

ROLE OF THE FAMILY FARM IN MODERN SOCIETY

by

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A family farm is one large enough to provide a decent living, and small enough to be worked and operated mainly by the farm family.

1. Production Efficiency: Family Farms vs. Crop Factories.

In **diversified farming**, combining crop and livestock production, the production efficiency of the family farm probably is superior to an industrialized large-scale farm organization. At any rate, in these types of farming, the family farm has not only stood its own, but has gained ground and strengthened its competitive position in the United States as well as in other countries.

The reasons for its competitive strength in this field may be summarized as follows:

- (1) Technological advance in many lines of mechanization (e.g. farm-all tractors, all-crop harvesters, rural electrification) has benefited the family farm as much or more than large-scale farming, through the development of small-unit power machinery and equipment.
- (2) Scientific developments in plant and livestock breeding, in fertilization and feeding, have been made readily accessible to a rapidly growing number of family farms, through Extension Services, TVA programs, cooperative organizations and other educational and informational facilities.
- (3) Cooperative marketing and purchasing has made available to millions of farmers economics of scale formerly only accessible to large-scale enterprises.
- (4) Improvement in Extension Service work, market news service, communication and transportation, benefits family farms relatively more than large-scale farms.
- (5) Productive employment of family labor the year round is made possible through diversification and various combinations of crop and livestock enterprises.

This trend of diversification is not conducive to the development of large-scale industrial and impersonal management in agriculture.

In highly **specialized types of farming**, large-scale enterprises often seem to be superior in production efficiency. Large vegetable and fruit growing concerns in the South-Central and Pacific States, and large-scale cotton production have shown considerable competitive strength and an impressive degree of productive efficiency.

The reasons for this strength are mainly:

- (1) Availability of large numbers of migrant or resident seasonal workers at comparatively low cost. Since these specialized farming types

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have very high seasonal peaks in labor requirements, an ample supply of temporary or transient hired workers is a necessary condition for the continued economic superiority of large-scale farming in these fields.

- (2) Access to large amounts of capital, by means of corporation charters or bank connections, encourages the use of large-scale machinery and equipment and the establishment of processing and marketing facilities, the latter being particularly important for perishable fruits and vegetables.

There are several trends characteristic of our times which are bound to weaken the position of large-scale industrial farming. Rising living and educational standards of share croppers as well as the need for diversification of farming in the Old South, make cotton plantations vulnerable; similarly rising real wages, unionization and increased health, sanitary and educational requirements of migrant workers tend to weaken the large-scale fruit and vegetable producers. Improved and extended credit facilities and better tenure conditions also bolster the competitive position of family farms relative to large-scale farming.

In extensive wheat production, the family farm, although enlarged to an acreage on which a full set of machinery can be profitably employed, seems to be holding its own. Montana's Campbell can hardly claim to have industrialized the wheat belt in the Great Plains. The success of his idea of wheat factories can perhaps be found in Russia. However, in the grain regions of eastern European countries the development seems to take a turn in the direction of servicing family farms through cooperative tractor stations and processing plants, rather than in the direction of large-scale industrialized farming units.

In specialized livestock production, only poultry, and beef and sheep raising appears amenable to large-scale organization. Egg factories show a strong expansion in the eastern and Pacific States, and the number of family cattle-ranches (with 100-200 heads of breeding stock) are probably on the decline. In dairying and livestock fattening the family farm shows increasing competitive strength in productive efficiency.

On the whole, I am inclined to believe that the family farm is at least potentially superior in productive efficiency to the large-scale industrial farm, regarding the bulk of our food production. Many of the economies of scale now benefitting plantations and crop factories can be made available to family farms through cooperatives or public services including superior managerial talent, and even superior bargaining strength in marketing and purchasing. Future application of minimum wages and social security benefits to farm workers will strengthen the family farm and weaken industrialized farming. Those large-scale enterprises that would weather such developments will have earned a respectable place in the structure of American Agriculture.

2. From Subsistence Farms to Family Farms.

If we eliminate about two million "part-time" farms from our consideration, we have four million farms in the U. S. which provide practically all the income for their respective farm families. Of these

four million bonafide farms, around 60% have been found **inadequate in size or in volume of production** to furnish the farm families with a decent standard of living. Hence, they fall outside our definition of "family farm". This proportion of "inadequate" farms is largest (over 80%) in the South, and smallest (above 40%) in the Western States. (See Ellickson and Brewster in the Journal of Farm Economics, November 1947. p. 837). These are the farms which reported a value of all farm products of less than \$1,500 in the 1945 census.

