

AN ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

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John A. Young

Small-scale farmers are defined under United States Department of Agriculture guidelines as those whose gross farm sales are less than \$40,000. They are typically contrasted with mid-scale farmers whose gross sales are less than \$100,000, and with large-scale farmers whose sales are more than \$100,000. Arguments from cultural and historical sources are cited to show that in fact only two cultural traditions may be distinguished: family farmers and industrial farmers. Furthermore, these two traditions represent contemporary examples of specific and general trends in cultural evolution.

The small-scale or family farm tradition is examined at length, based on results from the 1978 Small Farm Project interviews in Polk County, Oregon, and on the author's subsequent survey in 1985, as well as other published sources. The salient features of the small-scale farming lifeway, including its perceived strengths and weaknesses, is presented and recommendations are advanced for ways

in which small farm communities may be helped to survive or even thrive in the presence of apparent dominance by large-scale, industrial farms.

CULTURAL EVOLUTION AND SMALL-SCALE FARMING

by

Peter P. Caday

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APPROVED:

Redacted for Privacy

Associate Professor of Anthropology in charge of major

Redacted for Privacy

Assistant Professor of Anthropology in charge of co-field

Redacted for Privacy

Professor of History in charge of co-field

Redacted for Privacy

Chairman of Department of Anthropology

Redacted for Privacy

Dean of Graduate

Date thesis is presented April 18, 1988

Typed by Claire Younger for Peter P. Caday

This thesis is dedicated to the memory of my father, Petronilo (Pete) G. Caday, who tried to teach me, a stubborn and reluctant pupil, through the course of thirty-six years, how to properly maintain the integrity of the land and those whom it supports. He was a man passionately at peace, one of whom it can truly be said, "They shall sit every man under his vine and under his fig tree, and none shall make them afraid . . ." (Micah 4:4).

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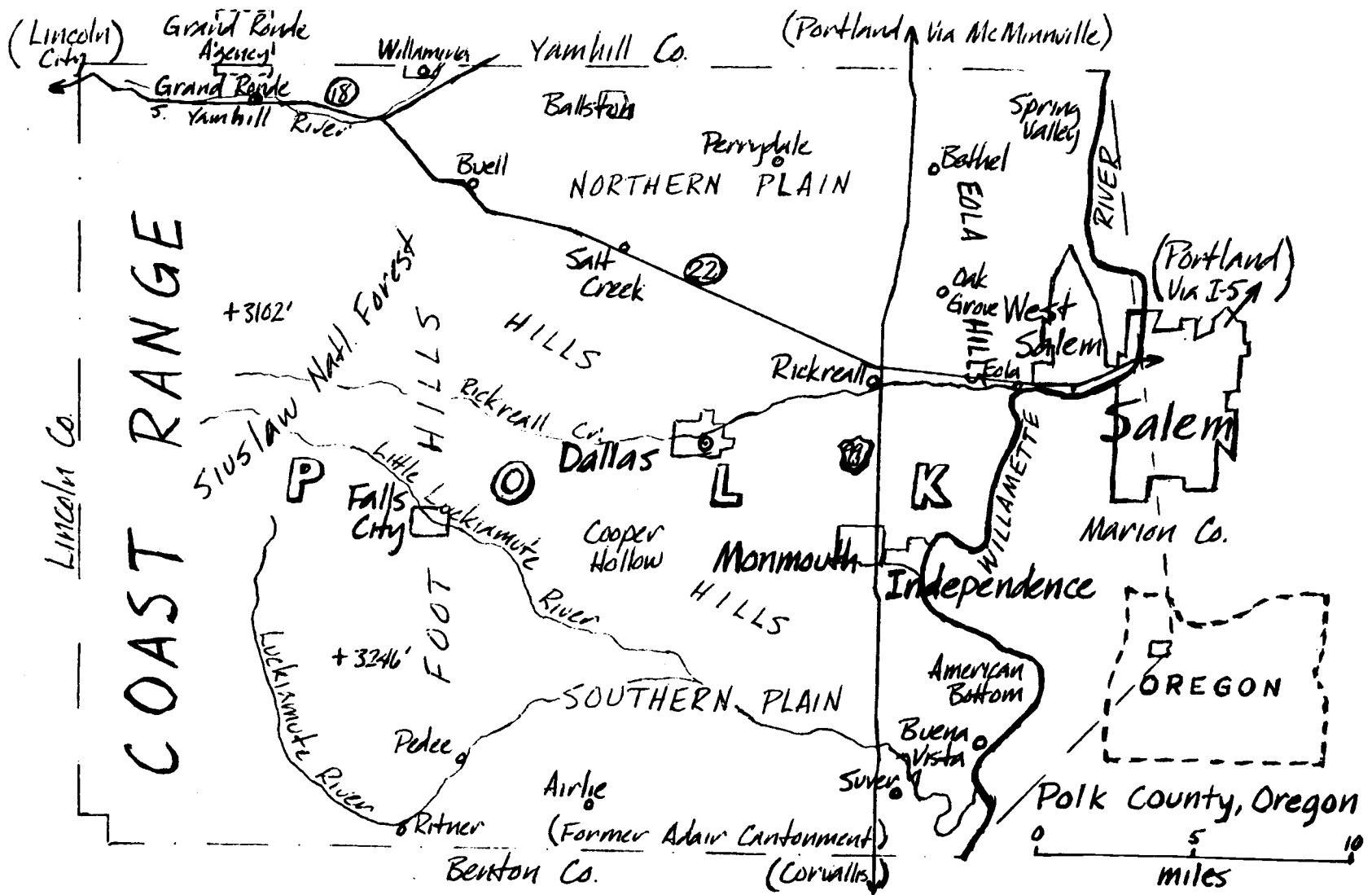
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PREFACE

Much of the basic information and many of the quotations used in this thesis come directly from the Small Farms Survey conducted in Polk County, Oregon, between May and July 1978. John A. Young, Associate Professor of Anthropology at Oregon State University, was principle investigator and the author was an interviewer and research assistant.

A detailed questionnaire gave structure to each interview, but extensive notes were also taken on conversations spanning a broad range of farm topics. Interviews typically lasted three hours, but sometimes continued much longer. Forty-four families in all gave complete interviews and a number of other persons gave extensive background information on local farm conditions.

In each of five areas within the county a minimum of eight farmers were selected on the basis of a ground search of all rural roads. Not more than two farmers were interviewed from a single road and no adjacent neighbors were included in the sample. Interviews were requested from those whose farm sales from the previous crop year were estimated at between \$1,000 and \$40,000 (the current United States Department of Agriculture standard for small-scale farms), and whose non-farm income was estimated to be less than \$20,000. Respondents were further required to be resident on their farms for at least one year. Subsequently it was found that

the sample obtained reflected very closely the established levels for gross farm product sales in Polk County from the 1974 Oregon Census of Agriculture (Young and Caday, 1979).

CULTURAL EVOLUTION AND SMALL-SCALE FARMING

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Who are small-scale farmers, anyway? In some minds the term conjures up the image of a sharecropper with 40 acres and a mule. Others envision a part-time rancher with a section of rangeland and 50 steers. Small dairies with fields of forage crops, small orchards cascading down a hillside to a fruitstand by the highway, u-pick berry fields, intensive vegetable plots, farmers' markets, flocks of sheep grazing upland pasture . . . all these and more seem the natural provenance of "small farmers," at least in humid temperate climates like that of western Oregon. But who are the people within the landscape, who in significant part create and maintain that landscape? Who in fact sometimes abandon the land or are driven out? What was their past; what are their daily dreams and struggles and triumphs; what can be their future? Who are small-scale farmers, anyway?

As representatives of a local subgroup of the larger rural community, now itself a minority subculture within modern American society, 44 families from among the 900 or more "small farmers" of Polk County, Oregon, seem obscure indeed. However, as their

opinions, life choices and family histories are collected through long, painstaking interviews, unravelled by computer analysis, and then woven back together within the framework of a broader historical-cultural scheme, certain patterns emerge. Finally, an overall design begins to appear. The small farm tradition is very like the background pattern of a tapestry of contemporary urban culture. It is interwoven at almost every point, yet is never prominent, always subdued. Furthermore, it is a reverse pattern to large-scale industrial agriculture, the natural adjunct to an industrial society. Where industrial agriculture become prominent the small farm tradition is peripheral or absent.

But turn over the tapestry and the pattern is reversed. What was subdued becomes prominent. What was peripheral becomes a dominant border. This reverse tapestry is the world of the small-scale farmer.

Much controversy surrounds the interchangeability of the terms "small-scale farming" and "family farming" in agricultural literature. Some "family farms" are actually large-scale family-owned corporations with millions of dollars in assets whose patterns of labor, ownership, and management are clearly industrial (McGregor, 1982). Many mid-scale family farms run by full-time professional farmers without substantial labor by non-family members are so closely tied to industrial agriculture by marketing contracts that they are not autonomous family-scale units at all (Goldschmidt 1978).

On the other hand, some mid-scale family farmers are distinguishable from their small-scale neighbors chiefly by the fact that their income from farming is more substantial, either because of greater skill or by circumstances of settlement. Within established, stable rural communities, these mid-scale family farmers play an integral part, often as community leaders and innovators. Despite some obvious differences in marketing, degree of mechanization, or financing, their lifeways and values are much more closely linked with small-scale family farmers than with the hierarchical organizations and specialized employees of industrial agriculture. Although this thesis is primarily concerned with the position of small-scale farmers, it is not thereby suggested that the loss of such an important segment as mid-scale family farmers would not seriously affect the well-being of most rural communities.

Many agronomists prefer the three-tier scheme of small-, medium-, and large-scale farms because it seems to divide amateur, professional, and corporate farms and thus helps identify and isolate certain social and economic groups the agronomists either do or do not wish to serve (Tweeten, 1983). From an historic-cultural perspective, however, there may be strong evidence to suggest only two groups are clearly distinguishable: family farmers of varying scale deeply imbedded in their local communities, and the more mobile, often ephemeral, organizations of industrial agriculture.

Using a cultural evolutionary model, this thesis will attempt to more clearly distinguish these two basic traditions within American agriculture.

Cultural Evolution

In a collection of essays titled *Evolution and Culture*, Marshall Sahlins and Elman Service apply several concepts from biological science to the study of human cultures. These concepts can in turn be profitably used to describe the current American farm scene with all its disturbing complexity. Like the individual farmers that make them up, rural communities are part of "generations" and "lineages" that anthropologists call phases and traditions within the broader context of American culture. These can be shown to change through time, or evolve. For the small farm tradition, one can speak of a pioneer phase, then early efflorescence as local communities grow, followed by decline as continued urban growth depopulates the countryside. Finally, there may be periodic rejuvenations of the rural culture by outmigration from overcrowded urban areas.

These changes can be described as occurring in two modes. The first of these is specific evolution by which diversity of forms increases through adaptive modification to exploit all available habitats of the environment. Specific evolution typically predominates during the efflorescence and rural rejuvenation phases. The second mode, common during pioneer or rural depopulation phases, is general evolution by which "higher" forms arise from and surpass "lower" forms. These modes are not mutually exclusive:

Any given change in a form of life or culture can be viewed either in the perspective of adaptation or from the point of view of overall progress (Sahlins, 1960, p. 13).

The use of terms such as "higher," "lower," and "progress" is actually misleading when applied to general evolutionary trends because of associated values. A less value-laden terminology would come from quantum theory where one speaks of discrete energy levels or from the ecological concept of several stages.

