A CONFLICT OF VALUES: AGRICULTURAL LAND IN THE UNITED STATES

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A B S T R A C T

The focus of this report is the relationship of people to agricultural land in the United States. Historically, agriculture has been a dominant force in our society, and agriculture is where we most clearly see how we as a people relate to the land. During Colonial times, land and farming provided the road to economic self-sufficiency for a majority of settlers. Today, while most Americans are not directly involved in farming, agriculture remains important, providing us with food and fiber for consumption as well as export.

In the United States our system of agriculture has undergone complex and far reaching changes. We have gone from a system of numerous small-scale farms to one where a few large farms own and control the vast majority of our farmland. What this shift means for those members of our society who are still involved in farming on a small- or medium-scale basis has been documented from an economic perspective, but farming as part of our cultural heritage has always been, and continues to be, more than strictly an economic enterprise.

Many people view the changes which have occurred in agriculture as being negative ones. Small-scale farming as a way to make a living and as a way of life is felt to be an important element of our society, and one which should not disappear.

The success of efforts to preserve farmland and to provide assistance to small- and medium-scale farmers have in most cases been minimal. In large part this is because a knowledge of the American agricultural system does not include an understanding of critical cultural values regarding land and its uses held by different groups of people. It is these cultural values which this report addresses and underscores as being crucial for future research.

PREFACE

The following report begins an examination of an important missing element in earlier agricultural land studies, namely, the perceptions of landowners. As the authors illustrate, the economic, regulatory, and cultural pressures on farmers vary according to their proximity to urban centers. For those farmers near a developing urban center, their relationship to the land (whether they like it or not) becomes less of a trusteeship and more of the holder of a marketable commodity. While the farmers who are not being pressed by urban development view themselves as defenders of their land and way of life being besieged by uncomprehending and uncompromising attackers such as the government.

Although this work has just begun, we are confident that further research into farmers' attitudes and perceptions can offer guidelines for policies protecting farmland and an agricultural way of life.

David O. Percy
Director
The National Colonial Farm

INTRODUCTION

To look at land, how it is viewed, how it is owned, and how it is used, provides a major key to understanding American culture and society. These factors can be traced through time to provide an understanding of the role land has played in our society's development and through space to see how different groups of people, living in different parts of the country, have related to the land. This focus on land and its uses is a central issue for our society. The shape of human societies has always been in large part determined by the way their members use the land. As Schumacher states, "Study how a society uses its land, and you can come to pretty reliable conclusions as to what its future will be" (1973:102).

In the United States today the majority of people are separated from the land in terms of where they live, work and play. Yet, this fact does not make us any less dependent upon such lands. It is land which provides food, fiber and shelter for all of us. Land, despite the vastness of our country, can no longer be viewed as being an unlimited, or even plentiful, resource. Competition for use of land in the United States is becoming increasingly intense and therefore land policies are becoming increasingly important (Clawson 1972). Our relationship to the land needs to be explored and clarified.

THE PLACE OF LAND IN UNITED STATES HISTORY

A critical feature which distinguished life in the New World from that in England was the existence and availability of vast stretches of virgin land. For only a limited time in this country's history,

during the very first European settlements in North America, was this land tightly regulated. For this short period the king's appointees, as his representatives in America, sought to establish charter colonies which mirrored the hierarchical social and economic relationships existing in England (Scott 1977). When these efforts failed, groundwork was laid for a different type of relationship between humans and the land, a relationship that proved to be a distinguishing feature of American society. It was based upon widespread individual ownership and use of land, this country's most important form of productive property.

These two factors, the abundance of available land and the absence of an effective monarchy or aristocracy which was able to demand economic allegiance, made free and easy access to land a standard feature of early American society. Working the land provided each individual with the opportunity for economic self-sufficiency. A man, regardless of his background or wealth, was supposed to be able to farm the formerly unclaimed land and achieve this goal.[1] In turn, the republic was to be a society composed of independent and autonomous freeholders. While selected minority populations were, in varying degrees, denied access to land, many European settlers found a frontier wilderness out of which they would carve a productive and profitable agricultural system. The land system of the United States historically developed from this process - the attainment and use of farmland (Clawson 1968).

The importance of land, land ownership and land use led to the development of an agrarian ideal which became central to Colonial Americans' conception of a good society. America was to be a country where each man was free and independent; each was able to labor for

his own benefit to provide a good and fulfilling life for himself and his family. This agrarian ideal was perhaps best expounded by Thomas Jefferson. For him the future of the country depended upon widespread ownership of the land. This type of ownership would prevent the development of a privileged ruling class which could exploit a much larger class of propertyless wage earners. Land owning would make a man both politically and economically self-sufficient (Scott 1977). The colonies, except for the tidewater South with its slave plantations and upstate New York with its leasehold system, became an area dominated by small, independent, freehold farmers. The agrarian ideal of a decentralized rural life became reality for many individuals.

