

Where have all the farmers gone?

This week's feature deals with an issue of vast significance to all of us as Canadians. So often in our modern world we overlook the most basic values that our nation was built upon. There is a culture in Canada that is facing extinction, a culture based on nurturing the land, a heritage and tradition that has survived until present, all the upheavals within society. Unfortunately, in the here and now farming and the nurturing of one's own land has become an increasingly difficult task, one that faces powerful elements bent on its destruction.

The very nature of our economy and our penchant with over-production and profit have squeezed many subsistence farmers out, forcing them to sell their land, their livelihood, and their dignity. It is my hope that this feature will enlighten many of us raised in the urban sprawl as to the "culture" of farming, the last bastion of people in harmony with nature and the elements.

"If the farmer is selling his product at less than the cost of production he has no energy left to go beyond that. If we can bring about profitability in our farming operations, we can then point out to the farmer a better way of carrying on his operation."

Malcom McLeod
Minister of Agriculture
New Brunswick

This quotation touches the surface of a very serious problem in our modern community. Much of the problem stems from great outside pressures being placed on our agricultural sector. Canadian farmers have been asked to demand the last ounce of productivity from our soils largely because of, economic necessity, international prices and technological progress. In these days of high production cost and low commodity prices, the least expensive way is often the only way a small farmer can survive. Coupled with the need to increase production to stay alive small farmers are faced with the rapid depletion of our soils and other environmental factors. Our Federal and Provincial Governments have considered increased production a major priority often with out consideration of the long term consequences to the agrarian sector of society. Farmers are encouraged to produce in greater quantities, on the same amount of land, to meet the demands of both domestic and export markets. Until recently, small farmers could obtain relatively low-cost fertilizer and fuel which could compensate from the resultant loss of nutrients that come with increased production. Now, the cost of such necessities have driven many farmers into bankruptcy. Their farms once fertile are now wastelands to be bought out by huge agri-business interests with the capital to sustain a profit.

In the past several years the threat to small farm interests has become so great that these individuals can now be placed on an "endangered species" list. It has become an increasingly arduous task to try and run a small farm in our modern economy and one that seems to place more stumbling blocks than incentives.

On Wednesday, December 5th, 1984, the National Farmers' Union met on Prince Edward Island, as a group they represent farmers interests nationwide (although each area faces different problems) and this was their annual meeting.



Addressing the annual meeting of the N.F.U., Prof. S. Pobihushchy, of UNB's Department of Political Science indicated that, "Society today gears production towards profit and urges consumption for profit." He defined the family farm as being, "A set of relations between people, animals and the land, and a lifestyle loved by those who participate not because of profit but because of the realization that life cannot go on without that relationship." He suggested people are functioning in an ideology telling them they don't have to worry about abusing the land or the environment because, "we will acquire the knowledge to correct the problem."

There is no evidence to date to support a belief that we can solve the problems we cause in nature and life by using technology," he warned, citing such examples as the Great Lakes, the dying New Brunswick forests, the dying oceans, high unemployment and a disregard for the elderly in society. He said science and technology are not being used for good purposes or to direct human prupose towards a harmony with nature. Instead, it is being used to gain control not only over the environment but over "our neighbours."

Professor Pobihushchy warned "the family farm is disappearing as a consequence of the grasp for power over the people and the economy. The disappearing farm is a symptom of the larger problems facing western society. He added:

"I've heard it said that farmers aren't ambitious, that they really don't want a lot of land - just their neighbours'. We're spending millions in space for the simple sake of gaining control beyond earth."

Professor Pobihushchy's concerns are well founded. We are presently witnessing the most farm foreclosures since the Great Depression, small farms are disappearing at an alarming rate, rising inflation and interest rates coupled with low commodity prices and high production costs are the greatest evils. Beyond these, we find a developing mega-complex, interests working to undermine the small farmer. Huge investors like McCains with the capital to turn large tracts of land into production, buy out small farmers allowing them to stay on, working as farm labourers. This phenomenon is not judged by isolated cases but is broad encompassing,

sucking many once prosperous small farmers into its momentum. The N.F.U. is attempting to bring a sense of unity to small farmers but, it is relatively powerless against the financial and political power of these huge agri-business interests.

Wendell Barry in his book: *The Unsettling of America, Culture and Agriculture*; has defined in simple terms what farming, the best farming calls for:

"The best farming requires a farmer - a husband man, a nurturer - not a technician or business man. A good farmer is a cultural product; he is made by a sort of training, certainly, in what his time imposes or demands, but he is also made by generations tested preserved, handed down in settled households, friendships, and communities that are deliberately and carefully native their own ground, in which the past has prepared the present and the present safeguards the future."

The concentration of the farmland into larger and larger holdings and fewer and fewer hands - with the consequent increase of over-head, debt and dependence on machines - is thus a matter of complex significance cannot be disintegrated from its cultural significance. It forces 'a profound revolution' in the farmer's mind; once his investment in land and machines is big enough, he must foresake 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 Barry again points out:

"If a culture is to hope for any considerable longevity, then the relationships with in 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 cutbacks 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 contribute 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 possesses, 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 High, 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 farmings 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 ways; 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.

R. Hutchins
Features Editor