From the standpoint of specific evolution, one cultural form can only be more or less successfully adapted to its environment than another. Just because one form is "higher" in evolutionary standing does not mean that it is everywhere and in every sense more advanced or better adapted (Sahlins, 1960, p. 15). What is a "higher" form? It is a form having

. . . higher thermodynamic achievement . . . associated with greater organization, specialized organs, higher mental ability, greater freedom from environmental control, greater mobility, greater dominance ranges, and all-round adaptability (Sahlins, 1960, p. 22).

A key term here is dominance. A "higher" form can be expected to exert dominance in any environment to which it is well adapted.

In the cultural context of American farming, large-scale highly mechanized vertically integrated operations would seem to be, by definition, a "higher" form than the smaller farms that produce the same products under similar environmental conditions, either here or in other countries. Certainly, large mechanized farms exhibit "higher thermodynamic achievement"--that is, they acquire, convert,

and expend far larger quantities of energy, usually from petroleum products, to produce food in bulk.

Also, industrial-scale farms in particular exhibit greater organizational specialization. The positions of investors, corporate executives, farm managers, crew foremen, farm workers, food processors, salesmen, truckers, mechanics, bookkeepers, tax consultants and others on smaller farms may be consolidated into the roles of only a few persons, typically family members. In addition, industrial farms may have greater access to market information, enjoy widespread commerce, and be able to relocate more readily--all dominance factors. Although usually represented as serving farm families, modern marketing cooperatives are similar to industrial farms in external function, even though individual farmers bear the burdens and risks of land ownership and crop failure (Goldschmidt, 1978).

On the other hand, a cultural tradition such as American small-scale farming may be very well adapted to particular economic and environmental conditions, but not be the "highest" form possible. Any period of invasion, disruption, or high stress might favor other "higher forms." If, however, a return to the conditions in which farming communities can thrive again favor small-scale, or as it might be better termed, family scale farming, then the small-scale farming tradition could be said to possess a long-term specific evolutionary advantage under those economic or environmental conditions.

Environmental Adaptation

Faced with the dominance of large-scale agriculture on the American farm scene today, small-scale and harried mid-scale farmers who prefer a family farming adaptation and do not wish to join industrial agriculture have an elemental decision to make: fight or flee. Those who choose to flee will find frontier opportunities for family farming still exist in parts of British Columbia and Alaska, where new rural communities are emerging. The more hilly the terrain, the more variable the climate, the more distant mass markets, the less available inexpensive labor, and the less developed the supply and transportation network, the less likely it will be that corporate agriculture will penetrate. Highly variable northern climates, in particular, seem to be a real impediment to large-scale agriculture (Pfeffer, 1983). The harsh weather and crop failures that occur more frequently in northern latitudes reward crop diversification and also may favor part-time farmers who can generate off-farm income. Another "niche" for small farmers is on the urban fringe where higher land values and higher taxes may place less intensive farms at a disadvantage.

Those who choose to fight, on the other hand, should take heart. More than 150 years after the Industrial Revolution began to change the face of Western agriculture, the proportion of small- and mid-scale family farms in Northwest Europe and North America is still a very significant fraction of the rural population. Of Oregon's 32,000 farms, 25,000 may be classified as small-scale and

another 4,000 to 5,000 as mid-scale (Russell Youmans, personal communication). Historically, large-scale agriculture has required optimal growing conditions, abundant labor, cheap land, and government concessions to be profitable (Worster, 1985). When those conditions cannot be met, industrial agriculture typically moves on to more lucrative regions, leaving the field to smaller operators.

Community Adaptation

Strong pre-existing farming communities are also in a better position to resist the incursion of industrial agriculture. Good examples are the Amish communities of east-central Illinois (Stoltzfus, 1973) and Lancaster County, Pennsylvania (Erickson, et al., 1980). Here, family farming values are so strong and the status of farmers so high that the communities actually expand into neighboring areas of rich, highly desirable farmland. Strong demand keeps land values higher and unit size lower than large-scale farmers find attractive. Thus, the communities can sustain themselves under very good farming conditions even without the degree of mechanization prevalent all around them. German Catholic communities in Central Illinois that specialize in intensive dairying have likewise consolidated and expanded in the last 100 years (Salamon, 1985). So have Hutterite communities in the upper Midwest and Canada (note in comparison, though, that Hutterite farms have a more highly centralized economic structure than others) (Bennett, 1967). The seeds of such strong farming communities have

been planted in the fertile Willamette Valley, as well. Whether such communities, too, will thrive depends in part on the determination and skill of their individual members, but also on larger economic factors.

The Present Farm Scene

In 1978, debate over the changing structure of American agriculture was brought before the American public at a philosophical and emotional level perhaps unequalled since the Great Depression of the 1930s. Bob Berglund, then Secretary of Agriculture for the Carter Administration, sought to reverse what he saw as a long-term trend toward U.S.D.A. advocacy of corporate farming by declaring that the traditional family farm was not only the most efficient producer but also the most desirable basic unit of the American farm scene. Large numbers of family farms built rural communities, sustained local economies, fed the nation at the lowest possible cost, and instilled values of democracy, patriotism, and entrepreneurship in succeeding generations.

Berglund's opponents then and now argued that mass urban and overseas markets, industrialized farming and food processing technology, and the overall efficiency of vertical integration made the triumph of large-scale corporate farming not just desirable but inevitable.

This debate would be academic if the proponents on either side did not have the power through political manipulation of the economy

to make their prophecies, at least in part, self-fulfilling. Farming boomed in the early Carter years, only to bust with the Soviet grain embargo of 1979. High interest rates and inflated land values set the stage for a slide into yet another cyclic farming recession.

Mid-scale family farmers, the quintessential entrepreneurs of farming, have been hardest hit. Their numbers continue to decline according to the latest Census Bureau statistics. News of their bankruptcies flood the media. What should be done to "save" them? Presumably their land and equipment will be purchased by more efficient, or at least more fortunate, better capitalized farmers, whether individual or corporate. Bankrupt farm families may find alternative financial backing to re-enter farming at a reduced scale, or they may take off-farm jobs. In some cases, they may even remain in place, managing their former land for a bank or some other investor. When the farm economy takes an upturn, the resilient survivors among mid-scale farmers will rise with it.

The 1982 Census Bureau report (released September 3, 1984) showed a steady increase in the number of very large farms (those over 2,000 acres in size), bolstering the position of those who hold that nothing succeeds like success, and small is not beautiful but rather inefficient. The general evolutionary trend in agriculture, characterized by manifold subdivision of ownership, management, and labor, dates from the ancient hydraulic civilizations of Mesopotamia. Even in North America, a cultural redoubt of individualism, its origins may be pre-Columbian in the lower

Mississippi Valley and desert Southwest (Worster, 1985). Given the size, diversity, and political advantage of industrial agriculture in America today, it may well be expected to become dominant wherever profits will support its large administrative sector and also meet investor's expectations. This currently includes much of the Sunbelt, but in the northern Plains states, New England, or most of the Pacific Northwest where vagaries of weather render profit margins more slender, its position of dominance is less assured (Pfeffer, 1983). Oregon's Willamette Valley, where Polk County is located, lies in a transition zone where some forms of industrial agriculture, such as seed production, may be consistently profitable and where industrial farming is indeed in residence. As we shall see, however, there may be economic constraints on the growth of large-scale farms in areas like Polk County at the present time.

The final group of actors on the farm scene are the least known and easiest ignored in the Department of Agriculture's three-tier scheme. These are the small-scale farmers whose great diversity make them hard to characterize and whose annual share of somewhat less than 20% of American gross farm income is easily overlooked (Wessel, 1983, p. 45). Theirs is in some ways a hidden economy, most noticeable on the local rather than national level. However, the number of farms in the U.S. under 50 acres (small farms by one of several classification schemes), in excess of 637,000 by 1982 Census figures, are up 17% from 1978 after a long period of steady decline. In Oregon, the growth rate was 44.8% over the same four

years. Although 1986 Census data have not yet been released, they will likely show continued growth in the small farm population.

If the triumph of large-scale or corporate farms is indeed inevitable, why do small farm numbers not continue to decline as do those of mid-scale farms? Besides sketching some fundamental characteristics of small farmers, this thesis will consider both strengths and weaknesses inherent in the small-farm lifeway using a survey sample of 44 farm families from Polk County, Oregon, as a window of opportunity. Because this survey community was revisited after a seven-year interval, additional data on small-farm survival have been added to the original study. These findings should help to achieve a better understanding of the small-scale farming tradition and its long-term adaptive advantage as an illustration of specific evolution.

CHAPTER TWO

THE LAND AND ITS PEOPLE

Polk County lies astride the 45th Parallel on the western side of Oregon's Willamette Valley, within a climatic zone intermediate between Marine Temperate and Mediterranean. Low ridges of the Coast Range to the west block some moisture from the Pacific Ocean, but rainfall in the county still averages from 38 inches to as much as 58 inches annually, falling primarily between November and April. Winter temperatures average 4 degrees C in the coldest months, summers warm to 20 degrees C with cool nights (Atlas of Oregon, 1976). The frost-free season is about 165 days, which is adequate for most temperate zone crops. Rainfall alone can usually sustain pasture, orchard, and grain crops, but row crops require irrigation through the summer months.

Much of Polk County is hilly, providing numerous microhabitats for small specialty farms to exploit. A hill which may be ideal for wine grapes on its dry, south slope may have Christmas trees on the north where it is wet and shaded. In fact Polk County's numerous low, broad hills form an unusual province within the Willamette Valley. Settled as early as the valley floor, it has been farmed continually since with little of the abandonment more commonly found on the heavy, poorly drained soils of the valley's margins. Its fertile Aiken soils, well suited to orchardry, have consistently produced greater wheat yields without exhaustion than most valley

soils. Slow to revert to woodland after European settlement, Polk County's central hills were still largely open in 1936 (Towle, 1974), although they contain extensive oak copses now. However, most hill farms begin on more recently cleared valley soils and continue upslope through several soil changes. Successfully farming such a diverse piece of land requires considerable flexibility, not to mention ingenuity.

Eighty percent of Polk County's farms were classified as small-scale by 1978 Agriculture Census standards. The sample we examined varied in size from 10 acres of prune orchard to 416 acres in largely unimproved woodland pasture. Given the diversity of small farms in Polk County, size alone was no indicator of success. Two respondents derived substantial income from 15-acre parcels, while two others showed losses on 200-acre beef and hay farms. Some operations were clearly among the best managed in the county, while others contained decaying orchards or overgrazed pastures in need of reconditioning.

While the majority of the 44 farms we visited were located on hill ground, 20 included some class I or II terrace or floodplain soils that were basically level and could be irrigated. Of these, only nine actually had irrigation, among them the most productive mixed crop and livestock operations. Over much of the county, irrigation wells were not feasible due to impermeable bedrock. Moreover, most surface streams lacked sufficient summer flow to be reliable water sources. Numerous water projects had been planned

for the county, but only one, a private line, had been completed at the time of our survey. Several of our respondents reported paying high hook-up fees only to find the water diverted for residential subdivisions. Two proposed reservoirs on Teal and Mill Creeks in the western part of the county were to be built with federal matching funds, but after 15 years of inaction those plans were quietly dropped at the end of 1984. The investors who could be found got their money back, but not the dependable water supply they so badly needed.

The largest irrigated farms in Polk County were located on the Willamette River floodplain or along the lower reaches of the Luckiamute River and Rickreall Creek. Large dryland wheat and ryegrass operations also dominated the north-central and southern plains, almost to the exclusion of smaller farms which were situated in the hilly northwestern, central, and northeastern parts of the county and followed the sharp break in terrain, often 60 to 100 feet, between the upper plains and river bottoms. Clearly a case can be made that many of the small-scale farms we found, particularly in the west, lie on terrain that is undesirable for large-scale agriculture because it is so highly dissected. In the eastern part of the county, however, the presence of small farms may be attributed to overall settlement patterns in which subsequent waves of immigrants cleared the brushy river floodplains which earlier settlers had shunned and established row crop farms and orchards near the growing towns (Towle, 1974). If demand for locally-produced perishable farm products should increase as nearby

urban areas expand, as is the current trend, then the remaining small farms in this sector should benefit from their ideal locations.

