century, some farmers had rebelled against the dominant tendencies of American life. Joining in a movement called Populism, they tried to restore and maintain farmer influence by changing nonagricultural parts of the American economy. Largely white, middle-class, landowning farmers in the South and on the Great Plains, the participants produced cotton and wheat, crops that sold in a now over-crowded world market. Served by an inadequate money system, their prices had been falling so that they could not pay their debts or prosper. Influenced by the agrarian tradition, they felt that the America they believed in had been displaced and that they were exploited in the new one by an immoral, unproductive "money power" or "monopoly capital." Convinced that they were virtuous, hard-working people, they believed they deserved to flourish, so they tried to change, not farmers and farming, but the system within which they operated. Not seeking a "Golden Age" free of cities and factories, they pressed for political reforms that would give farmers political power and for economic reforms that would destroy monopolies and change the money system and thereby permit family farmers to enjoy good times. They failed, although some of their specific proposals became laws later on.

The Modernization of the Farm

In the meantime, another point of view was emerging that emphasized changing—modernizing—farming and rural life. It had a variety of participants, including the railroads with their development offices. The United States Department of Agriculture, and land-grant colleges, the experiment stations and the extension services focused their energies on the modernization of farm people, their institutions, and their practices. The people involved in the establishment

and early operations of these agencies believed that farmers and farms were very important; they also believed that farm practices needed to be changed. They must become more scientific.

In their formative years, these agencies moved through three stages. The first emerged in the Civil War years and involved the establishment of a number of agricultural colleges and the USDA and the passage of the Morrill Act, which gave land to the states to encourage them to set up such colleges. Then in the 1870s and 1880s, the agricultural scientists and educators and their associates established experiment stations to supplement and strengthen the research in the Department of Agriculture and give the agricultural colleges lessons of practical value to teach. Congress gave this effort a boost with the passage of the Hatch Act in 1887, which made federal funds available for stations attached to land-grant colleges. Finally, the extension services took shape in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. They were designed to bring the new scientific knowledge directly to the farmers and to demonstrate to them that they would benefit from becoming more scientific. Again Congress aided the movement, this time with the passage of the Smith-Lever Act in 1914, which gave federal money for the development of extension services everywhere in the nation.

The Smith-Lever Act was a victory for a modernization effort known as the Country Life Movement. Not a farmers' movement, it was composed mainly of city people, although many of them had been born and raised on farms and all looked upon agriculture and rural life as very important. Many features of the contemporary rural scene troubled them: the large-scale migration of people to the cities, tenancy and absentee ownership, overworked women, poor health, inadequate roads, poor schools and churches, inefficiency, etc. They feared that soon the nation would not have the kind of rural population it needed. At work in a period of relatively high farm prices, they feared that the food supply would become inadequate and too costly for the fast-growing urban population. Thus, they proposed a series of changes, such as the consolidation of rural schools and including the development of the extension services, hoping they would hold the best rural people on the land and make agriculture more efficient. They sought a renovated agriculture and rural life that would be a substantial and significant part of the nation and serve its needs efficiently. Neither flattered or persuaded by the analyses and prescriptions, many rural people resisted the Country Lifers. But Teddy Roosevelt liked them and established a Country Life Commission to push the cause along, and Congress, especially during Woodrow Wilson's years as president, passed several laws that incorporated the ideas of the movement and improved rural mail service and rural roads, encouraged the formation of cooperatives, strengthened the Department of Agriculture, boosted vocational agricultural and home economics in the high schools, and expanded agricultural extension.

The American Farm Bureau Federation emerged in these years as another modernizing force, although one, like the Country Life Movement, influenced by the agrarian tradition. It took shape from 1911 to 1920, beginning with the formation of county farm bureaus, moving to the organization of state federations, and then bringing the county and state bureaus together into a national federation. At first, the movement was promoted by certain types of business people and public officials in the USDA, the agricultural colleges and their extension services who feared agrarian radicalism such as the Populists had expressed and hoped to make agriculture more prosperous by making it more scientific. The organization prospered, stabilizing at about 300,000 farm families in the 1920s, most of them in the Middle West, especially Iowa and Illinois. The members were the more substantial farmers, the rural businessmen. They seemed most capable of applying science, shared an interest in higher prices and seemed likely to give the movement a non-radical bent. And the organization imitated rather than attacked urban business, organizing farmers as urban business people were organizing, forming organizations for economic action—the marketing cooperatives—and engaging in political action seeking policies favorable to their interests.