An important problem of strengthening the family farm is concerned with **increasing the resource base** of over half of our bonafide farm families. The problem of raising efficiency and living standards on 2 million undersized farms should deserve at least as much attention as keeping large-scale crop factories in check. After all, the proportion of the farms operated by a "manager" (which is the most clear-cut criterion of a large-scale industrialized farm) has remained remarkably small during the last few decades, and amounted to 0.6% of all farms in 1940. Although there are, of course, many large-scale non-family farms which do not appear as farms operated by "managers" in the census, (for instance most of the cotton plantations) a strong trend toward industrialized farming would surely have shown a great increase of farms in this category.

Looking at our definition of a family farm, we must conclude that about half of our bona-fide farms do not qualify—not that they are too large and industrialized, but on the contrary, because they are too small and not sufficiently commercialized. A national policy directed at strengthening the position of the family farm should, therefore, place **strong emphasis** on giving families on inadequate farms access to **more resources** with which to work. For example, this might involve:

- (a) Special credit to **enlarge the acreage** of an undersized farm—provided that the enlargement does not make another farm undersized;
- (b) Special facilities for one to five years' **production loans**, (for fences, buildings, drainage, water supply, breeding stock, fertilizer, etc.) combined with a farm and home plan, and designed to increase the intensity of farming, the efficiency of year-round labor utilization, and hence the net income from the farm, with or without enlarging the acreage;
- (c) Aid and encouragement in establishing **public or cooperative services**, such as technical and farm management and marketing advice through county agents, cooperatives and other means;
- (d) **Improvement of tenure conditions** especially directed at increasing management freedom and responsibility of tenants and their security of occupancy.

A vigorous program along these lines, and directed specifically at the inadequate farms, would strengthen the family farm more effectively than anything I could think of.

3. Farmer as Self-Employed Enterpriser.

Perhaps the most important social aspect of the role of farm families in modern national life is their freedom from an employer, and their simultaneous dependence on labor **and** capital as their source of income.

Already in 1910, our country was so highly industrialized, that less than one-fourth of the people were in the "proprietors, managers and officials" group (23%). That proportion has dwindled to less than 18% in 1940. Considering that the "managers" and "officials" have increased greatly since 1910, the proportion of self-employed proprietors (including tenant farmers) in our national economy must have dropped even more sharply. The corresponding percentages for farmers alone are 17% in 1910 and 10% in 1940. This shows that **between 60 and 70% of all the independent enterprisers** in our total national economy are found in agriculture.

In terms of income, proprietors in 1947 received 20% of the total national income payments, and a little less than half of that went to farmers. Hence, farmers who constitute 10% of the nation's employed labor force, receive nearly half of the total proprietary income.

As long as agriculture is based upon family farm enterprises, the whole complex of management-labor relations, of collective bargaining and unionization, of employer-employee conflicts, can largely be avoided in farming, or can be harmonized with relative ease. The agricultural community under a family farm system is a **classless society par excellence**, and is eminently worth preserving in a modern democracy. Many believe that it would be worth preserving, even at a substantial price, in terms of productive efficiency, if such a price would be necessary to that end (which I think it is not).

Since a family farmer derives his income jointly from his own labor and at least in part from his own capital and equipment—usually without even knowing how much comes from the one and the other source—, his basic attitudes toward labor on the one hand, and capital on the other are less stereotyped, less charged with emotional frenzy, and less identified with power prestige, as is the case with industrial employers and workers. Family farmers, individually and through their organizations, could wield a most constructive moderating influence in the current conflict of industrial management and labor unions. Our national vigor and stability depends upon finding a workable composition of that conflict.

The attitude of the family farmer towards government, towards the problems of re-defining and re-examining necessary government functions in a progressing industrial economy and democracy, is also bound to be more constructive and more in conformity with the general public welfare, than that of organized industry on the one hand, and organized labor on the other. The legitimate and necessary functions of government are becoming wider and more important as an inevitable result of mass-organization in all major economic, social and political fields of human endeavor. The influence of a strong and stable farm family structure in agriculture upon the course of the nation's progress will be incalculably greater than the relative number of farm families in the

country's total population. The experience in the Scandinavian countries during the last fifty years, and in the midwest during the thirties, seems to support this proposition.

4. Farm-City Conciliation.

There is a cultural gap between farm and city life that needs to be bridged. That gap is widest where the farms surrounding a town are inadequate and fail to provide the family with a decent living, or where large-scale industrial farmers employ seasonal laborers in great numbers. It is smallest where prosperous family farms make up the country-side.