Rural Residents

Persons whom the survey respondents did not consider small farmers were rural residents, families with five- or ten-acre parcels, who maintained a suburban lifestyle in a country setting. Typically, they kept a few head of livestock, often as 4-H projects for their children, to meet the \$500 minimum gross farm sales requirement for deferral from Oregon's high property tax rate. Although their low farm income normally excluded them from the study group, two rural resident families were interviewed by accident (they initially indicated higher income), and so can provide insight into their relationship with the core group of small- and mid-scale farmers who are their neighbors.

Rural residents viewed their land primarily as an investment or as a means to keep neighbors at a distance, rather than as a productive resource. They chose hillside parcels from an aesthetic standpoint, often abandoned pasture or orchard land they did not have the means to renovate. Consequently, some of their neighbors felt they wasted land and drove up land prices (and property taxes). In the past, larger landowners were glad to partition their less productive parcels when they needed to raise capital. State zoning ordinances now severely limit further subdivision. Much of the

44.8% increase in Oregon's "small farm" population recorded by the 1982 Census is actually made up of rural residents (Harper, 1980). In time, many of these families may well become true small-scale farmers, but at present they are "outsiders" to the rural farm community.

Large-Scale Farmers: The Industrialists

If rural residents were casual about farm productivity, large-scale farmers were preoccupied. Engaged in intense competition for land, labor, and markets with thousands of acres in production, they operated on a different economic plane from the farmers in the study. They might rent land from small farmers or engage their services in some way, but otherwise they too seemed to have little impact on the small farm community. The few large-scale farms in Polk County acted as isolates in the rural landscape. Their workers lived in small rural ghettos distinct from surrounding farms. The low pay scale available to farm laborers mitigated against their accumulating enough capital to buy land of their own. Typically, they would have to leave agriculture for other skilled trades to get ahead to that extent.

Mid-Scale Farmers: The Rural Bedrock

Mid-scale farmers were classified as those with gross farm sales between \$40,000 and \$100,000. Their rural values and approach to farming were much more like those of small farmers, but their operations were larger, more highly mechanized, and usually better situated. They often referred to themselves in conversations with us as "small farmers," too, and were an inseparable part of the rural community. Smaller-scale operators just starting out typically looked to them as role models and mentors. From an historical viewpoint, however, they were distinguishable as second- or third-generation full-time professional farmers whose immigrant forebearers became established in Polk County in the 1880s and 1890s. Several operators interviewed by accident outside the sample of 44 gave us insight into this group. Totally absorbed in farming, they were the great risk-takers of the farming population. Consequently they were often deeply in debt.

The Small-Scale Farmers

What characterized the core of the small farm population? Most either farmed part-time or were retired. Most purchased their farms in mid-life after a period away from farming. Most had limited farm goals, seldom caring to enlarge their operations beyond what they themselves could handle. And most avoided debt as a matter of principle. Aside from those generalizations, there was great diversity in size of operations, crops and livestock raised,

agricultural skills employed, length of time spent in farming, and other factors. Sometimes characterized as "newcomers" on the rural scene because they were associated with more recent waves of migration, their common farm heritage and knowledge of basic farming skills gained them access to the established farming community.

Rural Community

Unlike industrial agriculture, where the organization itself may supply housing, health care, and unemployment protection for its employees, usually under some government or union stipulation, small farm families must work together to build supportive structures for themselves. This may take the form of actual organizations such as local school boards, water districts, churches, 4-H clubs, and fire protection districts, or it may be less formal as in equipment lending, haying teams, sewing circles, and food exchange. Farming itself is such an uncertain activity--dependent on careful judgment about weather, close observation of animal behavior, and knowledge of advanced mechanics and marketing strategy--that the advice and moral support of other farmers may be critical to a beginner's success. Local conditions may vary so much that it is not possible to "farm by the book," that is, by academic background alone. A community of farmers drawing on each other's strengths can overcome a lot of individual weaknesses.

Our small farm survey in Polk County did not reveal the same level of economic cooperation found in similar studies conducted in

the upper Midwest and East (Bennett, 1968; Salamon, 1985; Stoltzfus, 1973). Respondents generally agreed that it was good to help one's neighbors, but throughout much of the county, particularly the more fertile eastern parts, each farmer seemed to be on his or her own. Machinery and labor was not exchanged on a regular basis. Here, orchardry predominated among small farm activities so that it might be that fewer areas existed for profitable exchange. For example, all orchards had to be pruned at the same time each winter, usually over a period of several weeks, and this was typically a solitary undertaking. A group of people could not easily converse while pruning, thus no social benefit would be gained by making this a joint endeavor. Again, cattle and sheep raisers had daily chores, but few group activities in which to share aside from building line fences. All livestock were on fenced pasture and did not require roundup or branding. Most operators had squeeze chutes by which one person could inoculate or castrate an animal without having to throw it, again avoiding the need for team effort.

The Haying Exchange

It was in haying, common on the rolling central and northwestern portions of the county, that the most cooperative effort was observed. There was little profit to be made from raising dryland grass hay to sell, so that anyone with less than several hundred acres to cut had every reason to economize on haying costs. Many of our respondents in this area reported working

closely with a group of neighbors--one with a swather and rake, one with a baler, one with a flatbed truck and elevator--to bring in the yearly hay harvest. Each farmer might hire a teenaged worker to help stack bales, but otherwise labor costs were held to a minimum. In this way, a necessary ingredient for their livestock operations could be secured at the lowest possible cost.

This neighborly cooperation in the central county seemed to carry over into other aspects of community life. One area in particular was outside any rural fire protection district at the time of survey. Residents had formed an unofficial mutual support group to watch each others' houses. They also shared more food than elsewhere in the county, amounting to perhaps 20% of a family's food bill. The more experienced farmers were even conducting informal seminars for their neighbors on orchardry, herb growing, and animal husbandry. Often secluded on unpaved rural roads, these respondents were the most likely to complain about lack of county services. They did not, however, often complain about their neighbors.

Several of our older respondents refused to acknowledge that they shared with anyone--especially equipment which they felt was likely to be returned broken. However, we discovered that these same individuals were leaders of the farm community who volunteered countless hours on school boards, planning commissions, and other posts. Long established on their farms, they were naturally more self-sufficient and less likely to depend on mutual exchange.

CHAPTER THREE

SMALL FARM HISTORY: IMMIGRATION AND REMOVAL

The social structure that underlies modern industrial agriculture is in fact very ancient, dating back to the first great hydraulic civilizations. But the roots of the small farm tradition are older yet. They are the roots of pastoralism, horticulture, and agriculture themselves, as much as 9,000 years old--some 360 generations. In the United States there have been only 14 generations since the first European settlement, eight generations since the American Revolution, five generations of Euro-Americans in Oregon. Most of the survey respondents in Polk County could trace their families back only two or three generations. Yet with only two possible exceptions, all came from small farm backgrounds, even if they themselves had spent much of their lives in urban areas. Farming for them was a family vocation to which they had returned. It was an important part of their personal identity. What they liked most about it, they said, was the independence. They felt it made them more free.

Pioneer Migrations

This concept of freedom, rooted in a relatively inalienable land base that seemed to offer economic autonomy, is something agricultural peoples have migrated vast distances with great

hardship to attain. The dream of owning one's own land drew hundreds of thousands of tenant farmers from the security of the known in Europe to tackle the largely unknown in frontier America. The promise of fertile land held out by the earliest reports, reinforced by the Donation Land Act of 1850 brought "respectable" pioneers from the East, Midwest, and South to settle in Oregon Country. Original families claimed a full section, 640 acres, later migrants progressively less, leading to a settlement pattern of large but roughly equal holdings soon divided and subdivided. What seems particularly noteworthy about the earliest settlers was their relative homogeneity. Orderly and conservative by habit, they worked from the beginning to build a particular kind of society (Johansen, 1986). Their handiwork later attracted other like-minded immigrants, which may explain why family-scale farming achieved such a strong foothold in Oregon.

This earliest migration may account for some of the larger farms and more prosperous farm families in Polk County. However, the ground survey revealed relatively few century farms (that is, farms that had been under one family for more than 100 years) in comparison with other parts of the Willamette Valley. A 1903 study in neighboring Marion County showed only 15% of original claimants still held even part of their family lands (Towle, 1974). It may be that early settlers soon left farming to take more lucrative business opportunities in the growing towns. However, a revealing statement was made by a grain farmer whose family had held a large block of Polk County wheat land for three generations. He was

selling out and moving his operation to the Yakima Valley in eastern Washington where "a man can really farm." Despite its verdant appearance, the Willamette Valley was, he said, a "land of slow starvation." He cited the unpredictable summer rains that ruined his hay and sprouted his wheat on the stalk. There, in the drier, warmer Yakima, where natural forces seemed more under human control, surrounded by a community of like-minded "large" farmers and unthreatened by urban growth, he felt he would be able to get ahead. For whatever reason, we could link no other respondents with the earliest migration.

The Midwesterners

Ten respondents who had been reared in Polk County and others originally from the Midwest reported parents or grandparents who had been part of the great wave of the 1880s and 1890s flooding into the Pacific Northwest once transcontinental railways made travel easier. Many of these families had immigrated from Germany or Scandinavia, paused for a time in the Midwest, then gone on seeking cheaper land and a more favorable climate (Dodds, 1986). A smaller succeeding migration from Japan during the first decades of this century brought more small farm families to the river-bottom lands of eastern Polk County. Unlike the pioneer generation these were all primarily highly skilled, professional farmers.

Family farming boomed in Polk County from the 1890s through World War I. Local farmers supplied logging, mining, and railroad

camps throughout the Northwest with poultry and milk products, beef and pork (Trigve Torgeson, personal communication).

Transcontinental rail links made growing tree fruits and berries lucrative business. Even the Depression failed to halt small farm growth; farmers found new markets supplying the construction brigades of Roosevelt's public works projects. Western optimism increasingly drew homeless migrant laborers from more stricken parts of the country. The Pacific Northwest gained 460,000 immigrants during the 1930s: 25% from the northern Plains states, 14% from the southern plains (Worster, 1979).

Dust Bowl Migration

Dust Bowl conditions of the 1930s brought the families of three of our respondents to Oregon and indirectly affected others as well (those who first moved to California and then later relocated in Oregon). None of the three attempted to make their entire living by farming; all were dependent on outside income to support their small farm operations. Having watched their parents' farms blow away in a man-made natural disaster and knowing the privations that resulted, they seemed to have lost faith that the land could support them. Nevertheless they sought to retain rural lifeways.

Post-War Migration

More part-time farmers came in the post-World War II period of settlement. They or their fathers may have admired the countryside while in service training at the U.S. Army's Camp Adair in southern Polk County, and returned to live after their discharge. Encouraged by low Veterans Administration loan rates, heavy small farm settlement continued through the 1960s while land prices were still at a post-war low. Most of this migration seemed to come from the upper Midwest where small farmers were feeling the competition from increasingly industrialized farming practices and land use was scarce.

Back to the Land

The latest migration has come mostly from the urban areas of Washington and California. Socially more sophisticated, more highly educated families fleeing high crime rates, drug use, overcrowding, and inflation in the cities form the core of this current "back-to-the-land" movement so noticeable to extension agents. Although not so young or idealistic as they are often portrayed (again, almost all respondents lived on farms as children and had some idea what they were getting into), this group was notably more open to experimental or organic farming practices and increased community organization than were the post-war migrants. Eight of the 44 operators we interviewed had purchased their land since 1973.