Over the last century two important phenomena, industrialization and urbanization, have worked to drastically change the shape of our society. From the days when this country was a predominantly agrarian society with well over half of the population living in the rural hinterland, we now have nearly three quarters of our population living in urban areas. Advances in transportation and communications have also contributed toward bringing all of the members of society in closer contact with each other. Increasing specialization, likewise, has changed the structure of society, making each member increasingly dependent on others for goods and services. Despite these major changes, the Jeffersonian agrarian ideal continues to play a role in our society. Specifically, it is seen in the importance still attributed to small-scale farmers as well as to farming as a way of life. Even in the face of widespread industrialization and urbanization, the value placed on owning and working the land has not died. The lure of a self-sufficient, rural existence is very real for many city dwellers. Small- and medium-scale farmers remain one of the few groups of people

who are seen to retain this type of economic independence or self-sufficiency; maintaining control over their own labor rather than selling it to a boss or proprietor. In addition to this highly valued independence rural living in general, but farming in particular, is believed by many to provide a simpler, healthier environment (Merrill 1976).

OVERVIEW OF AGRICULTURE IN THE UNITED STATES

Hand in hand with these major societal changes, we can see changes and transformations in the agricultural system of the United States. The two most obvious of these are: 1) a decrease in the total number of farms and farmers, and 2) an increase in the average size of farms. Large numbers of small, autonomous farmers can no longer be said to be a dominant characteristic of American agriculture.

In order to understand the working of an agricultural economy, it is necessary to take into account the three basic resources of any agricultural system: land, labor and capital (Lewis 1979). It is possible to increase production by expanding upon any one of these three resources. Each of these three elements of American agriculture has experienced fluctuations and complex changes through the years. Since our emphasis and research goals deal specifically with agricultural land and its uses in the United States, we will focus upon land as the primary resource in describing the agricultural system and its changes through time, dealing with labor and capital as secondary components.

Throughout the late 18th, through the 19th, and up until the early 20th centuries, the United States government had encouraged widespread ownership of the land through various forms of legislation. From the

inclusion of an individual's right to private property in the constitutions of several of the new state governments,[2] the Homestead Act of 1862 which attempted to establish a system of small-scale farmers during the era of Western expansion, and through the Smith-Lever Act of 1917 which established the Agricultural Extension Service, the desirability of small-scale land ownership and the democratization of knowledge necessary to produce a living by farming on the land has been acknowledged (Jackson 1980). Even as late as 1961, with the passage of the Agriculture Act, Congress stated its policy to be the recognition of the importance of the small family farm. While continuing to pay lip service to the need to support small-scale/ family-run farms, the Federal government, however, has more recently shifted its support to the benefit of large-scale farming operations by providing various economic advantages and incentives.

Nevertheless, the development of agricultural land in the United States is not simply determined by governmental policies and mandates. There exists a complex relationship between an economy based on free enterprise (of which our agricultural system is a part), federal and local policies, and a society's attitudes regarding what is the right and proper way for its members to live. Each of these factors is influenced by, and in turn influences, the others. Likewise, the population's relationship to the land is not the exclusive concern of only those involved in agriculture. How land is used in the cities, in suburbs, and in rural areas affects each member of our society. The dramatic increase in the rate of urbanization and suburbanization in our society has already been mentioned. This migration, from rural areas to the city, has been and is still closely linked to patterns of land use and attitudes toward land in the United States.

This particular shift in population, however, has recently slowed and actually begun to reverse, a phenomenon known as reverse migration. Between 1970 and 1977, the urban population increased by 4.4 percent, while the rural population of the United States rose by 11 percent (USDA 1981). It has become apparent that people are attempting to return to an area and a way of life which is unavailable in the city. More than simply an increase in the number of "back to landers", this reverse migration illustrates the continued importance of our rural heritage which has helped to shape the cultural values of Americans.

Despite the recognized importance of "rural life" as a central value in American society, the fact is that over the past century, and particularly since World War II, ownership of agricultural land has fallen into fewer hands and the number of farms as well as farmers has been declining rapidly. During the early 1900's approximately 27 percent of the American population were farming. The percentage of farmers dropped to 12 percent in the 1950's and, by 1978 less than 4 percent of the American population were farming. In all, there was a decrease of 4.5 million farm-units in the total number of farms between 1935 and 1974 (USDA 1981).

Simultaneously with the decrease in the number of farms and farmers is an increase in the average size of a farm. As mentioned previously, one way to increase productivity is to expand upon any one of the three basic resources of an agricultural economy: land, labor or capital. The statistics given above illustrate an increasing land base for each farming unit, a step taken by farmers to insure that their farming venture remain economically viable. As opposed to former methods of expansion, because of the now limited land base

in the United States, the primary method by which land can be expanded upon is for some farms to increase in size at the expense of others. While the amount of land farmed in the United States over the last thirty years has remained relatively stable (Schertz 1980), the number of farms and farmers has decreased.