Many frictions arise from lack of mutual understanding between farm and city people. Farmers tend to interpret the greater intellectual curiosity and mental agility of city folks as dubious attributes of a "city slicker", and town people to take the greater stability of human relations and the reticence of farmers as stodginess and boring attributes of a "country yokel". Rarely do family farmers belong to service clubs in town, or town people cultivate friendships with individual farm families.

Yet, many urbanites got their elementary education in country schools—and will continue to get it there as long as the birth rate on farms remains higher than the replacement rate. One out of every three or four farm boys and girls are moving to town to make their living in some urban occupation.

A prosperous family farm with modern conveniences, communication facilities and access to schools equal in competence of teachers to those in cities, affords ample opportunities to partake of the advantages of city life, and such a farm family has plenty of insights and human values to offer to city people. Developments in such relationships, in such drawing together of farm and city families, are progressing rather vigorously in typical family farm areas like the Midwest, the Great Plains and Intermountain areas, but seem to make but little headway in the plantation areas of the South, the subsistence farming regions of the Appalachians, and the giant fruit and vegetable factories in California.

There is much that farm families can learn from city people in the appreciation of art, music and literature, of the need for human dignity, security and means of self-expression on the part of factory and office workers; conversely, city families can learn much from farm people in the appreciation of the mysteries of plant and animal growth, of closeness to the earth and the change of the seasons, and of the substantive satisfaction which comes from assuming the great variety of vital responsibilities on the part of each family member in the daily course of life on a farm.

5. Instinct of Workmanship.

The farm families in modern western civilization are perhaps the largest and most important reservoir of the instinct of workmanship. While mass-production techniques in industry are destroying much of the personal **ethical relations between man and his work** and give room for vast expansion of what has been called the predatory instincts, farming, along with some learned professions and some crafts, constitutes the major type of occupation where workmanship in the

fullest sense is cultivated. Farming, along with surgery and various metal and wood crafts and arts, requires a supreme blending of mental ability and manual skill, and yields a deep feeling of self-reliance rooted in competence and the joy in work well done. It often produces a rare sense of freedom blended with responsibility, of human dignity blended with tolerance. All these are moral values of which industrial society is in danger of running short. All the more essential it is to preserve those sectors of modern activities where these qualities are nurtured, and to draw upon them whenever possible for leadership and advice in the interest of the nation as a whole.

The separation of workers from the tools of production has been, and still is, the source of many a moral crisis in society, of many an ethical collapse in personal attitude and character. People are developing substitutes for the source of moral strength which workmanship provides—the most obvious of which are labor unions—but no society can ever afford to dispense completely with the instinct of workmanship and the ethical values it creates.

The family farmer's mind and heart are close to the growth processes of life. His preoccupation is with the care of growing plants and animals rather than with watching price margins, or waiting for pay-day, or beating a competitor to the draw. This preoccupation with living things cannot help but mold a mentality and basic attitude more conducive to human understanding and helpfulness than the preoccupation with dollars and cents and competitive out-smarting which is characteristic of so many modern occupations. Who could honestly deny that the cultural environment and the vistas of far-flung personal power in the business world offer infinitely more scope to the predatory instincts than does the operation of a family farm?

Mass production and mass organizations of producer interests are here to stay, and moral attitudes and government functions must become oriented to that fact. But all the more important is it to preserve and strengthen those refuges of individual and family workmanship which can be adapted to the social and economic order of industrial society. Agriculture, in the form of family farms, is perhaps the most important of such reservoirs of workmanship and its moral values. The Jeffersonian ideals of a democracy based upon an agrarian society of independent owner-operated family farms has become outdated; but his vision of the cultivators of the earth as the most valuable, vigorous, independent and virtuous citizens was as valid then as it is now—that is, valid in a philosophic rather than a literal sense. There is no ground more fertile for the growth of democratic attitudes and institutions than a community of reasonably well-to-do and secure farm families. This might well hold even more in modern than in Jefferson's times, because farmers need the stimulus of outside challenge to avoid withdrawing completely within the fence-lines of their individual farms. The independence and self-reliance of a prosperous owner-operator has all too often made him narrow in his interests and indifferent to what went on outside. The growing dependence of farmers as a whole upon city and national welfare will perhaps force farmers to use and display all those virtues which Jefferson ascribed to them, more consciously and effectively in the future than they have in the past.