The "back-to-the-land" tide recorded by the 1982 Census may ebb if interest rates for farm mortgages should begin to rise again. Indeed, one long established respondent referred to the newcomers as "boomers." "When times are good they boom in, then in a few years they boom right out again." This may be true of rural residents who are totally dependent on local employment but is much less pertinent to other small farm groups. The more committed farm families seemed determined to stay, quickly becoming involved in the life of their communities. Of them, one of our most experienced respondents commented: "Those people moving back into the country for the quality of its life will cause the rebirth of our rural communities. I'm sure of it!"

Ethnicity

One final note on migration: Polk County does not seem to have the clear-cut ethnic communities found in some other parts of the Willamette Valley (such as the Russian Old Believers of Woodburn, the German Catholics of Mt. Angel, or the Scandinavians of Junction City) or, indeed, as in the East and Midwest (Stoltzfus, 1973). Individual families have come to settle in the Yankee tradition (Salamon, 1985), more or less on their own, rather than as parts of whole migrating communities. Of our sample population, 60% had English surnames, 30% German, and the remainder Polish, Russian, Scandinavian, or Italian. A number of our respondents, especially those who had been reared in the Midwest, regretted the lack of

community closeness they felt in Polk County, while others gloried in their feeling of autonomy. Although several operators revealed themselves to be part American Indian in ancestry, none were associated with the Grand Ronde Agency in northwestern Polk County, nor could we determine that any tribal members were engaged in small-scale farming.

Native American Removal

The first settlers of Polk County to leave the indelible marks of long occupation were not, of course, Euro-Americans. They were ancestors of the Luckiamute band of the Kalapuyan nation whose artifacts place them on the tributary of the Willamette River named for them at least 3,500 years ago (Mackey, 1974). More a grouping of related families than an organized tribe in the Eastern sense, the Kalapuya nevertheless gathered each year to stage a controlled burn on part of their range (Elmer Stone, personal communication). It was due to their efforts that the Willamette Valley was a tall-grass prairie, appealing for agriculture, and not a dense woodland at the time of Western contact (Towle, 1974).

Early European settlers record that the Luckiamute were a quiet, peaceful people whose industrious harvesting of camas bulbs, white oak acorns, tarweed seeds, and other products of the area's natural bounty, along with the culture of tobacco, made them proto-agricultural in their lifeways like their relatives among the California tribes (Mackey, 1974). Any survivors among the

Luckiamute of the disastrous intermittent fever epidemics of the 1830s which ravaged the Pacific Northwest were driven onto the Grand Ronde Reservation in northwestern Polk County in the aftermath of the 1855, Rogue River War (Robbins, 1986). The once numerous Kalapuya at that time presented no threat to European settlement of the Willamette Valley. Their resettlement and that of some Chinook tribes to Grand Ronde was said to be for their own protection.

Once restricted to the reservation, they were to be trained in the agricultural techniques then current--wheat production and animal husbandry (Mackey, 1974). In time, they came to provide harvest labor throughout the Willamette Valley, and it seems many quietly returned to their former homes. It may be that native families soon intermarried with the immigrant population and were completely assimilated. At any rate, no tribal members remained at Grand Ronde after 1890 who identified themselves as Kalapuyan, although at least one family maintained the traditional round of camas and acorn harvesting off the reservation as late as 1915 (Elmer Stone, personal communication). The early removal of native families in what was to become Polk County was a harbinger of more trouble to come.

Japanese Internment

Before the Gentleman's Agreement of 1917 halted the flow, tens of thousands of Japanese workers were brought to the West Coast to replace Chinese labor in mining and railroad construction (Dodds,

1986). Many of these families settled in Oregon where their industry soon converted swampy wasteland and sagebrush desert into productive vegetable gardens, orchards, and onion fields. Tragically, these families who had abandoned their cultural roots and travelled half-way around the world to escape political oppression and overcrowding in their homeland now faced severe prejudice in their new home, not least from local business leaders who envied their economic success. Nevertheless, several families who located south of Independence on marshy bottomland won the respect of their small-farm neighbors for their unremitting hard work and the neatness of their homes and farms (two characteristics much valued by the small-farm community).

These families were part of the Independence community for more than a generation--their children were educated American citizens--when, in the general panic following the Pearl Harbor attack that brought the U.S. into World War II, as one respondent described: "The F.B.I. came and took them to a concentration camp in the Midwest. I kicked like hell, but it didn't do any good." Another asked derisively, "What were they going to spy on, the number of milk cows in Independence?" (Trigve Torgeson, personal communication). But it was believed by government leaders that the West Coast was vulnerable to invasion, so all persons of Japanese descent were removed to the interior and interned for the duration of the war. In most cases, they were not given time to make adequate provision for their land, homes or equipment, but were forced to sell for whatever was offered. In some places sympathetic

neighbors held Japanese farms in trust until after the war, but the families removed from Independence never returned.

Wartime Displacement

A third removal took place in southern Polk County, this time to make way for Camp Adair, a sprawling Army training center. Dozens of farms were condemned, homes and out buildings razed. Two of our respondents were directly affected by this removal:

We bought the farm back [from the government] in 1947, stripped, for the same price we'd been paid [in 1942]. Of course, that was with wartime inflation. There was shrapnel in the trees, unexploded shells . . . they had to sweep with metal detectors before we could plow the fields. It was like starting all over again.

Many of their neighbors never came back. The town of Airlie, north and west of the center of the camp, had been a thriving community with two stores and a high school. "You could get just about anything there. We went to Monmouth [now the closest town] once a month." Airlie today is a rural crossroad flanked by derelict buildings. Much of the former Army cantonment is still unpopulated after 30 years and has reverted to brushland.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE ECONOMICS OF SMALL-SCALE FARMING

Both small-scale (0 - \$40,000 gross sales) and mid-scale (\$40,000 - \$100,000 gross sales) farmers may consider themselves to be "small farmers" or "family farmers" in a social sense. Indeed, in Polk County they seem to share many of the same values--in fact, the same community. However, operators generating cash flow near the upper end of the scale were far more likely to earn their full livelihood from farming than those whose gross sales were less than \$20,000.

In response to a battery of attitudinal questions, none of our respondents indicated that their primary interest in farming was to obtain wealth. This was fortunate because, although seven individuals or 16% of our sample made substantial income from farming (\$12,000 on average) and six declared net worth of \$250,000 or more, in the previous tax year 22 farmers, or 50% of the sample, reported an average negative cash flow of \$2,500 in their operations and five (11.4%) reported average negative flow of \$8,700. Ten operators (23%), the balance of those interviewed, either broke even or made small profits in farming. The financial strategies of these different groups showed why, although their farms might be very similar in size, their income from farming varied so greatly.

Four Farming Strategies

Subsidizing New Farms

The five operators who were heavily subsidizing their farm operations had only been farming an average of 5.4 years. Besides repaying somewhat higher mortgages on their land than other farmers and at higher interest rates, they also faced heavy capital outlays for barns, equipment, and livestock. In only one case did high negative cash flow seem to threaten the farm operation. In all other cases, this initial capitalization had been anticipated and should not lead to long-term financial difficulties provided production increased to expected levels.

Just Breaking Even

The second group of 22 operators who reported subsidizing their farms with outside income, but at a much lower rate than the first, comprised a very large and stable segment of our respondents. Almost all within this group raised either cattle or sheep as their major product and for neither commodity had the market been strong for several years prior to the survey. For ten of the families, this did not represent a particular hardship because off-farm income was more than adequate to meet farm losses. They would have been paying more on a standard home mortgage anyway. But five more elderly respondents who were nearing retirement and whose off-farm income was more restricted found it difficult to maintain their

homes and outbuildings and still pay property taxes, even though in most cases they owned their farms outright. In addition, two young farm families were having trouble maintaining their operations because of a shortage of capital. Actual retirement seemed to improve the financial position of some operators since they could devote more time to upkeep and to raising farm income while drawing social security benefits. Unless they moved to diversify their farming activities, however, it is unlikely they would join the next group.

Farming For Profit

There were 10 farmers, again including many part-time operators, who reported an average of \$2,450 net farm income in 1977. What characteristics distinguished these farmers from the previous group which they otherwise resemble closely? Most noticeable was the diversity of their farm products: not only beef cattle and sheep, but also hay, grain and seed crops, cherries, prunes, grapes, berries, hogs, honey, and milk. These operators did not have larger farms or more naturally fertile land, but rather used imagination and intensive labor to produce specialty products that could earn them a premium, even in the smaller quantities they sold. They also tended to market their crops more directly and had established reputations for quality. Six of these farmers were retired, three with pensions that allowed them to live comfortably, and three with social security benefits that met their basic needs

but little more. Of the remaining four, two worked off their farms while two others were self-employed in farm-related businesses. All four were serious farmers who wished they had more time to devote to farm work, but who also felt they did not have enough resources to make a full living by farming.

Making a Living

The last group to consider are the seven operators who made substantial income from farming. They, too, followed diversified strategies, but tended to have more land available than the previous group, averaging 160 acres each. Five of their farms were highly mechanized, including two commercial orchards and three mixed crop-livestock operations. Two others, however, relied on more traditional labor-intensive practices and small complements of older equipment. Respondents in this group commonly had the advantage of accumulated family experience and capital in their farming endeavors. Of the 10 operators interviewed who had inherited (four) or purchased (six) family farms, five were found in this group.

When reviewing this four-fold subdivision of our respondents according to basic economic strategy, it is worth noting that each group contains individuals in transition to other categories starting with ambitious rural residents and ending with aspiring mid-scale family farmers. What then might otherwise appear to be stratified zones of farming endeavor are actually transitions by which individuals with limited personal resources seek to achieve

their long-term farming goals, sometimes through more than one generation. This is hardly surprising in a vocation whose skills take much time to learn and in which the operator often discovers the full potential of a particular farm only after considerable trial and error.

The Post-War Economy

As indicated in Chapter Two, the Second World War caused serious disruption of mature small-farm communities in Polk County. However, wartime dislocation was just the start of many farmers' troubles. The Pacific Northwest like the rest of the country was seriously affected by a post-war recession. As one respondent put it, "I bought heifers at Roosevelt prices (\$400/heifer) and sold them at Eisenhower rates (\$40/heifer)." Eight of the farmers we interviewed purchased their farms immediately after World War II and had to struggle through the recession. Another 12 bought their land in the early 1960s when land prices were still low but the economy was rebounding. A large percentage of both groups had to work full-time off the farm to make a living. There were definite reasons small-scale farmers were in trouble. Their economic base was under attack on almost every front.

Dairying

At least seven of our respondents had at one time produced milk on a small scale. Five more had been full-time dairymen, milking strings of from 30 to 60 head. Only three still had dairies, and one, the largest producer, was about to quit. He told us he could no longer afford to feed his cows properly on what he was making. Why was the price of grade B milk, used in making cheese and other dairy products, so low? The grade A dairies were always dumping excess subsidized milk on the grade B market, but, as one respondent put it, "The government hurts you more than the big operators. They can withhold supply or flood the market to control prices." We were told of one grade A dairyman in western Polk County who in disgust was selling direct to private customers. One family we interviewed was trying the alternative of selling goat's milk. At least goats were cheaper to feed. But there were no panaceas:

What they're doing is regulating the small farmer out of business. We're limited to three goats when selling raw milk, but it takes three goats to equal the production of one cow.

