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'Windshield Farming' on Way Out?

THEY used to be called "windshield farmers." This appellation referred to city lawyers, doctors, bankers and businessmen who invested in land in order to be known as farmers or ranchers.

They allegedly did their "farm work" by looking through their windshields while hired operators described what was going on.

Some writers see signs this class of farmers may be on the way out because of announcements that Dallas billionaire Nelson Bunker Hunt is auctioning off farm equipment that may have cost as much as \$10 million. Other farm operators are doing likewise on a smaller scale.

Newspaper reports say that after trying for more than 15 years, Hunt decided farming "just isn't a money-making proposition." He acquired numerous large tracts in Texas, Oklahoma and elsewhere, stocked them with Charolais cattle and hired experts to run them. Apparently, he didn't get enough back to invest in silver and oil.

A lot of Oklahoma City and Tulsa businessmen who tried it might

have told Hunt before he started that, while land produces new wealth annually, the owner is not necessarily the one who gets wealthy.

Inflated land values have kept many dirt farmers and some "windshield farmers" in business by increased collateral worth. Now farm real estate brokers tell me they are having a hard time getting as much for land as they did, even though non-operating buyers still are at land auction sales bidding against farmers and ranchers.

One fellow showed up this summer at a land auction downstate with his family riding an old flatbed pickup. He turned up at the bank the next day to close the deal driving a late model Continental.

A Texan who bought a couple of ranches in northwestern Oklahoma was wearing flashy diamond rings. Neither of these buyers was suspected of having made his bankroll as a sharecropper.

Legalization of parimutuel gambling on horse races has driven up farm land prices in several areas.

In "The Farming Game," a new book by Bryan Jones, published by the University of Nebraska Press, the author describes personalities engaged in agriculture on the High Plains, including Oklahoma.

He says that farmers "enjoy the greatest opportunity for real wealth and the nearest thing to personal freedom that exists in this country," adding that most of them "strive for high yields and attendant coffee shop bragging rights."

Somehow, he overlooked "windshield farmers." Many of them are pretty good talkers, too, fluently describing their spreads, fine pastures, purebred livestock and prices paid or received for animals.

Some people worry about the family farm disappearing. It won't. Government can't farm. Windshield farmers can't make money farming. Corporations can't put much on the bottom line farming.

Only farm families are willing to work for subsistence in hope that some day they may harvest big crops that will sell for high prices. This hardly ever happens.