Tenant farmers, small-scale farmers who rented their land, as well as those who owned their farms outright, have all played a role in the history of American agriculture. In the 1930's tenant farming reached its peak, accounting for approximately 42 percent of the total number of farmers. Rural poverty was widespread during this time and many rural residents were forced to leave their farms, often moving to urban areas. As tenant farmers left the countryside, along with many other small-scale agricultural land owners, some of the remaining farmers began to increase the size of their operations. Agricultural land ownership became more and more concentrated and by 1978 all of the farmland in the United States was owned by less than 3 percent of the total population, and 6.6 percent of all farms accounted for over half (54.1 percent) of the land in farming. Small- and medium-scale farmers, while decreasing in number in the United States, continue to account for the majority of all farming operations. In 1978, 60.7 percent of all farms were operated on less than 180 acres, however they controlled only 10.6 percent of all land in farming (USDA 1981).

Another characteristic used for measuring farm size by the United States Department of Agriculture is the value of a farm's total gross sales. The data suggest a similar pattern of concentration. In 1978, at the largest end of the spectrum, 2.4 percent of all farms reported 39.3 percent of the total value of farm sales. In comparison,

78 percent of all farms accounted for only 18.7 percent of total sales (USDA 1981). Again we find the average farm size increasing while the number of farms and farmers is decreasing.

In addition to increases in the size of individual farms, there has been a tremendous rise in the amount of capital invested in each farming unit. Increased mechanization has resulted in the widespread substitution of capital for labor. Large amounts of capital outlay are required for such things as fertilizer, higher yielding crops and livestock, and machinery with its associated fossil fuels. Between the years 1940 and 1970, increases in the prices paid for labor (wages) exceeded prices for other types of input. This factor encouraged the increasing substitution of capital for labor. During the 1970's, this trend has reversed, however, and the price increases for fertilizer and land have exceeded wage increases (Schertz 1980). In whatever ways this capital investment is directed, the end result is that small- and medium-scale farmers are at a disadvantage when competing with massive and heavily funded agricultural operations.

Our present system of agriculture, one based on specialization and mass production, makes it increasingly difficult for small-scale farmers to remain economically viable. The advantages of large-scale agriculture are seen to be apparent in the relatively low prices of food in our society, as well as the rise in yield per acre production characteristic of modern agriculture. The productivity of agriculture in the United States has increased dramatically over the past thirty years. Yet, during the early 1970's overall productivity has leveled off and actually begun to decrease. Some additonal disadvantages of our present system of agriculture are beginning to become clearer. These include: a decrease in food quality, the rise of centralized

food monopolies, the consequence of a vast migration of people from farms to cities with the resulting urban social problems, the destruction of our rural culture and environment (Merrill 1976), and increasing rural nonfarm unemployment.

Our agricultural system[3] has always been in a state of flux. The current change, however, is a dramatic one. Sometimes referred to as another revolution in United States farming (Schertz 1980) comparable to the shift from human to horse power and again from horses to tractors, this change involves a transformation in the organization and management of farming as well as in the patterns of land ownership.

Individual ownership has historically been the dominant form of farm tenure in the United States, and continues to account for nearly 90 percent of all farms. The other significant forms of farm ownership are partnerships and corporations. While these two forms of ownership account for a relatively small percentage of the total number of farms in the United States, they account for a much larger share of both farm acreage and farm sales. In 1974 these forms together accounted for 25 percent of all farm acreage and 32 percent of all farm sales (Schertz 1980). It is expected that the percentages of farm acreage and farm sales owned by partnerships and corporations will continue to rise. Most importantly, this transformation in ownership and management has far reaching implications for the future of our society's relationship to the land.

CURRENT ATTITUDES TOWARD LAND AND ITS USES

Tightly linked to the ongoing process of change in the American farm structure is an actual decrease in the agricultural land base. An extensive, in-depth study recently completed indicates that

approximately three million acres per year of agricultural land are converted to non-agricultural uses in the United States (NALS 1981). At the same time marginal lands are being brought into production, including, for example, millions of acres which need supplemental water for irrigation (Zube and Zube 1977).

This decrease can be accounted for by many factors. It is in part simply the growth of urban and recreational areas which keep spreading out into the countryside. It is the movement of industries and their workers to outlying areas, and it is the pattern which sub-urbanization has taken. Cities do not grow or spread in a regular pattern of concentric rings emanating from a core district, but rather as scattered settlements with open space in between, commonly referred to as buckshot urbanization. This "open space", rather than being safe for farming, becomes potential development land and any farmers who do remain are most often taxed out of existence.