Livestock and Poultry

Small dairymen weren't the only ones suffering from government policies. In the late 1950s and early 1960s, government support for wheat prices boosted the cost of feed grain to such levels that small-scale beef, pork, poultry, and egg producers could no longer

be sure of a profit. One had to have one's own source of cheap, subsidized grain to do that. Many survey respondents struggled on, buying milling wastes to feed their stock, but still they just broke even. This was one subject on which respondents were unanimous; they detested government price supports. One long-time livestock raiser who made a reduced living by cutting all possible costs put it succinctly: "Government subsidies are ruining the [farm] economy."

Many of the farmers we interviewed, including a majority of those who had just started farming in the last 10 years, sought to avoid the high cost of buying grain by raising sheep which are more efficient converters of pasturage than cattle, produce both lambs and wool, and are well-suited to Polk County's mild climate. Also, sheep are not much affected by the poisonous exotic weed, tansy ragwort, that infested local pastures, could kill cattle and horses, and was hard to control.

Unfortunately coyotes and domestic dog packs were making life miserable for sheep raisers. In the eastern part of the county where the rural resident population was high, dogs were the major problem, having savaged a number of flocks. In the west where there were large forested tracts, one family reported losing 70 head to coyotes the previous year. Another family lost 48 head and went out of the sheep business. Those who raised smaller flocks and kept them near their homes or in barns at night did better, but the predator problem in Polk County was truly appalling. A new high-voltage low-cost electric fence developed in New Zealand was thought

to offer one solution, European breeds of sheep guard dogs another, but as of the 1978 survey few sheep raisers were making profits.

Small Fruits

Our respondents who concentrated on orchard or berry crops reported a more favorable profit margin in 1977 than did livestock raisers. This may have been due, however, to short-term market fluctuation caused by a cherry crop failure in Michigan, Oregon's chief rival for the national cherry market, rather than to a long-term market upswing.

In the 1930s, Polk County had been a major producer of cherries and prunes with thousands of acres in orchard, but now the Willamette Cherry Growers and Prune Growers Associations were much reduced in nationwide market share. And, as our respondents reported, they were two to three years behind in crop payments because of massive backlogs in inventory. Several large growers had started to do their own prune drying and cherry processing, apparently with some success, but internal competition alone should not bring decline to such a major industry.

Our respondents offered us perspectives from both sides of the marketing dilemma. A larger grower told us:

Another guy pulled out of Willamette Cherry Growers to sell for cash. The next year, they (the independent processor) wouldn't take his crop and he couldn't get back into W.C.G. A stable market is more important than cash. Too many farmers are waiting to get in, so it isn't good to pull out and deal with fly-by-night outfits. A new processor is going into business.

We'll wait three or four years to see how he does. It means we live out of the bank and don't get paid right away.

A smaller grower lost his cherry crop three years in a row because it wasn't contracted; afterward, he sold his cherries to the co-op, but the payment was always behind. "The money comes in dribbles. It's like Christmas in June; what can you do with \$400?" A successful grower had sold half his crop to an independent processor for the last four years. He explained, "We couldn't afford the co-op; we need cash to run on." Faced with the limited markets of a mature industry, many of our respondents chose to diversify, raising berries or sheep on the side as a means of obtaining ready cash. One prune grower who settled for the relative security of the cooperative put it this way: "If you had one crop only, two years' loss and you'd be out. You've got to have diversity."

Interestingly, none of our respondents specialized in raising berries, either strawberries or cane berries, even though these were once premier crops in the Willamette Valley. In a good year, a small-scale farmer could realize quite a profit on a few acres, but now, as one grower put it, "You don't know what you'll get for berries right up to picking time." He did know, however, how much it would cost to get the berries picked, and this points to the greatest reason why cherries, prunes, berries, and hops are on the decline in the Willamette Valley, and why fresh vegetable production never really got started when national demand was actually increasing.

Most of the operators we interviewed were inured to market fluctuations; it's a fact of life for most American farmers. As one put it, "You take what they offer for crops and pay what they want for supplies, but (farming) is more satisfying than anything else." What they found harder to overcome was the shortage of skilled seasonal labor to harvest labor-intensive crops like tree fruits and berries. One alternative pursued by two of our respondents was to pick at least a portion of their crops by machine. This resulted in lower quality products, but drastically reduced labor costs. As one of the two said, "We keep this a family operation." His father and an older son ran the picking machine, the younger son drove tractor, and his wife drove truck. Although the initial outlay for equipment was very high, they were able to make a profit.

Most of our respondents had older trees on steeper slopes that could not be machine picked, and needed higher quality fruit to meet co-op specifications. They had no alternative but to hire large numbers of pickers and this led to several complaints. The smaller growers hired mostly local vacationing students and housewives with young children who needed to supplement their income. Some were skilled and motivated, some were not. The general consensus of our respondents was that present workers were not as skillful and motivated as the previous generation had been, which was usually attributed to greater affluence on the one hand and the availability of welfare or CETA jobs on the other.

Wages were high enough so that a skilled picker could make more than minimum wage; however, someone with that level of manual

dexterity could presumably make more working steadily as an assembler for one of the local electronics firms. In other words, there were more job opportunities open to skilled workers now. It also seemed unlikely that the welfare recipients of today were the field workers of the past, except perhaps on state poor farms. What seemed more likely was that fewer children now learn manual skills at home or in school, and thus find themselves at a loss when confronted with a field or orchard ready for harvest.

Current Oregon State Health Administration regulations made it impossible for children under 12 even to play nearby while their parents worked because of the danger that they might be exposed to contaminated (sprayed) fruit. Therefore, growers were expected to teach young harvesters complicated skills at considerable loss of time and expense for, at most, a few seasons of work before they went on to higher paying jobs elsewhere. At the same time, the core of experienced harvesters who could serve as role models and foremen had been eroded by loss of parents with young children who could not afford to hire babysitters while they worked. If the growers turned to the Oregon State Employment Division for help, they reported that they are sent welfare recipients who often turned out to have alcohol or other drug addictions.

Under the circumstances, it wasn't surprising that two of our respondents with large cherry orchards regularly hired Hispanic migrant workers who could be expected to harvest their crops in a professional manner and in minimum time. This, however, left them

vulnerable on three counts. First, they might be raided by agents of the Immigration and Naturalization Service looking for illegal aliens. Second, their migrant labor camps which were only occupied at most two weeks out of the year were subject to stringent Health, Education and Welfare regulations on sanitation, and the number and relationship of occupants in each room (brothers and sisters could not share the same room). These regulations could be very expensive to meet. And third, if the crop was poor or hard to pick the migrants would move on to find better conditions, leaving the growers' orchards unharvested. In summary, although the orchardists and berry growers we interviewed raised crops of potentially high value, an uncertain market and problematic labor supply made converting crops into profit a difficult proposition for many of them.

Grain and Seed

The last major field of production engaged in by seven of our respondents was raising wheat and/or seed crops. All but one operator made simple profits on moderate acreages of 60 to 200 acres without appreciable benefit from P.I.K. (Payment In Kind) or other government price support programs. Two younger farmers had heavy investments in new machinery and made little or no profit. The remaining five used older equipment and manured their fields to maintain soil fertility and cut fertilizer costs--a major factor in wheat production. All but one also used crimson clover rotations to

further build up the soil. These last five were true small farm traditionalists, among the most experienced and knowledgeable of our respondents. One had farmed for more than 40 years, two for more than 50. They either shipped their wheat to Portland terminals or deposited it in local granaries which they agreed were generally well-managed. Their seed crops were also sold locally. Their income from farming was low, on the order of \$6,000 to \$9,000, but stable. Two farmed full-time; the others worked off the farm or had retirement benefits. In order to survive in farming on limited income, these individuals sought more than any other group we interviewed to cut costs and eliminate waste. They hired little help, did their own repairs, and lived out of their gardens. One operator told us,

People around here farming 2,000 acres are having as hard a time as small farmers. They don't make as much per acre as I do. Farming has been good to us on this little place, but it's not for everyone.

Since the time of our interviews, wheat has fallen in price from \$6 per bushel to as low as \$2.85--well below production cost. None of our respondents was totally dependent on wheat; most raised livestock as well, and low grain prices usually mean better times for beef raisers. However, even at the height of the wheat boom, one respondent reported he only cleared \$3 per acre on spring wheat. He planned to give up renting wheat ground and concentrate on growing beet seed on his own acreage.

CHAPTER FIVE

MOTIVATION IN SMALL-SCALE FARMING

Given the economic problems besetting every major group of small-scale farmers interviewed in Polk County, the question may well be asked: Why do they continue to farm? How can they maintain their supporting communities and land base? Truck gardens and orchards were being uprooted in west Salem to make way for housing tracts. Hill land was being zoned for five-acre rural residential sized parcels, driving land prices, and consequently property taxes, beyond the capacity of farmers to pay. Meanwhile, just a little to the west, land was zoned to Exclusive Farm Use (EFU), 20 acre minimum, so that married children could not easily settle near their farming parents if their parents owned smaller acreages, but must live elsewhere, usually in town, making generational transitions much more difficult and abrupt. In the western portion of the county, timber companies were expanding their already large holdings, usually at the expense of small-scale beef and sheep raisers who had not made money in years but owned valuable timberland. And on the central plains, larger-scale farmers and agribusinesses stood ready to buy up any farms sold under duress.

Most of our respondents were committed to farming; their simple presence in the face of long-term economic hardship proved that. Their ideal seemed to be the strong family and community based

agriculture many remembered as having thrived during World War II.

One of the younger operators told us,

People often don't need the latest information on small farms; they need good techniques from thirty years ago when small farms were successful.

However, only a stable economy could make such a recovery possible.

Older respondents remembered that farm work could be sheer drudgery without machinery. They felt that young people had higher expectations, that they demanded more personal freedom and less sacrifice than small farming generally afforded. It was literally up to the new generation to prove them wrong.

A Family Endeavor

Younger families had powerful reasons to make the attempt. They wanted a healthful environment in which their children could grow up. They wanted the security of owning productive land. They wanted to carry on a family tradition in farming. To achieve these goals would require careful, realistic planning, hard work, and doing without some of the luxuries and conveniences common to more urbanized areas. Older respondents, particularly in areas threatened by urban encroachment, voiced fears for their children's future: "Young people can't afford to buy houses or land; they'll be renters all their lives." Or, "Little places now cost so much, farmers can't afford them." Or,

Nobody makes a living on these hills farming; if it wasn't for the farm deferrals [on property taxes] people get around here they couldn't afford to farm.

One man remarked, "If I had enough money to go into farming, I think I'd invest it in something else." Another said, "If a person had enough money to start farming, he could retire. I think a person's crazy if they buy a farm and try to make money off it."

Here are some comments from families that do buy farms: "I gave up security and a good future to go into small farming. It's a gamble, but we've enjoyed this last year." "Farming teaches children good values; it teaches planning and responsibility." "We've got more (quality of life) now, but less money." "Being a small farmer puts you in a higher social class than city dwellers, though there are no financial advantages. It's a dangerous investment compared to most." "I've heard farming requires the largest capital investment for return of any business in America now." A respondent who had farmed successfully for 58 years countered with this advice:

The biggest problem for new farmers is that they will get discouraged because [sales] won't increase fast enough. The one who sticks it out will be ahead of the game. A small farmer increases his production little by little; he pays for the farm instead of paying rent. This is how he comes out ahead.

Others stressed that small-scale farming was a family endeavor: "You have to do all the work yourself on a small farm. If you hire someone, you won't make it." "I do 100% of repairs. I hate to see a dollar go out for something like that." "The cheapest thing we have on this farm is our labor, so we do all the work we can. It's impossible to farm otherwise." "When I'm out combining, [my wife] will be plowing; that's the only way to beat the weather around here." "If we stopped to count up all the hours [put in by

family members], we'd get out of it; on small farms, you have to be in it for the quality of life."