The New Deal for agriculture that developed in the 1930s incorporated and moved forward these modernizing tendencies without ignoring completely the traditional ideas about farming and rural life. The modernizing agencies—the USDA, the land-grant colleges, the extension services, and the Farm Bureau—participated significantly. Involving more action by the federal government on behalf of farmers than had been undertaken at any point in the past, the New Deal emerged most immediately from the farm depression. After enjoying a "Golden Age" in the years before World War I as urban advance pushed farm prices up and then a wartime boom, farmers had suffered from a postwar collapse in farm prices and failed to recover completely during the 1920s. That situation had generated pressure from the Farm Bureau and others for farm relief from the federal government, but President Coolidge's vetoes had defeated that. Now, as a consequence of the nationwide and worldwide depression that developed after 1929, farm prices had fallen even lower, and Washington, under the new leadership of Franklin D. Roosevelt, responded more positively.

The Agricultural New Deal

Efforts to raise farm prices and thereby make the farm business profitable once again dominated the agricultural New Deal. Two agencies established in 1933—the Agricultural Adjustment Administration and the Commodity Credit Corporation—were chiefly responsible. Triple-A paid farmers to reduce the acreage devoted to major farm products, assuming that this would result in lower production and higher prices. Aiding farmers who cooperated with the production control efforts,

the corporation employed crop loans and crop storage to push up prices.

Both modernization and tradition influenced these programs. The big change, of course, was the vast enlargement of the role of the federal government in agriculture. Beyond that, Triple-A's attempt to regulate production was especially significant for the key people in the development of the program, including the Secretary of Agriculture, Henry A. Wallace, influenced by the practices of the large industrial corporations, tried to persuade farmers to imitate those practices. Farmers were urged to copy an urban pattern of behavior rather than try to change it. Yet, production control was only a means and the goal was to protect commercial family farmers and hold them on the land so that the United States would continue to have a substantial farm population. And champions of these farm programs drew heavily on another component of the agrarian tradition to justify federal aid to the farmer. They used the argument about the great importance of farm-purchasing power for the health of the entire economy.

And as time passed, another part of the agrarian tradition entered increasingly into official thinking and policy. This concerned the great importance for city people of the things that farmers produced. It appeared in Wallace's plan for an "Ever Normal Granary," which became a program in 1938. The official line was that government must store farm crops to assure consumers that they would have enough to eat. The New Deal also launched an experiment with food stamps in the late 1930s to make more food available to the urban poor.

As the agricultural New Deal developed, other efforts to change farming and rural life were added. An old idea of the agricultural scientists—soil conservation—became a part of the New Deal in the Soil Conservation Service and other agencies. And the Rural Electrification Administration, established in 1935, quickly became a major modernizing force. Before its establishment, only 750,000 of the nation's farms had electricity. By 1941, 2.3 million did so.

Furthermore, New Deal payments to farmers and cuts in acreage and higher incomes gave farmers inducements and resources to make changes on their own. Rather than pass on a portion of the payments to their sharecroppers, many Southern planters held on to the money, lowered the status of their workers from sharecroppers to wage laborers, and evicted some of their sharecroppers. And some farmers, including cotton planters, reduced their need for sharecroppers and hired labor by investing some of their new resources in tractors, a relatively new technological development. Tractors had first become important in the 1920s, chiefly in the Middle West and on the Great Plains, and they grew in importance in the late 1930s, even becoming numerous in the South for the first time. In 1920, less than 4 percent of the farms had tractors. By 1940, over 23 percent did.

The existence of extreme poverty in parts of rural America troubled some New Dealers, and they made

the federal government's first attack on the problem of rural poverty, doing so chiefly through the Resettlement Administration and the Farm Security Administration. Over 3.5 million of the 6.5 million farms had less than 100 acres, and farms of that size in most types of agriculture were too small to support a family. Also, many of the small farmers did not own their land. Reflecting the influence of the agrarian tradition, RA and FSA tried to improve the lot of the rural poor in various ways so as to keep them on the land and made loans to tenants to enable them to become farm owners and to small farmers to enable them to enlarge and improve their farms so that they could support families. Some New Dealers preferred the migration of large numbers of rural people to the cities but recognized that there were no job openings there in the 1930s, and the Farm Bureau and many congress-people believed that the federal government should not devote resources to the rural poor and kept RA-FSA appropriations small.