More than all of these, however, it is a result of reverse migration which has in turn led to a growing density of non-farm settlements in rural areas. This settlement has resulted in increasing land use conflicts as the two groups, farmers and non-farmers, want to use the same land for different things. Residential land use is often incompatible with continued agricultural land use when the two exist side by side. Residential land users are bothered by the odor of manure, the flies, the noise of tractors, irrigation pumps and other machinery, dusts, chemical sprays and many other "nuisances" which are necessary components of an agricultural operation (Thompson 1980). As more and more people move to areas which were formerly centered almost exclusively around agriculture, those involved with farming become a minority and their needs become increasingly ignored.

It is an accepted fact that agricultural lands must be preserved, but the conflicts arise in terms of where this preservation should occur.

Local communities experiencing these changes and conflicts, as well as some state governments, have begun to respond to the conversion process with policies directed toward retaining their agricultural land. The success of those ventures, in terms of their acceptability to the target population as well as their long range effectiveness, has yet to be determined.

Prevailing attitudes toward land can be divided into two coexisting but conflicting perspectives on how land should be viewed and used (Andrews 1979). These are: 1) land as a natural resource base which has an important ecological function and must be preserved and protected in order to maintain its viability, and 2) land as a commodity which has a specific dollar value, is privately owned, and can be sold in the marketplace. These differing conceptions of land are intimately related to how land is viewed, owned and used by the members of a society.

In the early 1970's, meetings were held in several major cities across the country for the purpose of "collecting beliefs, opinions, feelings and impressions about land".[4] Sponsored by the American Land Forum, people were drawn from the local community for an informal discussion about their attitudes toward land, land use, management and planning. The transcripts from these meetings are filled with an awareness of a conflict of values - is land a commodity or a resource, and how does that affect its usage? As one participant questions the phenomenon at a meeting in the St. Paul/Minneapolis area:

> I'd like to ask if the cultural values that might be nice to achieve in land usage, aren't they in our system rather overshadowed by economic considerations. . . ?

Coughlin and others (1979) have suggested that one part of this conflict of values is deeply rooted in our historical notion of the "garden image" - a symbol of the American countryside depicting a romantic portrayal of the relationship between a hardworking, individualistic "gardener" and his land. Land was highly valued as a basic resource, yet it was tied to the belief of a limitless frontier. Land was a resource, but one without boundaries. Today we recognize the reality of land as a nonrenewable resource with limits as a part of the natural system, but it does little to temper our symbol of the small-scale, independent farmer who is, at least symbolically, in control of his own destiny. While few people in our society actually "work the land", we still hold strong notions about those who do. And the land they work is seen as an integral part of the overall relationship of the American society to its natural setting - land.

Yet, in a free market enterprise, land has an additional symbolic meaning. Land is valued as a commodity, in contrast to the value as a resource and a part of the overall natural environment. As Schumacher has stated: "Modern man does not experience himself as a part of nature but as an outside force destined to dominate and conquer it" (1973:14). Individual land ownership holds a lofty place among Americans, but with a bit of a twist from early agrarian days. In a commercial society, as a commodity land takes on the dimension of an investment - a unit to be bought and sold which carries the rights and responsibilities of private ownership. The value of land as a commodity is based upon its market value or economic elements which are in contrast to the "garden image" of personal, permanent attachments to the land.

While these two notions can be viewed analytically as separate and in opposition, in reality this division is considerably less clear. A single individual can actually view the same piece of land as a commodity tied to economic variables, on one hand, while, at the same time, still hold strong cultural values about the land as a natural resource and part of the natural system (Marquis 1979). The fact, too, that so few Americans today actually live and work on the land they own has an additional impact on the concept and value of land in the United States. As discussed earlier, the "garden image" has resulted in a romanticized notion of the small-scale farm. Tremendous importance is attributed to farming as a lifestyle (Goldschmidt 1978), and genuine concern has been expressed in many ways about "saving" or "preserving" the small-scale farm as well as agricultural lands. As Aldo Leopold wrote in the 1940's:

> It is inconceivable to me that an ethical relation to land can exist without love, respect, and admiration for land, and a high regard for its value. By value, I of course mean something far broader than mere economic value; I mean value in the philosophical sense (1949:261).

This "philosophical" value Leopold refers to can also be identified as cultural values - a part of the "garden image" and a view of land as a natural nonrenewable resource. Whereas we see that these cultural values about land are held at least in a symbolic way, especially when linked to the small-scale farmer, little has been done toward specifically identifying these cultural values and their role in the agricultural system.