Avoiding Debt

Most of our respondents stressed the need to stay out of debt for anything except land--in fact, this was a characteristic that neatly separated small from aspiring mid-scale farmers. While 18 operators reported no debt whatsoever, 11 had taken out personal loans for equipment and two held Production Credit Association (P.C.A.) loans. One young man just starting out reported somewhat ruefully, "My banker says you aren't successful until you owe a million dollars." Another admitted, "The reason I'm probably not making it in farming is because I haven't borrowed money." Still another told us, "It's actually too easy to get loans. When it gets too easy, it's time to change banks." The farm credit crunch of the 1980s has certainly borne out his warning. A more typical reaction from small-scale farmers comes from an operator whose neighbor had just lost his farm in a Willamette Production Credit Association foreclosure: "I avoid production loans. They scare the hell out of me."

Low Productivity

To most of the farmers we interviewed, many of whom had lived through the Great Depression and remembered their parents losing their farms, high indebtedness in troubled financial times was an unacceptable risk. Of our 44 respondents, virtually all had chosen to work off the farm at some point in their careers. Usually, they had to earn capital elsewhere in order to make the down payments, then continued working to support their families through the repayment periods. This naturally diverted their energy from farm work and community involvement. One man summed up his quandary this way: "You can't put your heart in farming if you work off the farm."

Most of our respondents maintained neat, orderly operations, even on rather meager incomes, but they could be bitter about the costs of doing so: "Every little improvement you make on your place, the assessor comes around and raises your taxes, so you let some things go." Several persons recommended turning the local tax code on its head: "Taxes should be just; tax people for neglecting their places. You would encourage improvement with tax breaks."

Some part-time operators reached retirement with their farms still in a state of low productivity. It was this characteristic that more than any other earned the disapproval of neighbors who farmed full-time and tended to value productivity above all else. As one farm wife said, "Everyone now wants to live in the country, and it's taking our land." She particularly objected to rural

residential zoning creeping up the backside of the hill where they farmed, but as we observed, some part-time farmers started out as rural residents with room to grow. Another full-time operator told us, "[Exclusive Farm Use] zoning and a decent living is what farmers need." Many of our respondents, particularly the younger ones, aspired to farm full-time, but found it difficult to put viable farms together piece by piece. As one noted, "If you start small, you might not be able to buy next door and end up with land scattered around." This latter condition prompted an older farmer who hated waste to scoff, "Some farmers burn up as much fuel on roads between fields as they use working them."

Government Advocacy

Where can the small-scale farmer turn for help with his problems? Older respondents reported that in the 1930s, committed Extension Agents affiliated with the land-grant universities worked more closely with farm families, raising productivity, encouraging conservation practices, helping secure government loans, and developing new markets. Usually, they were successful farmers within their local communities whose farms were practical demonstrations of new methods. But after World War II, larger farms became the ideal and large-scale farmers didn't have time to be agents. A respondent who could have benefited from financial counseling five years before we met him told us angrily, "Government leaves the small farmer to make his own way." Agents today know

much about the latest production technologies, but apparently little about marketing strategies. They are too highly specialized to help small farmers, who tend to be highly diversified.

Our respondents claimed Farm Home Administration (F.H.A.) loans often go to the already wealthy. Furthermore, commodity price support schemes like P.I.K. benefit only those with large acreages in grain. Only the Agricultural Stabilization and Conservation Service (A.S.C.S.) seemed to be reaching out to our respondents, helping them build stock watering ponds to get them through Polk County's dry summers. And rural residents just starting out found Cooperative Extension's technical information helpful.

On the other hand, retiring part-time operators who were trying to raise farm productivity to supplement their social security benefits had many complaints. When a grub infestation killed one man's orchard, he got little help from Extension: "The County Agent bent over backwards for big farmers, but didn't have any time for me." An experienced beef raiser said,

I can't rely on the Extension Service anymore; they abdicated their vital personal relationship to chemical company field men. I criticize them for that. People tell me I'm behind the times.

Ironically, Extension Agents could have learned much, as we did, from talking with him. Another orchardist observed, "You talk to big farmers and they say the County Agents are never around. Small farmers never see them either. What do they do?" The problem seems to be that while agents were once successful farmers, they are now

mostly part-time academicians who haven't the time to drive country roads talking with farmers about the problems of rural communities.

Will chemical or farm equipment representatives, seemingly the only agents who will visit farmers where they live, give fair appraisals of cost-benefit problems on which the farmer's livelihood depends? Only to the point of mutual survival. After all, they have their companies' products to sell. Naturally, they concentrate their efforts where sales are greatest--on the largest farms. This circumstance led one of our respondents to observe, "Corporate farms are dumps for industry." Another said, "Small farmers need a voice. Agribusiness has advertising, lobbies, political power, surveys. . . ." Government agencies no longer serve as small farm advocates, despite an occasional recital of the Jeffersonian ideal. Because their commercial viability may well depend on them, local business communities have a direct interest in preserving small family farms (Goldschmidt, 1978); but small farmers and small farm communities must speak for themselves, both on the local and national scenes.

What About Cooperatives?

Marketing co-operatives sustained mid-scale and serious small-scale farmers from the Depression era through the 1960s. They could still provide marketing expertise and share tips on increasing productivity. One man who sold to Willamette Cherry Growers told us, "Cooperatives should be the answer for small farms, but aren't."

He knew of three co-ops locally that were in financial trouble. Had they grown too large to be responsive to their primary producers?

"Mayflower Farms was a true co-op in the Thirties; my father made money with them. But then they began to bottle milk and became just another processor."

Were they poorly run? "The managers of most co-ops are working for the big guys." Proportionate voting and unlimited membership has made American cooperatives particularly vulnerable to takeover by relatively few persons, usually to the detriment of other members. Are co-ops disadvantaged by selling to independent distributors, rather than marketing directly themselves?

The man who makes the real money is the [broker] sitting there in his big padded chair. We only get a nickel per jar of maraschino cherries. Shoppers don't know this. The middleman is getting all of it, just like mobsters.

It may be that small-scale farmers need small, locally run cooperatives that give equal representation to each producer and have limited membership. Such cooperatives should hire workers sparingly, marketing directly where possible to cut all possible overhead. In this way, they may be truly competitive with larger suppliers, at least for certain commodities.

Farm Organizations

Is there any other hope for small-scale farmers? They could band together to lobby the government for special treatment as many other groups do. Several of our respondents belonged to the National Farmers Organization (N.F.O.) even though they felt it represented the interests of larger-scale farmers than themselves. One predicted, "The N.F.O. will deteriorate to a social organization as the Grange did; farmers are too independent to attend meetings and stick together." Aside from offering insurance, the Farm Bureau seemed to contribute little support to its members among our respondents. Again, it usually represented the interests of larger farmers.

Tilth, an organic farmers group, is a growing organization in the Northwest, but did not appear to reach out to more established small farmers like those we interviewed, even though its interests and approaches to problems were in many ways similar to theirs. As one 4-H leader among our respondents remarked,

The average farm in Japan is two acres and supports six people--it's mind boggling. We write to them and say we can't make a living on 70 acres."

Japanese agriculture may be heavily government subsidized; nevertheless, its productivity is reported to be 10 times that of the U.S. per acre (Goldschmidt, 1978). If Tilth emphasized high productivity as well as organic purity, it might well appeal to a much broader membership.

Hard Times

Deeply intertwined with their determination to keep farming as they did and to stay on the land was one thought that ran through many respondents' conversations. A former executive who had brought his family "back to the land" said it bluntly: "Maybe what this country needs is a good depression." A retired couple who had lived on farms most of their lives added, "A depression would cause people to think about economizing." Let the big farms thrive in boom times; the small-scale farmers would survive when times got hard, if not as individuals, then as communities. One deeply committed farm wife said this: "I don't think farmers need to be 'preserved' like an endangered species. They should be able to hold their own."

CHAPTER SIX

SMALL-SCALE FARMING REVIEWED

Small Farm Survivals

In the spring of 1985, a follow-up study of the Small Farm Survey was undertaken. After five years in a serious farming recession, how had the 44 respondents fared? The original study had been conducted in such a way as to establish an "ethnographic present" of selected Polk County small farmers as of summer 1978. Would further investigation in view of the current crisis shed new light on the strengths and weaknesses of those farm operations so carefully detailed seven years before? Forty-one of the 44 original respondents expected to still be farming in five years--quite a measure of optimism, given the personal and financial difficulties many of them faced, even at that time. Was there some hidden strength in the small farm way of life that might allow them to succeed when seemingly better trained, better advised, better equipped farmers were failing? The only way to find out would be to contact each farm family again, talk with them, observe their operations, and note what changes, if any, had taken place in the intervening years.

In six days of interviewing, it was possible in almost every case either to talk directly with the original respondents or to discover their current status from family members, former neighbors,

or the present residents of the farms. In every case where the original respondents were still living on their farms, the question was posed whether they had increased their farming involvement; that is, purchased or rented more land, spent more time farming, acquired new markets, or developed new product lines. Conversely, had they decreased their involvement: sold or rented out land, spent less time farming, or decreased production? Or, had their farm operations remained basically unchanged in seven years? At the conclusion of the original study, a list of the major problems that each farmer faced had been compiled. These ranged from health loss and inadequate machinery to high debt, lack of capital, and loss of markets. It was felt that fully 29 of the 44 families we interviewed, or 66% of the total, faced serious threats of this sort.

Would our respondents show the same high rate of failure as other small businessmen? They not only had a portion of their livelihood at stake, but their families' homes as well. Since the majority were advanced in age, their failure, although less likely on strictly economic grounds, would cause them serious dislocation. Moreover, many of the younger families did not have the long experience in farming that might carry them through difficult times. A high attrition rate was a definite possibility when the following survey was launched.

To Live on a Farm

When first questioned, 93% of our respondents indicated their primary goal in farming was not to make money, but to live on their farms. After seven years, 37 of the 44 families (or 84.1%) still did.

Table 1: Family Residential Continuity

| Location | Number | Percentage | |
|-------------------------------|--------|------------|-------|
| Within community: | | | |
| Unchanged | 37 | 84.1% | |
| Relocated farm | 1 | 2.25% | 88.6% |
| Relocated off farm | 1 | 2.25% | |
| Outside community: | | | |
| Relocated near work | 3 | 6.8% | |
| Relocated because of death | 2 | 4.6% | 11.4% |
| | 44 | 100.0% | |
| TOTAL | | | |

Seven families had moved. One had remained in the local community, working with the family lumber business, and one had relocated to another farm nearby. Two others had moved to nearby towns to be nearer their work, and one had gone to a more distant city in the state seeking work. In two of three cases where respondents had died, their farms had been sold outside the family. Thus, in 39 of the 44 cases, the families had remained either on their original farms or nearby, a total of 88.6% community continuity over seven years.

In the original study, each family could be placed on a continuum of involvement in or commitment to farming. Some were clearly rural residential, spending a proportionately smaller amount of time in farm activity, devoting fewer financial resources to farming, deriving a smaller percentage of family income from farming, and taking little part in farm community affairs. Others were intensely committed, farming full-time, constantly seeking to improve their income from farming, and staying very active in community and farm organizations. After seven years, especially under the pressure of a worsening farm economy, some changes in farming commitment could be expected on the part of those who had remained in the field.

Table 2: Change in Farming Commitment

| Farm Involvement | Number | Percentage |
|---------------------------|--------|------------|
| Increased | 4 | 9.1% |
| Unchanged | 18 | 40.9% |
| Decreased | 15 | 34.1% |
| Moved and left farming | 4 | 9.1% |
| Deceased | 3 | 6.8% |
| | <hr/> | <hr/> |
| TOTAL | 44 | 100.0% |

Four farmers had increased their overall farm involvement. One had bought a larger abandoned farm and was seeking to clear and improve it. Two other farmers nearing retirement age had left outside employment to concentrate on farming full-time. The fourth farmer, already retired, had greatly increased his proficiency and was much more active in the farm community.

