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A Farm Journalist Looks at The Farm Problem

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My topic is "A Farm Journalist Looks at The Farm Problem. I am glad to give you my opinion on the matter. Not that there is any shortage of opinions on the farm problem, but because editors are like all other agriculturists. We feel that if our opinion were put into operation, the problem would be greatly minimized if not entirely eliminated.

As an editor, I have many opinions on many subjects, and instead of giving a speech on any one subject, I shall for the next few minutes eliminate the speeches - at least the first 20 minutes of each speech - and simply give you my conclusion on various points pertaining to the farm problem. This may be somewhat like the stenographer whose employer gave her a dictionary and suggested that she read it. The next day she expressed disappointment in the new book. She said that she didn't like it because the author was continually changing the subject and she couldn't follow the plot. In order to help you follow the plot of my speech, as I change subjects I may have to tell you when I get to the end of an item.

1. Agriculture isn't what it used to be. It never was and it never will be. Changes have taken place and more lie ahead. Change

doesn't always mean progress; but there can be no progress without change. There is a lot of traffic from our farms to the cities, and from the cities to the farms. Almost anybody can move from the farm to town; but nowadays, you really have to be successful to be able to move back to the farm.

2. Some say agriculture is sick. Their mournful tones might be taken to imply that they are ready for the funeral and permanent disposition of the body. Agriculture has problems, certainly; but is it sick when the American workers can buy more groceries with an hour's wages than ever before, when our nation is the best fed and best clothed on earth, and when farmers are so advanced in the techniques of their business that they can continually supply workers to industry and keep on growing more food than they can eat?

No, agriculture is not sick. It is in robust health. If agriculture were sick, we would be looking for some kind of program to get farmers to grow more so our children wouldn't be hungry. Our farm problem is how to keep a healthy giant busy; not how to put muscles on an invalid.

3. Folks who talk excitedly about the decline in number of farms often overlook the fact that similar changes have been taking place in town. Thousands of small grocery stores have been replaced by

hundreds of supermarkets. So have many other small retail establishments been replaced by larger single stores or by a chain of stores under one ownership. Agricultural industry has been greatly affected by this change. In Oklahoma in 1940, there were more than 500 cotton gins and 32 flour mills. Although the cotton is still readily available and Oklahoma has about the same amount of wheat in storage as was harvested in the past two seasons, there are now only 275 cotton gins and 9 flour mills left in operation. We are a nation dedicated to bigness, and it is affecting every type of operation in our country - not just the farmers.

4. The philosophy of keeping everybody on the farm who wants to farm has failed. Even Congress, utilizing the full resources of the United States treasury, couldn't do that. Now that we are operating under a military government in which the high powers in the Pentagon dominate the affairs of both major political parties, the password to the treasury is no longer "farm relief." The password of today is "national defense." From now on, farmers will have a harder time getting any relief from Congress or the treasury.

5. One million of the best farms in the United States, operated by the better qualified farmers who now run them, can produce more food and fiber than all the farms produced in 1957, a record year.

Nobody in America will stand for a scarcity of food, so we will always have surpluses. The number of farms probably will continue to decline and the size of farms will increase. But as the acreage allotments and farming franchises change, we will continue to have more than enough. There is no use to fret about the small farmers being eliminated from agriculture. They are already out of farm production; and as soon as congressmen catch on to what has happened, small farmers will be out of farm politics.

6. Agri-business, agri-dynamics, and vertical diversification are among the new words and phrases that have come into the agricultural vocabulary in recent years. They reflect an effort to link up the business of growing raw agricultural materials to the businesses related to the processing and marketing of agricultural commodities. They sound good, and give us something to talk about; but they are at least 25 years too late. Had some agricultural visionary of the 1930's identified these related industries with agricultural production, we would be better off. He might have been mobbed by farmers, but they would have been better off. Now these processing and marketing industries are definitely identified with and a part of urban industries. Farmers will never get them back, no matter how many titles we invent to make it look like we will.

7. The fastest-changing thing in agriculture is the definition of a family-sized farm. The USDA and the various farm organizations have to keep changing their definitions of a family farm so that they can prove some still exist.

8. Farmers are producing 36 percent more than they did in 1940, with about the same total resources. There are about one-third less farmers. It's done now with more materials and machines, fewer men and mules. Nobody should figure on going into farming now unless he can do something a machine can't do. The next danger is that somebody will invent an IBM machine to write articles for farm magazines.