One logical place to start in identifying cultural values toward land and its uses is with the population in our society most closely linked with the direct use of land - our farmers. And one manner

of looking at values is to systematically analyze the choice situation experienced by farmers (Vogt 1955; Barlett 1980). Wendell Berry has described the kinds of economic and cultural variables associated with a farmer's choices:

> A competent farmer is his own boss. He has learned the disciplines necessary to go ahead on his own, as required by economic obligation, loyalty to his place, pride in his work. His workadays require the use of long experience and practiced judgment for the failures of which he knows that he will suffer (1977:44).

In order to fully understand the nature of the change occurring in our agricultural system, it is necessary not only to identify the economic variables associated with farming but the cultural components as well - those elements tied to what Berry refers to as "loyalty to his place, pride in his work".

The concern for the loss of the small-scale farmer and small-scale farms appears to be directly tied to what Berry calls the "loyalty to his place". In this sense, the farmer is seen as having a special cultural attachment to the land (Redfield 1956). This attachment carries with it a sense of the land as a natural resource tightly interlinked with the natural environment. In defense of the small-scale operation as opposed to agribusiness, Schumacher has suggested:

> . . . that men organised in small units will take better care of <u>their</u> bit of land or other natural resources than anonymous companies or megalomanic governments which pretend to themselves that the whole universe is their legitimate quarry" (1973:36).

Also, as previously described, concern for the loss of the small-scale farm is linked to our historical background of a predominantly rural society.

ming is recognized as more than an occupation, differing from a "nine to five" routine; it is tied to a lifestyle:

> days do not begin and end by rule, but in ponse to necessity, interest, and obligation. y are not measured by the clock, but by the task his endurance; they last as long as necessary as long as he can work. He has mastered intricate nal patterns in ordering his work within the over- ping cycles - human and natural, controllable and ontrollable - of the life of a farm (Berry 1977:44).

ul way of looking at farming as something different or more t an occupation is to see farming as a craft whereby the crafts- rols the production of the commodity from beginning to end. rison, the individual who sells his labor in a free market e contributes to only a small portion of the overall pro- process (Mills 1981:210-220). By controlling the production from beginning to end, the farmer is viewed as "independent", rol of his own destiny" - features highly valued in American

ARY INTERVIEW DATA

n all of the preceding data and information in mind, there e doubt that small- and medium-scale farmers in the United re experiencing severe and in many ways unprecedented economic s. In many instances these outside pressures have resulted ner choosing to give up his land and his work. In many other however, farmers have continued to work the land and have no e plans for changing this.

ng able to document some of the problems which small- and cale farmers must face in order to continue to make a living s to reach a certain level of understanding regarding the n of farmers today. In an attempt to identify specifically

what these pressures are the USDA (Schertz 1980) has focused upon seven major economic forces which they feel account for many of the changes in farm organization (primarily increases in scale) within our agricultural system. These are: 1) inflation, 2) increases in farm product exports, 3) availability of capital-intensive new technologies, 4) non-farm employment opportunities, 5) availability of institutional credit for the purchase of land and capital goods, 6) commodity programs supporting farm product prices, and 7) tax rules applicable to incomes and estates.

Identifying and analyzing statistical trends which indicate changes in the structure of our agricultural system also provides information necessary to achieve an understanding of the current position of small- and medium-scale farmers in the United States. The Agricultural Census, undertaken by the U.S. Department of Commerce, gives much of the material necessary to do this.

What this sort of information does not tell us, however, is how the farmers themselves perceive the outside forces and pressures which are believed to result in these statistical trends. What do they think has been happening in American agriculture, what do they think lies ahead, how are they coping with or responding to these perceived pressures, and finally, what policies or changes do they think would help them to realize their goals (whatever these goals are determined to be).

As a <u>first</u> step toward achieving this level of understanding, we conducted several in-depth interviews with small- and medium-scale farmers and farmland owners on the Eastern Shore of Virginia and in Northern Virginia.

We structured these interviews loosely, having in mind several

areas which we wanted to talk about, but letting the farmer determine in large part the flow of the conversation as well as the precise subject matter. We wanted to know specifically about each of the individual's farming operations; how they got started in farming, what their operation looks like now, how they are currently doing economically, and what their future plans are.

Of the farmers and farmland owners interviewed, two in Northern Virginia have given up farming almost entirely, one on the Shore has owned farmland for years but is just beginning to start farming it himself, one on the Shore owns no land but rents himself and his equipment out to perform "custom farming" for other land-holders (much of his equipment is borrowed from his father who is a successful medium-scale farmer), one, again on the Shore, is a small-scale farmer, and finally, three Eastern Shore farmers interviewed run successful medium-scale farming operations.