Eighteen farmers had either improved their operations in less dramatic, incremental ways, or kept them essentially unchanged. Several commercial growers had changed their product balance to meet market demands, but had not changed their overall acreage or intensity. A remarkable number of part-time and retirement farms had remained the same right down to the number of cattle in stock.

Another 15 operators had decreased their farming involvement. Eight did so by decreasing the amount of time they spent farming, renting out some of their land or dropping some of their product lines. Seven other respondents had decreased their involvement to strictly rural residential status with no remaining farm activity. Was this high percentage of reduced farm involvement (34.1%) over a seven-year period simply a part of the natural changes that would occur at any time within the small farm population, or was it indicative of undue stress or unmet needs?

Four Basic Types of Small Farms

In the original analysis, it was postulated that there were four types of small farmers in the sample. Although some cases were

clearly transitional and hard to characterize, statistical evidence did support the presence of four groups: part-time rural residents, alternative agriculturalists, older farmers and retirees, and aspiring commercial farmers (Young and Caday, 1979, Appendix C). The following chart shows how each group fared according to the follow-up study.

Table 3: Change in Farming Commitment by Farm Type

| Involvement | Type | | | |
|---------------------------|-----------|-----------|-----------|-----------|
| | Type I | Type II | Type III | Type IV |
| Increased | 0 (0%) | 2 (20%) | 1 (11.1%) | 1 (7.7%) |
| Unchanged | 7 (58.3%) | 2 (20%) | 3 (33.3%) | 6 (46.2%) |
| Decreased | 5 (41.7%) | 5 (50%) | 2 (22.2%) | 3 (23.1%) |
| Moved and left farming | 0 (0%) | 0 (0%) | 1 (11.1%) | 3 (23.1%) |
| Deceased | 0 (0%) | 1 (10%) | 2 (22.2%) | 0 (0%) |
| TOTAL: | 12 (100%) | 10 (100%) | 9 (100%) | 13 (100%) |

Type I: Part-time rural residential

Type II: Alternative agriculturist

Type III: Older farmers and retirees

Type IV: Aspiring commercial farmers

Before looking further at these figures, the reader is again cautioned that while differences between these four groups are apparent on a statistical basis, they are much less clear when taken individually, so that a particular farm operator might easily fit into more than one category. For example, a farmer might be of retirement age but also have most of the characteristics of an alternative agriculturist or an aspiring commercial farmer. Therefore, assignment of individuals to tight groups was at times arbitrary; however, the original cluster analysis was closely followed. (Note also that two farm families deleted from the original analysis due to missing data have been added here where the missing data are not pertinent.)

Furthermore, the passage of seven years has led many of the respondents either to begin or complete the necessary transition between two groups, such as between part-time and retirement farming, a transition suggested by the original data but not verifiable given the limited time depth. For example, six of the original 12 part-time farmers are now of retirement age, as are two of the alternative farmers and three of the commercial farmers. Bearing the dynamic nature of the small farm population in mind, each of the four groups can be examined in turn to see whether characteristic problems surfaced under the stress of an economic down-turn.

Part-Time Farming

Of the 12 part-time rural residential farmers, the operations of seven had remained essentially unchanged. Four of these were in transition to retirement farms, and three already showed the special neatness and attention to detail characteristic of the best of the retirement farms. The fourth was larger and had the raw edges of a hard-to-handle operation. The farmer was looking forward to retirement within a month, and had well-developed plans to increase his farm's productivity that, when carried out, would place it in the aspiring commercial category. Of the remaining three unchanged part-time farms, one was well-kept and productive, while the other two were neglected. Five other part-time farms showed decreased operator involvement. One family had given up sheep raising because of coyote predation and had fallen back strictly to raising beef, a classic part-time strategy in Polk County. The other four had ceased most farming activity and were essentially rural residents. Two of these had sold most of their land, which was being put into increased production by others, in one case by an out-of-state investment group speculating in vineyards.

Whether an active small farm extension program could have helped these four families continue on their own is debatable. Their practical difficulties included shortage of capital, lack of farming expertise, and poor markets, but their greater weakness seemed to be a lack of faith that they could achieve their farming goals. Two had been victims of fraud and were understandably

bitter. A third family simply never got its plans off the ground. The fourth, a retired couple who had farmed hard for 30 years, sold their home and best land to an aspiring small farmer, retaining just a few acres of hill ground and some livestock.

The suspicion and reclusiveness common to many of the rural residents among the part-time farmers interviewed was by no means limited to this portion of the small farm population. However, it was here most marked. Perhaps their peculiar suspension between city jobs and rural homes left some families without a clear sense of community. If they did not have the time or ability to maintain their farms, they risked the hostility of their neighbors whose great pride was in knowing how to care for the land. As in every other area of human endeavor, success breeds confidence while failure produces anxiety and fear.

Alternative Agriculturists

This group of 10 families is the most diverse and difficult to categorize of the four. All its members could be subsumed under the other three groupings of part-time, retired, or commercial. Only one characteristic really set them apart: through application of organic methods they seemed more confident they could deal with their own problems on their farms. While four families clearly identified with the "back to the land" movement of the 1970s, others were right at the core of the post-World War II small farm population. At the time of the original survey, one family had

already been farming for 58 years! A better term for this group might be small farm traditionalists. They looked to the zenith of small farm activity in the late 1930s and early 1940s for their inspiration and actively sought to maintain or recreate a small farm community based on that model. Would their idealism withstand the brute facts of 1980s decline?

In fact, two alternative agriculturists actually increased the scale of their operations by either acquiring new land or shifting from part-time to full-time farming. Both took considerable economic risks in doing so but were clearly prepared to make sacrifices in their style of living in order to remain in farming. Two other operations remained essentially unchanged, although both were considerably improved in appearance from the first visit. Five more had undergone a decrease in farm activity, in four cases due to advancing age of the operators, and in the fifth due to the principal operator taking off-farm work. In only one instance, however, did farm activity drop to rural residential level. In every other case, herd size and other indicators were not much below what they had been seven years before. Finally, one farmer in this group had died just after shutting down his small dairy operation at age 73. His widow was determined to remain on the farm, and there was the chance a married son might return to help.

In general, it seemed this group of "small farm traditionalists" was doing quite well, particularly in contrast to some in the part-time rural residential group, not so much in an economic sense as in overall personal well-being.

Older Farmers and Retirees

It may seem incongruous that when part-time farmers "retire," they farm harder than ever; however, this phenomenon was observed both in the original study and also in the follow-up survey. One operator who had begun with the very basics was now highly skilled in stock breeding and veterinary practices. Another respondent who had initially planned a hobby farm was clearly getting more ambitious. Two operators now in their mid-seventies were farming away unchanged at a considerable scale, even though one had undergone open-heart surgery in the last year and often had to stop for breath.

Two farm families in this group had decreased their activity to residential status because of advancing age. The most elderly couple of our survey had actually sold their farm but retained lifetime estate. Because they lived near an urban center, it seemed certain their now abandoned land would be subdivided for a housing tract upon their deaths. In addition, two other respondents had died shortly after the original survey, and their farms were sold to new rural residents.

Generally speaking, older established farmers were not very interested in assistance programs because of their long experience in farming and better-developed markets. However, persons taking early retirement to farm were in the same need of technical advice and community integration as younger rural residents in the part-time category. Although they usually had greater financial

resources to invest, they could not farm long without developing markets. Similarly, serious part-time farmers approaching retirement could benefit from advanced planning to help them increase the intensity and productivity of their farms.

Aspiring Commercial Farmers

The fourth and final small-farm group we should consider are the 13 aspiring commercial farmers who farmed on the most capital-intensive scale and who depended most on their farm income. While nearly all the members of every other group had purchased their farms in their late 30s when they had accumulated enough capital from outside employment to do so, fully eight of this group of farmers, or 61.5%, had been reared on the land they farmed and had purchased or otherwise obtained it from their parents at a younger age. Their land tended to be more productive and valuable than that of other groups (particularly the part-time rural residents), and 11 of the 13 farms (or 84.6%) were irrigated. In all these ways, this group closely resembled mid-scale family farmers, except that their gross farm income was below the \$40,000 standard. In 1978, five of these aspiring commercial operators farmed full-time, while eight had off-farm employment. This group seemed to be the least stable of the four because of high debt loads and uncertain markets. After seven years, how many had remained in farming?

One farmer had dropped his unprofitable outside business and returned to farming full-time. With refinancing and a loan from the

Small Business Administration, he was on a more stable financial basis than at the time of our first interview. Six other farmers had not changed their overall farming status, although in two cases the operations themselves had undergone considerable internal rearrangement. Both of these were commercial orchards. One operator had changed his marketing emphasis from home sales to wholesale; the other had sold some of his old, less productive orchard to finance new plantings. In addition, two growers had increased their acreages in cane berries, one by removing an old prune orchard.

Three aspiring commercial operators had decreased their farm operations, two by renting part of their land and taking outside employment. One operator now worked for a neighboring large farmer where he felt his skills were better utilized. Another, with failing health and advancing age, needed the retirement benefits of his off-farm work. It should be noted that both of these farmers kept their options open by renting out rather than selling parts of their relatively large farms. The third operator, perhaps the most skillful and experienced we were privileged to interview, was now nearly 80 years old. Before his wife's death, he had sold most of their place to a younger couple and moved to town to care for her, but was now back helping the new family get established. Thanks largely to this remarkable man, they could report a 175% average annual lamb crop over the last three years, a very good record for beginning producers, indicating a high lamb survival rate and the probability of solid profit.

It was clear that farming at this scale was not without increased risk. Three families, by far the highest number of any group, left their farms altogether, in one case under extreme duress. For all three, return did not repay investment, even with relatively high gross sales (in two cases). Unlike other part-time operators who might simply remain on their land without farming, these latter two families had chosen to liquidate their farm assets and move into nearby cities. Serious part-time farmers had replaced them on the land.

CHAPTER SEVEN

CAN SMALL-SCALE FARMERS SUCCEED?

Between 1980 and 1985, bulk commodities such as wheat, soybeans, and milk products had taken a strong down-turn on world markets, thus depressing that part of the rural economy industrial agriculture, geared to export. During that same time, however, the products most of our small farm respondents specialized in--beef, lamb, tree fruits, and berries--had rebounded 10 to 20 percent on the national and local scene, from a low point at the time of our first interviews. This upturn had strengthened part of the local small-farm economy. On the other hand, of the eight farmers who had raised wheat (mostly on shares) in 1978, only one still did, and he was planning to switch to grass seed where there was a chance of some profit. The others had either sold or rented out their wheat land.

Three small dairies in the 1978 sample were gone by 1985. Thus, an activity one-quarter of the respondents had engaged in at some time was now extinct in the survey population--gone the way of poultry and hog raising. When respondents asked what new crops or livestock they could raise for profit, there were to be few obvious answers they could accept. Driving through the rolling hills of Polk County after seven years absence, it seemed the rural population must have grown by 50 percent, judging by all the new homes. Were these all rural residents or were there determined

part-time farmers among them? Were there young families with potential berry pickers, or elderly urban refugees, potential consumers of local small-farm products? Nearby Salem, Oregon, was a growing urban market; metropolitan Portland was not beyond reach. Yet, where were the marketing co-ops and roadside stands to serve those markets? Research on suitable small-farm crops and marketing was badly needed if the small-farm economy of Polk County was to be completely revived.

