

I the farmers gone?



the values of husbandry and assume those of finance and technology. What we are facing is the threatening extinction of the "nurturing" farmer, the man who is conscious of his land and its limitations, he is a partner with nature. This dilemma is what initially brought on the co-operative movement amongst farmers, as Wendell Berry again points out:

"If a culture is to hope for any considerable longevity, then the relationships within it must, in recognition of their interdependence, be predominantly co-operative rather than competitive."

For cultural patterns of responsible co-operation we have substituted this moral ignorance, which is the etiquette of agricultural progress. We are currently facing the new "Grapes of Wrath," a time unparalleled since the Great Depression. The 1981-82 recession hit farmers along with virtually everyone else. Our exports were then hurt by stiff competition from Europe and the developing nations. Land values, which serve as collateral for loans have slid since 1980, making necessary investment capital harder to get. The financial squeeze has been greatest on the families that run medium sized farms. They are suffering on two fronts. On the one hand their farms are less efficient than those run by larger agri-business operators. On the other hand most medium-size farms require full-time work, so owners cannot easily supplement their income with other jobs. Troubles on the family farm are exacting a heavy psychological toll, with many just giving up and moving to cities and towns. Those who have chosen to battle the odds are facing a tough and uncertain future. The plight of farmers makes it unlikely that government will swallow cut-backs in aid without major changes. What is needed is a system that will allow the small farm to survive. Not only policies aimed at increasing production and acreage are required, but a new approach, one with the interest of survival as its cornerstone.

In a report on Soil Conservation by the Standing Committee on Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry to the Senate of Canada, certain recommendations came forward concerning our depleting land resource. The committee cited both old and new agricultural practices as being partly to blame.

•Old practices and technologies such as summer fallowing and the use of moul board plows contributed to salinity and erosion in certain parts of the country.

•New practices and technology, such as the use of monoculture and large, heavy machinery contribute to loss of organic matter, soil compaction and erosion.

The problem of conservation also plays a part in the plight of small farmers. Farmers who realize the necessity of taking conservation precautions find their implementation costly in the start-up stage. They may not be able to afford the expense of a new piece of conservation tillage equipment, or the loss of income caused by replacing a cash crop with a nitrogen-fixing rotation crop. Over the years the production priority has taken its toll on soil quality. There is no substitute for the agricultural land which Canada possess, and indeed, the margin for error in trying to save the soil becomes smaller and smaller every year. We cannot ignore the limits of this vital resource. Of course both Provincial and Federal departments of Agriculture allocate roughly 4 to 5% of their budgets to conservation research, this amount is dangerously low considering the magnitude of present problems and must be substantially higher if we are to attempt to slow the soil degradation in Canada. As the New Brunswick Institute of Agrologists points out:

"There is a major difference between soil and forest and fisheries, forests can be planted and managed. Fisheries can be restocked. But once our soil is gone, that is the end of economic agricultural production. Our children's grandchildren will not see a rejuvenation of our soils."

It is clear that the soil degradation is costly, not only to agricultural industries but to the Canadian Economy and our rich, full lifestyle. The facts speak for themselves.

The magnitude of the problems facing farmers transcends economic terms and can be judged as a direct threat to culture, a nurturing culture that much of our North American sense of community was built upon, we cannot continue to ignore the plight of farmers. Some new approach seems worth trying, since the expensive policies of the past have not solved farming's woes. When we speak of a farm culture, we speak of character and community—that is culture in its broadest sense. As Wendell Berry points out; neither man nor nature alone can produce human sustenance. Only the two together, culturally wedded can succeed. We must adhere to the values of this culture, farming must remain "nurturing" and these individuals must be allowed the dignity and right to "farm" their land, without these small farmers, the culture will die, replaced by agribusiness and a counter-culture not based on nurturing the land but exploiting it. The poet Edwin Muir said it so unforgettably:

*"Men are made of what is made
the meat, the drink, the life, the corn,
Laid up by them, in the reborn.
And self-begotten cycles close
About our way; indigenous art.
And simple spells make unafraid
The haunted labyrinths of the heart.
And with our wild succession braid
The resurrection of the rose."*

So is explained the notion that the farmer and his land are culturally-wedded. If the marriage based on nurturing is destroyed, so too dies the culture, a culture fundamental to the social fabric of our modern community.

One need only drive to the farming areas hardest hit by this phenomenon to witness the incredible impact on the "culture" of the area. If we allow the slow and gradual destruction of small farming it will disappear forever and with it will disappear man's last profession in community with nature.

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