The Jeffersonian idea about the link between farming and democracy also influenced the New Deal. It appeared most notably in the committees of farmers and others that participated in the administration of Triple-A and in the land-use planning that came under the direction of the Bureau of Agricultural Economics in 1938. The Farm Bureau, which enjoyed great growth in the New Deal climate, came to see the land-use planning committees as a threat and brought them under attack, which led to their destruction during the war.

The farm population remained rather constant during the 1930s because of New Deal programs and large-scale unemployment in the cities, but after 1940 it dropped rapidly until what had been a large minority became a very small one. There had been 32 million people on the nation's 6.5 million farms in 1920, and the numbers were only slightly lower in 1940. Over 23 percent of the nation's people lived on farms that year, compared with nearly 30 percent in 1920. But by 1960, the percentage had dropped below 9. Now, it is below 3.

These figures point to massive migration from country to city. In four decades, more than 30 million people made the move, a number greater than the number of people who moved from Europe and Asia to the United States and settled here permanently during the great period of immigration from 1815 to 1914. And the people who moved now had adjustment problems that were at least as large as those faced by immigrants earlier. Neither group had been trained for life in the city. Earlier, nearly all of the migrants from farm to city had been whites; now, many were blacks from the South and victims of the poverty and poor schooling that the region had provided for them.

"The United States was born in the country and has moved to the city," one historian, Richard Hofstadter, wrote nearly 30 years ago. His observation is even truer today than when he made it.

What are the factors responsible for this enormously significant change in American life since 1940?

One is a constant of American history: the relatively high rural birth rate. But that is not the most significant part of the story. Why didn't people who were born on farms remain in agriculture? The main part of the answer is that they were not needed there but could be put to work in the cities, at least much of the time.

A New Technological Revolution

Although marred by frequent recessions, the years since 1940 have been boom times that have expanded greatly the number of urban jobs. World War II kicked off the boom and brought it to a high point; the nation avoided the feared postwar depression, and the economy soared to a new high in the 1960s. It has limped since then, and unemployment has been substantial, especially in the current recession, but most of the time since 1940, the economy of the cities, aided by other factors in city life, has pulled people away from the countryside.

At the same time, a new technological revolution has pushed people off of farms. It was apparent in the 1920s, moved forward rapidly during World War II, and accelerated after the war. The tractor—the substitution of motor power for animal and human power—was a major feature. Tractors now became much more widely used, larger, faster, and more powerful, and machines were developed and adapted for use with them. The mechanical cotton picker illustrates the change. Responsible for only 10 percent of the cotton harvest in 1949, it harvested 96 percent 20 years later.

There were other features to the technological revolution. One was more productive crop varieties, such as hybrid corn. Henry A. Wallace introduced it commercially in 1926; farmers began to use large amounts of it in the 1930s, and it completely displaced its competitors early in the postwar period. By then, other types of hybrids were being introduced, including hybrid chickens. Agriculturists developed better breeds of livestock, and farmers increased dramatically their use of chemical fertilizer and began to use insecticides, herbicides, and fungicides. These chemicals eliminated hard and unpleasant tasks and greatly increased output. Farmers also became more specialized and made increasing use of modern managerial practices.

The rapid rate of change suggests that farmers as a group were more receptive than ever before to advice from the modernizers. The industrial corporations who had tractors, seeds, chemicals and other things to sell to farmers supplied some of the advice. The Department of Agriculture, the land-grant colleges, the experiment stations and the extension services also functioned as promoters of the technological revolution and contributed significantly to the development of the new technologies. Farmers who could afford to do so now welcomed what these agencies had to offer for increased efficiency seemed to provide a way to greater profits.

With these new technologies in use, agriculture

did not need as many people as it had employed in the past. Cotton planters, for example, substituted tractors and mechanical pickers for sharecroppers and wage laborers as well as for horses and mules. Farmers who employed the new technologies could operate larger units. To enlarge their farms, they bought neighboring land, often freeing the people who had owned and worked it to seek employment in other places.

