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The Occupation of Farming

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Cornhusker Economics

Cooperative Extension

Institute of Agriculture & Natural Resources
Department of Agricultural Economics
University of Nebraska – Lincoln

The Occupation of Farming

Market Report	Yr Ago	4 Wks Ago	9/25/98
<u>Livestock and Products,</u>			
<u>Average Prices for Week Ending</u>			
Slaughter Steers, Ch. 204, 1100-1300 lb			
Omaha, cwt.	\$65.00	\$57.75	\$59.25
Feeder Steers, Med. Frame, 600-650 lb			
Dodge City, KS, cwt.	*	71.25	72.88
Carcass Price, Ch. 1-3, 550-700 lb			
Cent. US, Equiv. Index Value, cwt.	97.81	94.90	93.93
Hogs, US 1-2, 220-230 lb			
Omaha, cwt.	49.10	33.53	30.48
Feeder Pigs, US 1-2, 40-45 lb			
Omaha, hd.	*	*	*
Vacuum Packed Pork Loins, Wholesale, 13-19 lb, 1/4" Trim, Cent. US, cwt.	113.20	98.10	97.10
Slaughter Lambs, Ch. & Pr., 115-125 lb			
Sioux Falls, SD, cwt.	80.75	79.38	70.50
Carcass Lambs, Ch. & Pr., 1-4, 55-65 lb FOB Midwest, cwt.	164.50	165.00	165.00
<u>Crops,</u>			
<u>Cash Truck Prices for Date Shown</u>			
Wheat, No. 1, H.W.			
Omaha, bu.	3.58	2.51	2.69
Corn, No. 2, Yellow			
Omaha, bu.	2.40	1.64	1.67
Soybeans, No. 1, Yellow			
Chicago, bu.	6.38	5.06	5.05
Grain Sorghum, No. 2, Yellow			
Kansas City, cwt.	4.00	1.76	2.96
Oats, No. 2, Heavy			
Omaha, bu.	*	*	*
<u>Hay,</u>			
<u>First Day of Week Pile Prices</u>			
Alfalfa, Sm. Square, RFV 150 or better			
Platte Valley, ton.	122.50	*	*
Alfalfa, Lg. Round, Good			
Northeast Nebraska, ton.	90.00	55.00	57.50
Prairie, Sm. Square, Good			
Northeast Nebraska, ton.	130.00	70.00	70.00
* No market.			

Farming is one of the world's oldest occupations. It has been hailed as one of the most noble of occupations by Thomas Jefferson and countless others throughout recorded history. Tilling the soil and husbanding the livestock as a resource steward in the seemingly-endless cycle of seasons, this remains in the minds of many as the basic stereotype of a farmer.

However, beyond these idealistic notions, the question to address is, "what is a farmer today in American agriculture?" Particularly, what is the nature of those who account for the bulk of commercial agricultural production in this country?

This is a difficult question since agriculture is very complex and growing more so. It is further compounded by the fact that farm families often merge off-farm income/employment with farming to raise their household income level. In fact, the importance of off-farm income can be so great in many of these households as to question if the term "farm household" should be replaced by "rural household."

The thought occurred to me recently that one way of thinking through this question of "what is farming" is to start with an analogy from the building and construction industry. Take today's typical "home builder" and compare that person with the "carpenter" of a generation or two back. The carpenter of times past was a multi-skilled artisan who participated directly in virtually all phases of the building project, whatever the project. For example, when a house was to be built, the carpenter, along with his helpers, dug and poured the footing before taking a trowel from his tool chest and laying up the foundation. He would then frame the house, roof it, plaster the interior walls and trim it out, including building all the cabinetry from scratch. When that house was finally completed after many months, it certainly represented both the sweat and the skills of that carpenter builder. His touch was evident from the basement floor to the ornate trim in the gable peak.



Contrast the above with the home builders of today who serve as general contractors to manage and oversee the complete construction process. Their tool chest may be rather empty relative to their carpenter grandfather's. In fact, it often consists largely of a cellular phone and a laptop computer with a fax modem - all of which is easily assessable in the cab of their 4x4 truck. Rather than intensive physical labor and skills of the hand to carry out nearly every phase of the building process, they exert considerable mental energy, networking and coordinating with input suppliers and a countless number of sub-contractors who carry out the increasingly specialized phases of the building process. When they are not doing that, they are dealing with the "codes" people, utility companies, accountants, marketing specialists and yes, considerable time with the customer/client as well. For today's builder, management and coordination skills have replaced the skills of the hand. Even management, which was also important to the carpenter-builder of a previous generation, has changed to reflect a more fluid emphasis upon delegation and oversight of the total process. If carried out in a successful fashion, the end product - a home built today - will be one of quality that probably surpasses by far the house built a few generations ago. And yes, the home builder's touch is still there, even though he or she never drove a nail or sawed a rafter. It's there in the effective coordination of a tremendously complex undertaking which makes for a high-quality end product.

Now, using that analogy, let's get back to farming. Can we not see some amazing parallels? Were not yesterday's farmers "jacks-of-all-trades" just as their carpenter counterparts? And obviously, mental energy in today's production agriculture replaces much of the physical labor of farming in an earlier era. But, the subtle changes over time are much broader as the following list implies.

Yesterday's Farmer	Today's Ag Production Coordinator
■ solitude with the land	■ active communication with people
■ services by the farmer	■ services subcontracted
■ on-farm inputs	■ inputs purchased
■ labor intensive	■ management intensive
■ independent	■ interdependent
■ total participation	■ delegation of tasks
■ pride in the farm	■ pride in the farm business
■ diverse enterprises	■ specialized enterprises
■ technical skills	■ management skills
■ commodity-focused	■ consumer-focused
■ owned assets	■ leased and contracted assets
■ neighborhood networking	■ task networking

In summary, we no longer have carpenters in today's home building industry, but rather general contractors coordinating home building by "out-sourcing" specialized tasks to framers, drywallers, trimmers, cement finishers and countless other entities. And likewise, to a large extent, neither do we have commercial farmers, but rather agricultural production coordinators who, likewise, sub-contract for a whole array of specialized services. Yes, they may still live on the land or in the rural community, and they will still be dependent upon the cycles and dynamics of agriculture. But their success and career fulfillment is becoming more dependant upon their management and networking skills than their own production skills.

Does this scenario, as it is played out today, imply we could be losing something as a society? Some believe so, particularly those who ascribe to the neo-populist view that a more traditional small-scale family-farm type of agriculture is superior. However, it is a debatable issue. Let's not forget that some of the most successful commercial farm operators today do so without huge holdings of land and other assets. In fact, their net worth is often very modest. The point is that they compete successfully with superior management and networking skills. Yes, they operate to make a profit; but they are succeeding by being visionary and socially conscientious, managing human, financial and natural resources in a sustainable as well as profitable manner. And they are doing it with a cell phone as their primary tool of trade - not a pitchfork.

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