9. Agricultural economists have had much to say lately about the fact that off-farm income is increasing so that about \$1 in every \$3 comes from an off-farm source. This off-farm income on high-producing farms now is about one-fourth of the total; and on low-producing farms, it is three-fourths of the total. A survey in one Oklahoma county recently, showed that only 14 percent of the farmers there depend entirely upon agriculture for their income. This is not news to us, because it is a part of the Oklahoma quick-shift system. Other people are catching on to it. In Oklahoma, for a long time, about the only farmer who survives is a conservationist who follows a good rotation of crops, livestock, and oil wells.

10. There's a lot of talk about a two-price system to dispose of our surplus farm commodities. We have had a two-price system for many years. Our No. 1 agricultural market is the population of the United States. Our next best market is the world market. Our two-price system has been to charge the United States customers all that they will pay, and then add a little more in the form of taxes to support government payments. Then we sell what's left on the world market and lend the other countries money to buy it with at the lower price. That is a real neighborly two-price system. It helps in our international diplomacy. We can always tell who our enemies are. They are the countries that can buy American farm products with our money for less money than Americans can buy it.

11. One aspect of the farm problem is the diet fad that is sweeping the country. Millions of Americans have been told that they are too fat, and that they will live longer if they are not so fat. Some may not have much reason for living longer, but they want to anyhow. Science and technology have increased agricultural output per man by use of improved machines, new chemicals, and better management. The output per animal has been increased by better breeding and feeding. The production per acre has been increased by better varieties, fertilizers, and irrigation. Agriculture in the United States is producing at the speed of a rocket and marketing like a firecracker.

People today are not working hard enough to eat as many potatoes

and as much bread as they used to. It doesn't take as much energy to push buttons. At the same time, doctors are advising everybody to go on a diet, charging \$5 for each advice so that the doctors won't have to go on a diet.

The solution to the farm problem is really very simple. We need to make it fashionable to be fat and popular to be plump. This could be accomplished readily by encouraging everybody to eat at least four meals a day. This not only would reduce the farm surplus materially, but it would help to offset the recession that information experts say we are heading into. The change in circumference that might result from eating four meals a day would require many new garments, which would help to use up the surpluses of cotton and wool. Much additional labor would have to be provided to make and sell these new garments. This solution may sound a little foolish and facetious, but have you ever heard about how acreage allotments and the soil bank solved the same problem?

12. The other day I received a letter from one of our readers, saying: "I shudder to think what would have happened to the cattle business had the government gotten into it. I raise cattle in addition to wheat and cotton farming, and if the government ever gets into the cattle business, I am quitting pronto." This particular western Oklahoma farmer settled there with his father nine years

before statehood in the Kiowa country. He says that he has "warmed my hide with cow chips fire and have eaten so many rabbits I still get nervous when I hear a dog bark; but I will never like being fenced in by all this government hokum by pretending to help the poor farmer."

We don't need a better object lesson in comparing the effect of government controls and free competition than exists with the beef cattle and dairy industry. The dairy industry has had just about all kinds of government help, ranging from a tax on margarine in a futile effort to squelch a competitor, to federal marketing orders and price supports. Beef cattle, on the other hand, have escaped these helps. The escape has been narrow in a number of cases, but at least we do not have government iceboxes stacked full of beef. Today the beef cattlemen are much better off, price-wise and otherwise, than the dairy industry.

Last September in Washington, in an interview with Secretary of Agriculture Benson, I raised a question along these lines. He replied that the commodities which were in the greatest difficulty today were those that the government had helped the most; that those commodities which the government had helped least are getting along better.

Need we say more on this subject?

13. In the current series of Little Abner, the sage of Dog Patch and

satirist on the American way of life, a peculiar bird has entered the scene. I am not sure just what kind of bird it is, or what it's purpose is yet; but it reminds me a great deal of the farm problem and the efforts of Congress to solve it. In the series a few days ago, Pappy Yoakum was sleeping off a bait of preserved turnips when a small bird lit on the ground near him. This bird laid an egg bigger than it was. This hatched out another bird which laid an egg bigger than it was. Each time there was a bigger bird and a bigger egg.

So it is with the farm problem. The government program has not solved the farmers' problems, and looking back, doesn't seem to have had much effect on them. The trend that has required farmers to expand or expire has moved ahead regardless of good times and bad, drouth or flood, depression or prosperity, war or peace, and all other efforts to change the course of farm history. The government will not regulate the farmer into prosperity in 1958, and probably will not even aggravate farmers into a new declaration of independence for agriculture. The reason for this is that Americans are people who will fight anybody, any place, any time to preserve their right to vote, and then they will sleep right through an election.

It is the editor's prerogative and responsibility in discussing matters of this kind to view with alarm, point with pride, wave the flag, and to hold forth the hope that good must ultimately triumph over evil. I hope that is the case for agriculture and this speech.