The federal government helped farmers obtain the funds demanded by the modernization process. It continued the price-support and production-control programs that had been introduced by the New Deal. They were controversial, and critics talked of doing away with them. The Republican Secretary of Agriculture during the 1950s, Ezra Taft Benson, was especially forceful on this point. But the debate actually focused on the level at which prices should be supported rather than whether or not government should be removed immediately from decisions about agricultural production and prices, and Washington remained active in these areas, even reaching a record level of expenditures in 1983 under a Republican administration that had promised a drastic reduction in the operations of the federal government. Thus, it continued to support prices and to make payments to the farmers who participated in the programs, thereby helping them obtain funds for modernization. And the largest payments went to the largest farmers.

That Washington continued to give so much help to a dwindling minority is a problem demanding an explanation. The strength conferred by organization is part of the answer. The vocal and active participation of farmers in politics is another. So are the skills and the positions in Congress of their representatives there. But the agrarian tradition cannot be ignored. It continued to exert influence, persuading many city people and politicians that they must not let the farm population completely die out even if protecting it meant higher food prices and the expenditure of tax dollars. And a development that began in the mid 1960s must also be noted. This was the reestablishment and then the vast expansion of the food stamp program. Here was a farm program that helped a large and growing number of city people. Placed and kept in the major farm bills and the Department of Agriculture, it helped to offset urban criticism of government aid to the farmers and to hold on to urban votes for farm legislation.

Washington also contributed to the transformation of agriculture and rural life in a negative way. After the war, it dropped New Deal programs on behalf of the rural poor and never reestablished them. There were, in other words, no programs such as those administered by the FSA that might have encouraged and helped sharecroppers, farm laborers and small farmers to remain on the land. Some people did suggest that programs should be developed to help such people make the transition to urban life, but here the agrarian tradition got in the way. Americans seemingly could not allow themselves to plan migration out of farming. So the rural exodus took on massive

proportions soon after World War II began and moved forward without guidance.

Even though Washington did help commercial farmers, many found themselves caught in a cost-price squeeze from time to time that also contributed significantly to the movement out of farming. The technological changes raised the costs of farming substantially. Farmers now had to pay for things, like gasoline and fertilizer, that they had not paid for earlier, and the things that they needed to farm in modern ways became increasingly expensive. Furthermore, though the USDA supported prices, it did not drive price fluctuations from the economics of agriculture. So often farmers burdened with debts encountered price drops that forced them to sell out and move to the city in search of satisfactory employment. Unlike their financially stronger neighbors, they could not respond to the problem of low prices by expanding operations so as to reduce unit costs. Some hard-pressed farmers responded to the cost-price squeeze by joining the National Farmers Organization in the 1960s and the American Agriculture Movement in the late 1970s; they staged demonstrations and threatened farm strikes and holding actions but failed to raise prices. And some farmers caught in the squeeze turned to part-time jobs off the farm in hope of holding on to their land.

Thus, for several reasons, the farmers became a small minority in the American population, but they also became a highly productive minority. Their output per person hour increased more rapidly than the output of workers in manufacturing in the years after 1940. Before the days of hybrid corn, yields averaged below 40 bushels per acre; now, yields average well over 100 bushels. Before the advent of the mechanical cotton picker, field hands worked 140 hours to produce a bale of cotton; by 1968, 25 hours of work produced that result. In 1820, before the first technological revolution had begun, one farm worker could supply the food needs of four people; in 1945, as the second revolution was getting into full swing, one worker served the needs of 15 people; by 1969, one worker served 45 consumers; now, the ratio is one to more than 70. The farm person is, of course, helped by scientists, technicians, educators, government officials, manufacturers, salespeople and others.

A Complex Agribusiness System

Family farmers still produce most of America's farm output, but their numbers have dwindled, and their farms have grown in size. At the end of World War II, the average American farm had 174 acres; by 1960, it had expanded to 303 acres. By 1975, it had 376. The average commercial farm jumped from 404 in 1959 to 534 in 1974. The new technologies permit families to farm much larger units than they could before World War II. Encouraged to expand, the owners of family farms rent as well as buy additional acres.

As farms have grown in size, corporation farms have increased in number. Some are owned by families who have chosen the corporate form because of

the legal benefits it provides. Other corporate farms exist largely for the tax benefits they give to their non-farm owners who are not interested in making profits from their farm operations. Most corporate farms, however, are giants employing the latest technologies and people who work for salaries and wages. Some of these are parts of urban-controlled organizations. The large corporate farms are not products of the economies of scale; they are not more efficient than well-run, highly capitalized family farms.

