

Farm Writing That Endures Hard to Find

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Agricultural literature, the kind that endures with a meaning beyond the time in which it was written, is scarce. Two examples come to mind from the thousands of articles that have been published in The Farmer-Stockman over the past 49 years.

Both of these items were published about 20 years ago and have been widely quoted and reprinted. In fact, a request from a farmer for a copy of one of them a couple of days ago is the reminder. He wanted the item that won a prize in a readers' contest titled "Here are the pictures; you write the story."

The pictures showed a badly gullied field and a terribly rundown, abandoned farmhouse. The idea of Clarence Roberts, editor who originated it, was to stimulate greater interest in conservation. It did, as more than 2,600 entries were received, many of them very good.

Judge O. E. Enfield of Arnett won the top prize with a little piece he wrote as a sort of after thought following a more serious approach he had penned. It went like this:

"White man crazy. Make big tepee. Plow hill. Water wash. Wind blow soil.

"Grass gone. Door gone. Window gone. Whole place gone to hell. Buck gone. Squaw too. Papoose gone. No chuckaway. No pig. no corn, no cow, no hay, no pony.

"Indian no plow land. Keep grass. Buffalo eat. Indian eat buffalo. Hide make tepee. Make moccasin. Indian no make terrace. No build dam. No give damn.

All time eat. No hunt job. No hitch hike. No ask relief. No shoot pig.

"Great Spirit make grass. Indian no waste anything. Indian no work. White man heap loco."

This was picked up by Readers Digest shortly after it appeared in The Farmer-Stockman and has appeared in numerous newspapers, including syndicated columns in both the United States and Canada. Once it appeared twice in the same Sunday edition of a Dallas newspaper, in a local item and in a syndicated magazine insert. Conservationists used it in speeches.

Perhaps it has helped the cause along somewhat, as Oklahoma has certainly made a lot of conservation progress since it first appeared.

Another Listed

The other item of "agricultural literature" was written by Boston B. Blackwood, who lives on a typical eastern Oklahoma farm near Hartshorne and writes as a hobby. This, too, appeared about 20 years ago in The Farmer-Stockman, under the title of "Definition of a Dirt Farmer":

"A dirt farmer is a man who starts out with nothing, loses on everything he grows and comes out even at the end of the year. Nobody knows how he does it. He doesn't know himself.

"Anyone looking over his farm would think the smartest man in the world would starve trying to tend it. That would be right. The smartest man would starve, but not a dirt farmer. His wife won't let him starve.

She has one basic menu: She cooks whatever she has. In good years she serves half a dozen vegetables at each meal; in lean years it's just poke salad or blackeyed peas.

Helps Cityans

"A real dirt farmer can shape up an axe handle from a persimmon sprout and put it in with a dull pocket knife. He has a serviceable set of harness fashioned from baling wire, feed sacks, and a few scraps of leather.

"He grows corn for the squirrels and provides cover for quail, so his city friends may have something to shoot at in due season.

"He is the world's greatest optimist. He believes that the fact he has come this far is proof that he can continue to the end. He buries last year's disappointments with the spring breaking and lives for the future.

"His faith is not in himself alone. Jokesters say he consults his almanac before he plants his crops and has his teeth pulled in the dark of the moon so they won't sprout. Perhaps. But after a hard week's work he drives miles to church because his heart still holds the eternal truths that worldly, wiser men have lost.

Standard Given

"If any man aspires to the title of dirt farmer, let him measure himself by this standard:

"He must have worn out two pairs of overalls growing cotton enough for one; he must regularly do a half day's work before the sun comes up and another half-day's work after the sun goes down. He must have the heart to plant in hope, cultivate in faith, end in failure and then start all over with greater hope and stronger faith.

"This is the dirt farmer. Heaven help the family that depends on him for its support. Heaven help the nation that does not have him to depend on for its support."

Since that definition was written, the kind of dirt farmer that Blackwood was talking about has virtually disappeared from the landscape. They've moved to town to find better paying work in business and industry. Let us hope that the indomitable spirit of independence, self-reliance and integrity he describes remains in both city and country, because those are the qualities that have made this the freest and best-fed nation on earth.