All those interviewed, to some extent, spoke generally about the increasing economic pressures on farmers. Both how these pressures are interpreted and where the forces which weigh on them are believed to originate varied to some extent. Those who are still involved in farming blame the government directly for many of their problems. Increased regulations, particularly in the areas of increased protections for hired labor, and safety standards for machine and pesticide use, along with higher taxes, all make it less and less productive to stay in farming. "It's these rules and regulations that are going to kill the whole thing. The government shouldn't be involved in telling a farmer how he should run things. The government itself is in bad shape, real poorly managed, why do they think they should tell us how to do things? This is supposed to be

a free enterprise system and that's what it should be." This was from a farmer who has a long history of conflicts with and resulting citations from OSHA concerning his work place. He spoke, too, of the government subsidizing cotton and tobacco growers, yet, "when it (the government) pays any attention to the vegetable producers in this country (of which he is one) it is only to give them trouble." When we asked if the government should then subsidize vegetable farmers as well, he said "No, they should just stay the hell out of our business."

Those still involved in farming also discussed the rising costs of equipment and supplies as major factors which limit their profits, "Seed potatoes went up just this year from $2.75 to $3.00 or $3.50 a bushel, but we still get the same price when we sell. Everything's up, fertilizer, fuel, everything. Our costs are doubling, but the prices we get are staying the same."

Those who currently feel they are in good economic shape say that it is their other investments, such as stocks and bonds, which account for their success, "Sure, some years I make good money, but then a bad year comes along and I really lose. It takes four or five good years before I can make up for one bad year. A man can't make any money in farming today."

The two major problems a farmer on the Shore feels that he faces are labor and capital. The "quality of labor" has declined, making it increasingly difficult for a farmer to get his crops harvested and processed at any price. And, too, the outlay a farmer must make each year is increasing dramatically, while his income from farming is not keeping pace. Farmers on the Shore, to one degree or another, are feeling pressures from many directions. In discussing this, and

as a partial defense of his fellow farmers and the responses he felt we might elicit, one farmer said, "Farmers around here have developed a kind of a siege mentality. They feel they are being backed into a corner and they do not like it at all."

The farmland owners in Northern Virginia have a somewhat different perspective on the problem. One man we spoke to made his living from farming until 1975, but at that point taxes in Fairfax County had risen so high that he was losing money. He now rents the land, in part to a woodworker who has his shop in the barn and also to another family who lives there and uses the land for horse pasture. He never encouraged his sons to go into farming because he knew they would never make it, "No, you can't farm around here. This here is Fairfax County. An average house costs $150,000. Maybe in the South somewhere, or out West, a person can farm, but not here." He rents the land out on a six month lease and is ready to sell when the right offer from a developer comes in. He has had three offers so far, but knows they will get higher.

The other farmland owner, a woman, is the only heir still interested in farming from a family who has been farming outside Washington, D.C. for many years. At this time she is barely able to retain her land. In fact, she has had to sell off over half of the original farm in order to pay the taxes on the remaining. These two farmers, having their operations located so close to an urban area, feel different types of pressures than do the farmers on the Shore, and they direct the blame for these pressures in different directions. In Northern Virginia it is more likely a farmer will have developers knocking on his door rather than officials from regulatory agencies. Farmers in Northern Virginia are faced with

new residential developments on all sides. While their land increases in value, the increase is solely as potential development land, not as farmland.

One thing that everyone we interviewed agreed upon is that it would be almost impossible for someone who wanted to farm to start from scratch and become a farmer in the United States today. Only if their parents owned a farm and they inherited the farming operation would they stand a chance of being able to make a living farming. "No young man could get in to farming today. It takes a lot of money to get the land and equipment. If you had that much money you should put it in a bank and live off the interest."

This fact represents a complete reversal from the position farming has played in our country's history. Evidence for the lack of young people becoming involved in farming is found in the median age for farmers in this country. In 1978, over half of the American farmers were 55 years or older (USDA 1981). In many cases this is not because of lack of interest by the younger generation, rather it represents a realistic appraisal of their chances for making a living by farming.

Most of the farmers we spoke to have sons who are helping them with their business and who are slowly trying to go out on their own. But there are others whose sons want to go into farming and cannot. "I feel real bad about that. I have two sons, and both want to go into farming, but neither can. I just don't make enough money to help them get a start. My family has been farmers all their lives, but we just can't go on growing things for nothing."

Each of the farmers we spoke to reinforced the picture drawn from USDA statistics concerning farm size. Smaller farms have

been going under while successful farmers have all had to increase the size of the operations to stay in business. "On the Shore you used to be able to make a good living from a ten to fifty acre farm, but not any more, now you need between one and seven hundred acres just to try to make a profit. There's no sense to it, you need to grow more potatoes so you can make more money, but then you have to rent the land for $75 to $80 an acre, and then you have to hire more people to grade them (the potatoes), and maybe another truck to haul, and before you know it you hardly make anything. But you still have to give it a try."