To use a term coined in the 1950s and used frequently since then, American commercial farms of both the family and the corporate types are now parts of a complex agribusiness system. That system includes all of the businesses that participate in the production and distribution of food and fiber. It includes feed, seed, and fertilizer companies, farm machinery manufacturers, food processors, and other businesses. It is in these areas that the most important corporate giants involved with agriculture are located. Some parts of the system are much more important in it than they were before 1940 because their products are more important in farm operations than they were or they supply things that farmers once provided for themselves. And some firms in the complex are linked more closely with farms (or ranches) than others, some because they own farms or own feedlots, some because a system of contract farming has developed rapidly in some lines, such as the poultry industry, which has shifted decision-making power off of the farm and into the hands of firms that supply feed or process chickens or have some other reason to tie particular farmers closely to them.

In this vast complex, most of the income to farmers goes to the larger farmers, but most of the total income goes to the other parts. In the late 1970s, less than 20 percent of the farms earned more than 75 percent of the farm income. Processors and retailers, however, normally obtain about 60 percent of the income received from the retail sale of agricultural products. Farmers get about 40 percent but must pass on much of that to their suppliers.

Agripower

In the eyes of some commentators, the agribusiness system has become a basis of American power in the world. They coined another new term in the 1970s, "agripower," doing so after several discouraging events, including the American defeat in Vietnam and the rise of OPEC as a troublesome force and doing so also in the midst of talk about a world food crisis. The theory of agripower was based on the assumption about the fundamental importance of the farmer's major product, food, and on recognition of the superior productivity of American farmers as a consequence of the heavy application of technology to unusually good land. Food, the theory proclaimed, could be used to accomplish political objectives. "Food," Gerald Ford's Secretary of Agriculture, Earl Butz, insisted "is a tool in the kit of American diplomacy."

American farm products have long been important internationally. They not only enabled the U.S. to import money and goods in the nineteenth century, but the cotton trade persuaded Southerners to proclaim cotton king during the Civil War. American farm products exerted an influence on the outcomes of both of the world wars of this century and were used for political as well as humanitarian purposes in the war-ravaged parts of the world after both. And beginning in 1950, the American government exported both farm products and agricultural "know how" to underdeveloped parts of the world, doing so, at least in part, to influence the course of events. A political objective—the defeat of communism—provided one motive for such policies.

More recently, however, the limits of agripower have come into clearer focus. Presidents Ford and Carter used food in a negative way, embargoing its export, in efforts to influence the behavior of the Soviet Union, and the efforts failed to produce the desired results. The experiences suggested that the theory exaggerated the importance of American agriculture, for the Russians found other suppliers, and the experiences also indicated that the theory oversimplified the nature of power. Its essential ingredients include will as well as resources. However flattering the theory was to farmers, they were unwilling to have their products used in this fashion for they wanted the Russian market. Clearly, although the world needs our farm products, farmers also need the world.

The theory of agripower is a modern translation of the old idea about the great importance of agriculture. Debates over domestic farm policies in recent years also offer evidence that the idea is still with us, but the triumph of modernization persuades me that the agricultural tradition can survive in the years ahead only in truncated form. Surely we cannot argue much longer that our cities depend on the countryside for their supply of people for there are not large numbers of rural people left to move to the cities. The idea about the great importance of farm purchasing power has a somewhat brighter future, especially in certain parts of the country, like Iowa, for modern farmers must buy many things, but it cannot continue to be as persuasive as it once was. And our democracy now and in the future must depend mainly on the cities for its health if it is to survive. To believe now that there is an essential link between farming and democracy is to be very pessimistic.

Only one element of the agrarian tradition seems to have a future equal to its past for only that element is compatible with our modernized agriculture. That is the idea about the great importance of the products that farmers supply. We seem likely to continue to depend on them for a long time, and that dependence guarantees that the federal government will continue to give commercial farmers help and protection.

Modernization has triumphed, and the process seems certain to persist. The promoters of it are firmly in place, and most of our farmers are not conservative, at least in their attitudes toward technological innovations. More of those innovations surely lie ahead. They will continue to displace people, although migration from the countryside will be a trickle compared with what it was. Farms will continue to grow in size, but the giant corporation need not overwhelm the family farm if any one cares about the structure of our agriculture. We will still have some small farms, but more and more of them will be worked by part-time farmers.

Soon no more than a few city people will have memories of life on the farm. Then, only highly imaginative romantics will keep the full Jeffersonian creed alive.

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