

Farmers' Plight Nothing New

JUN. 12 1978

By Ferdie J. Deering

The story of American agriculture is a long, sad tale of futile efforts to grow good crops and sell at profitable prices.

In spite of adverse weather, insects, labor shortages and machinery problems, farmers have grown lots of good

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crops and fine livestock. American consumers have been well supplied with food.

Farmers have been far less successful in the marketplace. Eras of low prices seem to begin with good crop yields and hang on much longer than the occasional intervals of higher prices generated by relatively smaller production.

American agriculture can and usually does produce considerably more than domestic and world markets will absorb at anything like "parity prices."

From time to time, farmers have engaged in protest movements to try to break up "boom and bust" cycles. One of the first big ones was a massive populist movement launched by the National Grange and Patrons of Husbandry in the 1870s.

In 1902, the National Farmers Union grew out of a protest movement against low prices. In 1904, the Southern Cotton Association tried to get better prices by voluntary acreage reduction. Night riders tried to keep farmers from picking their cotton and gins were burned, but the price of cotton wasn't affected very much.

By the early 1920s, state, regional and national cooperatives were developing, hoping to control enough of

whatever commodities each specialized in to bring about "orderly commodity marketing and prosperity." Prices weren't swayed very long.

In 1929, the Federal Farm Board was created, making loans to cooperative marketing associations, as well as to wheat and cotton stabilization cooperations set up to control price-reducing surpluses. The Great Depression brought the Farm Board to an end.

The first so-called agricultural strike occurred in 1932 when the Farmers Holiday Association blocked roads to markets and waved banners urging producers to "Stay at Home — Buy Nothing — Sell Nothing." Small price gains ended when picketing stopped.

Another national farm strike called for May, 1933 was averted when the Agricultural Adjustment Act became law.

The National Farmers Organization (NFO) came into being in the 1950s, encouraging farmers to hold produce off the market until prices reached "a reasonable level." NFO sponsored both limited and all-out holding actions, sometimes marked by violence.

NFO continues as an organization, its most recent projects being sale of meat and cheese from trucks at prices members said were lower because NFO was cutting out the middlemen.

At a convention in Memphis in 1974, an NFO vice president appealed to the 8,000 delegates to "shake consumers as you would a spoiled child" to teach them a lesson. Subsequent production and price trends indicate

that neither farmers nor consumers responded very widely to the suggested treatment.

Over the past half century, agriculture has been a major political issue and farmers have received a lot of action by Congress, almost to the point of making agriculture a nationalized industry.

But government controls haven't repealed laws of supply and demand, and farm prosperity for many still is an elusive dream.

A California farmer recently declared nearly everyone in his neighborhood is involved in politics. "We have to be," he said, "because government is our biggest problem."

The current (or recent) farm strike called by the American Agriculture Movement (AAM) is another protest against unprofitable prices. Unquestionably, it has attracted a lot of attention.

Tractors roaring down Main streets in what has been called a "mechanized hoedown" may give an exaggerated impression of how many are in the parade. Farmers persuaded merchants and suppliers to post signs declaring support of the strike, and leaders talked of quick and adequate response to

their demands last December.

Farm work was laid aside by many as they flew to Plains, Ga., McAllen, Texas, and Washington, D.C., to publicize the difficulty of making a profit when selling below cost of production. Politicians jumped on the noisy bandwagon.

Now, political and agricultural observers are trying to evaluate the objectives and accomplishments of AAM to determine whether it has a different future from previous farm protest movements.

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