Most of the farmers on the Shore own about half the land they work and rent the rest. Over the past ten years there have been "land wars" over the rental land as available land for renting has tightened up. In only a few places on the Shore, particularly with land adjacent to the main highway and waterfront property, is farmland being converted to non-agricultural uses. Conversion is not felt by the farmers to be a major problem at this time. One farmer, in thinking ahead, saw how it could become a real problem though. "It's going to get rough, we're going to need more and more land to grow food, and we're going to have less and less. You know, the good Lord isn't making any more good agricultural land for us, only the Dutch are."

In Northern Virginia, the farmland owners we spoke to were not concerned about getting more land. It had gone well beyond that point for them. Conversion pressures were so severe that it was now a matter of at what point they were going to sell out. One had fought it for years but is now ready to sell, whereas another is still fighting. "Sure, I'd rather have things the way they used to be.

I'm a farmer. They tell me I can make a lot of money when I sell my land, but I'm an old man. What do I need a lot of money for?" Nevertheless, the same individual is carefully weighing all offers, and waiting for what he thinks will be the top bid. For the other farmland owner in Northern Virginia, the process of selling any of her land is a painful one. "I just can't get used to having people refer to my field as 'Lot 13'". Both of these individuals have accepted the fact that their land can no longer provide them with a reasonable income, but are not happy with a system which has allowed this to be so.

Aside from selling their land and getting out of farming completely, how are farmers responding to these economic pressures? Over the years, a common response among farmers has been to specialize. With increasingly sophisticated equipment and the advantages of mass production, many farmers have focused in on often one, but in most cases, two or three crops. "In 1968 I had 100 acres in white potatoes, 100 in sweet corn, 80 in tomatoes. Plus then I grew a lot of strawberries, brocolli, snap beans, and cabbage. Now I have potatoes, cucumbers and grain. That's all. I had to stop with the others because of my returns. I just wasn't getting enough money to mess with all of those. There used to be lots of strawberries grown around here - we called them mortgage payment crops. But they ripen too early for the migrants and we just don't have the labor to pick them. Problems with labor have caused a lot of us to switch over to fully mechanized crops (grains), but mostly it's just the money."

Over just the past few years, however, a few of the farmers are beginning to view this strategy as a dangerous one. Some years a

particular crop will do well, because of growing conditions or the market, while the same year another crop will prove to be a financial disaster. "Last year I lost big in cabbages, but I made out like a bandit in cherry tomatoes, and that was enough to see me through. The key is to diversify, you've got to get diversified."

Despite this growing feeling, more farmers have moved from growing a wide spectrum of crops to focusing on one or two. This is seen by many as being unfortunate, a step in the direction of making farming more and more businesslike. "I myself like working with different crops - makes things a little more interesting. Now take Phil Jones (a neighboring farmer). He grows cucumbers and grain, and his wife has several acres of azaleas. He's all irrigated, has a real nice set up. Has a big fancy office, too. He hired men to run different parts of his operation. Runs his place like a business. He's making good money. It just seems sort of a shame, he hardly seems like a farmer."

What this man was alluding to, and what most of the farmers talked about in one way or another, was the non-economic side of farming. It came out most clearly when we asked why they continued to stay in farming despite the fact that they seemed to feel, as one put it, "Like the cards were stacked against us." At this point farming was described in very different terms. It became "a good way to make a living, a good way to raise your children, a good life." "My parents were farmers, but after I went away to college I just became involved in other businesses. Now I'm getting ready to start farming again. I'm putting my children in charge of a lot of things. I want them to learn responsibility and this seems like the best way."

Other farmers talked about the independence which farming allowed them. "Farming is not a nine to five job, there's no time clock to punch, no one telling me when to come in, when to leave. Sure, you work hard, and most days you work a lot more than eight hours, but I can take off when I need to, I just get some one to cover for me, and I'm off."

Many others said they didn't have any choice in the matter. "Now, what am I supposed to do? I've got the land, I've got the machinery. I've been farming for 35 years, that's all I know how to do. I don't have any other skills." Yet this man had plenty of other skills, and he knew he could get into another business if he was forced to. During the summer he managed a large operation, coordinating as many as 40 workers at one time. He was personnel director, payroll officer, and supervisor. He fixed machines, worked as a truck broker arranging for his produce to be shipped and delivered, while at the same time, keeping detailed records of all his financial transactions. He had graduated from college and would be considered, by any criteria, to be a successful businessman. Yet he wanted to be a farmer, wanted his sons to be farmers, and had no desire to leave this occupation.

All of the farmers we interviewed had a very clear sense that farming was more than an occupation. For them it was a good way to make a living and was the cornerstone of their lifestyle.

SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION OF CONTINUING RESEARCH

Over the past thirty years, a striking change has occurred within our agricultural system. This change has been twofold. First, there has been a sharp decline in the number of small- and

medium-scale farms, and, second, there has been a decline in the actual number of farmers. A critical variable in the American farm structure, well documented in the available literature, suggests that these changes are directly linked to changes both in land use patterns and in land ownership patterns. In terms of land use, the amount and rate of agricultural land converted to non-agricultural uses has rapidly increased beyond earlier projections. The value of agricultural land goes beyond its exclusive use as farmland. Patterns of agricultural land ownership have changed as well, indicating a concentration of the farmland base into fewer and fewer hands.

The variables associated with these shifts are many and complex, yet generally the explanations for changes in land use and ownership patterns have been based entirely upon economic factors. Little has been done toward identifying the role cultural variables may play in this change, although most writers on the subject stress the importance of taking these factors into account.

An understanding of cultural variables is best achieved by obtaining an "insider's" view of the problem under study. An individual's world view, including his/her attitudes and perceptions of land and land uses, is derived from a particular cultural background and orientation. In order to fully comprehend the changes in our agricultural system, it is necessary to identify the specific cultural elements linked to land and its uses that an individual farmer holds and that will affect that farmer's interpretation of and responses to existing economic pressures. One must be able to see the constraints and available choices in the same way that farmers see them; to have a grasp of their world view. Only then

can we understand why certain decisions are made.

It is readily apparent from our preliminary research that small- and medium-scale farmers do in fact feel economically threatened. What is not apparent is precisely how they interpret the pressures which threaten them, how they are going to respond, and why these responses are consistent with their own world view.

Our research will examine several groups of small- and medium-scale farmers from different cultural backgrounds and from different parts of the country. By comparing these groups we will be able to identify the critical cultural elements which relate to land and understand the role these play in a farmer's decision-making process. To achieve this level of analysis, an extended period of time must be spent with each group of farmers. Living and working with farmers, day in and day out, observing and participating in their everyday activities, will allow us to determine how and why certain decisions are made - decisions which will ultimately affect their future in farming. By observing this agricultural decision-making process we are then in a position to understand the plight of the small- and medium-scale farmer in the United States' agricultural system.

One site chosen for this research is Neshoba County, Mississippi, a rural county located in the east central part of the state. The area is home to three different farming groups - blacks, whites and Choctaw Indians. Each of these three groups have had rather distinctive cultural backgrounds. The inhabitants with the longest history in the area, the Choctaws, were also the earliest agriculturists (Debo 1967). Blacks in agriculture are concentrated in the Southern states and the roles they have played in the

American agricultural system range from slavery during pre-Civil War days to farm owner/operator today (Beale 1966). Whites comprise the largest category of small-scale farmers in Neshoba County, accounting for 72 percent of all farmers in the community (Polk 1981). One of the researchers, Ms. Daughdrill, will spend a complete agricultural season (approximately one year) in Neshoba County working closely with each of the three groups.

The second research site selected is the Eastern Shore of Virginia. Farmers on the Shore, while sharing a similar cultural background with the white farmers of Neshoba County, provide a range in scale of operations from very small to medium size farms. The size of an individual's farming operation is also a critical factor in shaping significant cultural values. Ms. Heppel will conduct a similar period of fieldwork on the Eastern Shore, living and working with farmers during an agricultural season.

The importance of cultural variables in understanding the problem of the loss of agricultural lands in the United States cannot be easily dismissed. To adequately understand the role of these cultural elements in our agricultural system it is necessary to understand the point of view of those directly affected by the changes; small- and medium-scale farmers. We cannot anticipate that farmers with different cultural orientations will interpret and respond to economic pressures in the same way, especially relating to land and its uses. Only by empirical research can we hope to understand the dynamics of change occurring within the American agricultural system.

NOTES

1. While in reality this land was in many cases not unclaimed as it provided the resource base for native American Indians, the fact that Indians did not practice the same type of system of intensive agriculture and did not appear to be "using" the land, made it as good as uninhabited in the eyes of the early settlers.

2. The 1776 Virginia Declaration of Rights, for example, read "All men are born equally free and independent, and have certain natural, inherent rights of which they cannot, by any compact, deprive or divest their posterity; among which are the enjoyment of life, liberty, with the means of possessing property and pursuing and obtaining happiness and safety (Poore 1878 - our underline).

3. To discuss the American agricultural system involves innumerable variables, all tightly interwoven. These range from a global system involving international markets to local, grass roots influences and inputs. Some agricultural sectors of the country (such as the Midwest) serve an international market, while others (i.e., some vegetable producing areas) provide only for a local market. Likewise, agricultural practices vary across the nation. For example, more acreage is required to grow grains than vegetables for an equal return. Defining the size or scale of a farming operation at the national level does not accomoodate these regional differences. We can expect, then, different meanings to be attached to the same statistics when looking at specific areas.

4. The American Land Forum has yet to publish the tape-recorded transcripts from these meetings. However, due to the generosity of Mr. Charles Little, we were given access to the data to review for our research purposes.

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