Six of our respondents mentioned that the small-farm extension specialist in Polk County helped set up a fruit and vegetable cooperative before his two-year program ran out of funds in 1981. However, none of them, though indicating interest, had joined the cooperative. Did it not meet their marketing needs or were they unwilling to give up even a portion of their autonomy? One elderly couple offered their land for a small-farm research center, but no agency was willing to operate it. Such a center, properly run, could have served as a valuable focus for the small-farm community. A successful water project for the area, perhaps based in part on low-pressure drip irrigation from the individual reservoirs already in place (thanks to A.S.C.S.), would also have been helpful in developing new orchards and vineyards.

A relatively small amount of money spent for community development would meet the needs of Polk County's small farmers. In all likelihood it would cost only a fraction of local tax revenues. But Polk County is not alone in its need; every Willamette Valley

county has its small-farm population and there are many agricultural regions like the Willamette Valley within the United States. As the United State population grows increasingly urban, small specialty farms that provide desirable amenities for urban life become increasingly valuable. Such things as wholesome, fresh food, close-in rural ambiance, economic diversity, community enrichment, education and entertainment are part of the urban-rural symbiosis. Why squander this cultural wealth due to a public policy of neglect when the small-farm population is still largely in place, ready to respond to public encouragement and action? Of course, symbiosis must be mutual. Not all small farmers are prepared to meet the urban community halfway. Thus some rural communities remain detached and in economic decline.

Farming Continuity

If the national economy were for some reason to undergo major disruption as many of our respondents feared, small farmers would be in as good a position as any group to survive. In this eventuality their independent stance might be justified. But in the meantime the loss of their contribution to society at large may be very great. More pertinent questions may be: can they actually succeed under the unstable conditions of rapid economic change that periodically galvanize the larger economy, yet still retain their distinctive tradition? What does success actually mean within the

small farm tradition? Is there any means by which small farmers can be assured a cultural future?

Most of the families we interviewed were themselves very interested in these questions. Many had seen drastic changes occur since World War II, when the small-farm tradition was still strong. Would their own children have even the choice of farming open to them? Nine respondents either had adult sons and daughters already in farming or had definite plans for their children to take over operation of the farms. Seven others thought it was likely their children would choose to do so. Fifteen more, mostly with younger children, felt that it was a possibility. On the other hand, four respondents said it was unlikely their children would be able to farm, while eight more indicated there was no possibility, either because they had no children or their children had no interest in farming. These reactions were highly personal, apparently having little to do with how large the farms were or how economically successful. However, with increasing operator age seemed to come the realization that small farms could be difficult to pass on directly. At the same time that 31 operators either hoped or planned that their children would continue in their farming tradition, the same number felt that opportunities for small farmers would diminish in the near future. Thus small farming continuity may become more a community concern than a family one, as is typically the case with larger farms.

Taking Advantage of Environment

As the Polk County Small Farm Survey and other studies from across the country have shown, small farm communities tend to thrive in certain environments. They do not necessarily do best on marginal lands of rough topography, poor soils, or limited water supply although this is the sort of land often associated in the public mind with small-scale farming. The great Dust Bowl depopulation of the High Plains (Worster, 1979), the stump farms experiment in the Pacific Northwest (White, 1980), and settlement history of the Oregon High Desert (Allen, 1987) all suggest that stabler small farm communities take time to develop and cannot necessarily be replicated at will in just any environment, any more than industrial farms can.

The sustainable agricultures practiced most notably in Northern Europe and Japan may in fact be largely due to moderate rainfall, particular cropping systems, fertile soils, and a supportive culture--one in which conservation is widely valued (Jackson, 1980), but they have also developed over many centuries. In fact they have grown out of colonial and feudal land systems that are the cultural relatives of modern industrial agriculture. Conscious political decisions made these mature agricultures possible and sustain them now.

In the United States a truly sustainable family-scale agriculture may emerge from a sub-division of larger farms as the rural communities mature and the trend of specific evolution begins

to dominate. Pockets of rich bottomland, rolling topography with numerous microenvironments, and higher value farmland on the urban fringe all serve as valuable foci for the development of successful small farm activity. Where small farm communities are both culturally and economically vigorous they are far more likely to enlarge their land bases than where marginal conditions make them vulnerable to periodic dislocation.

Taking Advantage of Economy

Concentration on specialty production seems to offer opportunity for small-scale farmers in a mature agricultural-urban economy. Raising purebred, high quality livestock, dairy replacement heifers, fresh market vegetables, tree fruit, berries, and grapes were all profitable enterprises in the follow-up survey in Polk County. Other activities that require high initial investment but may have potential for the Northwest are growing hydroponic vegetables for winter market or the various microflora and microfauna increasingly used as biological pest controls, dietary supplements, and pharmaceuticals. All these require the kind of intense, highly-skilled labor on a daily basis that small-scale operators are in a good position to provide. Other advantages that small-scale farmers may pursue are better opportunity for direct sales where one can share knowledge, recipes, or recreation as well as a product. The chance to experiment, develop new ideas, and put them to work immediately, often with minimum capital outlay;

and the direct incentive to minimize waste and conserve resources are also economic strengths for small-scale farmers.

Product diversity has long been a hallmark of small-farm success. Diversity helps buffer the farm family against sour markets and uncertain weather conditions. Yet if a stable economy were achieved and advanced techniques brought greater control to the small grower, the advantages of specialization might become more appealing. Yet even though the small-scale operator may become highly specialized in a particular product, he or she may still require a full range of entrepreneurial skills. Whether pioneering in Alaska or raising blueberries for the New York market, a multiplicity of skills--conceptual, technical, manual, managerial--is usually required in every successful operation.

Taking Advantage of Community

The diversified, sedentary, traditional pioneer farmers of northern Haskell County, Kansas, were better able to survive the worst Dust Bowl years than were their more speculative, plow-the-fencerows neighbors to the south. Lower debt, better farming techniques, more neighborliness and cooperation, and rejection of an incautious stampede for quick profits led to fewer farm failures and less soil loss (Worster, 1979). Older Polk County respondents also remembered that community solidarity carried them relatively unscathed through the 1930s Depression. Almost all respondents seemed to feel they were well-positioned to face another serious economic depression,

which many expected could come at anytime. But how to keep community strong through a decade of stable recession, of mild, steady attrition? During the Great Depression, churches, clubs, neighbors, and family ties tended to counteract the disintegrative forces emanating from a mass culture. Families in particular were well-positioned to fight the loneliness, insecurity, and depression that a mass culture created and preyed upon (Worster, 1979). Could any organization or movement lift small-scale farming out of its economic doldrums to take advantage of this period of relative stability, however, unpromising it might otherwise appear?

It was claimed by several of our respondents that small farmers were too independent to willingly organize. Therefore they would always remain at the mercy of more organized sectors of society such as the implement manufacturers, chemical suppliers, grain merchants, food processors, financial institutions, even the universities and government agencies who all have their own clear-cut self-interests to pursue. On the other hand, the organic agriculture movement can be seen in some ways as a conscious boycott of all those forces that seek to strip individual small farmers of their land and livelihood. United by common ideology and purpose, the alternative agriculturalists interviewed were the most amenable to organization of any of the four small-farm subgroups studied. They were the individuals most likely to take community action based on their beliefs.

Thus it is not strictly true that small farmers will never organize; only that it is unlikely they will organize in such a way

as to compromise their essential freedom as individuals to join a consensus community. They will probably not choose to organize as a corporate body with hierarchical structure in which the urge to dominate the structure might be translated into a form of political tyranny, and urge to dominate the landscape, or some other tendency that might pose a threat to the long-term well being of their community.

Conclusion

Living within the ecological order requires knowledge, of course, and appropriate technology, but more important is the capacity to feel deeply the contours of that order and one's part in it. When both the identity of self and of community become indistinguishable from that of the land and its fabric of life, adaptation follows almost instinctively. . . Houses and fields, tools and traditions, grow out of the earth with all the fitness of grass; they belong in their place as surely as any part of nature does. This is genuine adaptation . . . (Worster, 1979, p.164).

Small- and mid-scale farmers and their communities are adapted to a broad range of topography, climates, products, markets, and levels of mechanization. They may survive in an urban, industrial world by using land resources marginal to industrial agriculture, by maintaining strong communities, or by offering products and services larger enterprises cannot match. They may thrive by forging a new partnership with the urban community. Some of America's largest farms, on the other hand, are completely dependent on the initial high productivity of irrigated virgin land. It is less clear how

they will fare if they continue to rapidly deplete soil and water resources in the semi-arid regions they now chiefly occupy (Wessel, 1983).

There is an assumption still widespread among professionals in the American agricultural community that small-scale farming is a marginal activity from the standpoint of American society at-large, and that persons who choose this way of life either consciously or unconsciously choose to avoid the mainstream of social life and social progress. They equate the "noble yeoman" with the "noble savage" and consign both to early extinction. In both cases the obituaries are premature.

If corporate-scale agriculture best addresses the market needs of an urbanized society at home and export abroad, then small farms are simply occupying land and resources best turned over to larger-scale enterprises which will use them more efficiently. Again, if small-scale farming is the mode of the pioneer or of primitive agriculture, then it is an anachronism in post-frontier society. Large-scale operations will attract the best qualified, brightest young farmers while the small-farm population will grow increasingly aged and anemic, falling farther and farther behind in technological skill and marketing ability until extinguished as a viable group (Tweeten, 1983).

Both these arguments, I feel, are premised on the American farm scene as it existed 50 years ago, and appreciate neither the skill and determination of small-farm operators today nor market changes that may soon overtake post-industrial America. Some of the Polk

County respondents were elderly and in failing health, it is true; but they had worked out successful farming strategies in their lifetimes. Furthermore, as they left farming, ambitious young operators who were willing to try the latest techniques of animal husbandry, direct marketing, and organic practices were taking their places. Innovation can take place on many levels, not just the large-scale, and each succeeding generation must make its own way.

Although one of our respondents still worked with horse sometimes out of reverence for his crops, his soil, and his cultural past, one could hardly make him out to be a plodding anachronism. Watching his son learn to plow with a big Belgium team made me remember the true meaning of conservatism: nothing valuable is lost. Not every farmer can safely work ground in the middle of winter without fear of compacting the soil, as he could. For the mechanically innovative, efficient small-scale machinery at moderate prices is increasingly available from Europe and Japan, where successful small-scale operations are widespread. Several of our respondents had purchased the latest types.

As population density increases in the United States, and as technical advance speeds both the decentralization of business and industry and the dispersion of urban populations, local markets for high-quality food products will grow, and with them the advantage for small specialty farms. Also, an increasingly well-educated and affluent public may not indefinitely tolerate the adulterated foodstuffs so often the product of industrial agriculture. Food

processors increasingly are trying to accommodate a health-conscious, toxin-wary populace, but it is unclear how some crops can be grown on a large scale or in unfavorable climates without constant applications of pesticides, herbicides, fungicides, and other lethal compounds. Through limited plantings, crop rotation, and other organic practices, small-scale farmers can help eliminate this public health worry.

Family-scale farming forms the background of America's cultural tapestry; it forms the base. If its threads are pulled out, the whole may weaken and unravel. Although it is not prominent, it is sustaining. It deserves the respect of public opinion and fair treatment under law. It deserve its proper place in a mature economy.

Returning to the concepts of cultural evolution, the trend of general evolution is most dominant under conditions of invasion, colonization, and rapid change. Specific evolution on the other hand is associated with diversity, stability, and balance. Both contribute to social survival and advance. If industrial agriculture seems an overwhelming force in American culture today, it is because the nation has gone through such a long and thorough period of economic and social change. If a culture balance is to be restored, then family farming must surely play its part.

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