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Part Time Farming: Status and Implications*

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In this paper I would like to examine four widely held hypotheses regarding the economic basis and current status of part time farming. These hypotheses are:

1. The growth of part time farming in recent years has been, and will continue to be, a direct consequence of industrial decentralization.
2. Part time farming is the result of an association between two low-income occupations--low-income agriculture and low-income non-farm employment.
3. Part time farming is, in the main, a transitional phase in the life of the farm family. For some it represents a transition from full-time farming to full-time non-farm employment. For other families, part time farming represents an effort to accumulate sufficient capital to effect a transition into full time farming.
4. Part transforming is the result of a complementary relationship between the production characteristics of farm and non-farm employment opportunities.

Following a brief examination of these hypotheses I would like to discuss some of the research and extension problems posed by part-time farming.

*Paper presented to a meeting of the North Central States Farm Management Extension Committee, Chicago, Illinois, October 23, 1957. The author has benefited from criticism of an earlier draft of this paper by J. B. Kohlmeyer and Paul L. Farris

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Our first hypotheses, that the growth of part time farming has been, and will continue to be, a direct consequence of industrial decentralization is based on the assumption that our economy is actually experiencing a sharp increase in industrial decentralization. The evidence with respect to this point is not entirely clear cut.

On the one hand there is little doubt that the long-term trend toward industrial dispersion--toward the location of a larger share of the nation's industrial employment in the less industrialized regions--is continuing. The share of the nation's total manufacturing employment located in the New England, Middle Atlantic, and East North Central regions has declined. The other regions have increased their share of the manufacturing employment, with the most dramatic increases occurring in the Pacific and West South Central regions.

On the other hand it seems equally clear that the dispersion of industrial employment to the less industrialized regions that has occurred in recent years has not been accompanied by any substantial increase in the proportion of total manufacturing employment located in the smaller cities and towns of the nation. For the **United States as a whole, the percentage of manufacturing employment located outside of the standard metropolitan areas was almost exactly the same in 1954 as in 1947.** There have, however, been some important differences in the pattern of change among the several regions. The East North Central region with approximately two-thirds of its total industrial employment located in the very large industrial centers, since 1947 experienced the largest portion of its relatively limited increase/in industrial employment outside of the standard metropolitan areas. In the West North Central region, on the other hand, ^{the} large industrial centers experienced the most rapid rate of expansion in manufacturing employment. In the Southeast, where three-fifths of manufacturing employment was already located outside of the standard metropolitan areas, the greatest percentage gains were recorded in the larger cities of the

region while the greatest absolute gains occurred outside of the metropolitan areas.

In the East North Central and Southeastern areas the pattern of industrial dispersion was substantially the same in 1954 as in 1947. And in the West North Central Region industry was actually more highly concentrated in metropolitan centers in 1954 than in 1947. And on the basis of location theory, it is hard to find any substantial basis for expecting a rapid trend toward industrial dispersion in the decade ahead.

It seems likely, therefore, that growth of modern means of rapid transportation which permits long-distance commuting, the continued disparity between farm and non-farm income levels, and declining labor requirements in agriculture have been, in most areas, a more important basis for the growth of part time farming than the minor tendencies toward industrial dispersion which we have seen in recent years.

Our second hypothesis, that part time farming is the result of an association between two low-income occupations--low-income agriculture and low-income non-farm employment, has, in the past, rested on a rather firm empirical foundation.

In spite of a much lower level of industrial employment and wages in the South than in the North, part-time farming is of considerably greater importance in the South than in the North. In 1954, for example, 29.5 percent of the 2.3 million farm operators in the South worked off their farms 100 days or more. In the North, including the North Central and New England areas, only 24.5 percent of the 2.0 million farm operators worked off their farms 100 days or more. The same pattern seems to hold within many of the states of the North.

In Southern Indiana (Economic areas 6, 7, and 8) where both farm and non-farm incomes are well below incomes in the rest of the state, and industrial employment is severely limited, approximately 53 percent of all farm operators worked off their farms 100 days or more in 1954. In the rest of the state only 26 percent of all farm operators worked off their farms 100 days or more in 1954.

In spite of the strong association between low-income agriculture and low-income non-farm employment which has prevailed in the past there are signs that this association may be much less precise in the future. Since 1949, there has been a marked increase in the number of commercial farmers, in each economic class who are working off their farms 100 days or more per year. In the North, the number of farms falling into the two Census categories--part-time and residential--actually declined between 1949 and 1954. All of the increase in farm operators working off their farms 100 days or more occurred in the group of farms identified by the Census as commercial farms.

Attempts to further identify the economic characteristics of part time farmers leads directly to the third hypothesis. That is part time farming is, in the main, a transitional phase in the life of the farm family. Two patterns of transition are usually identified. For most families, the argument runs part time farming represents a stage in the transition from full time farming to full time non-farm employment. For a few families, part time farming represents an effort (Often an unsuccessful effort) to accumulate sufficient capital to effect a transition into full time farming.

With respect to this third hypothesis it is difficult to say anything that is either meaningful or significant. I know of no evidence, other than purely personal opinion, relating either to the importance of the two patterns of transition identified above or to the question of whether part time farming is, in fact, mainly a transitional phase in the life cycle of a farm family.

In addition to the transitional groups it is possible to identify part time farming situations which have some degree of permanency. It is these groups to which our fourth hypothesis - part time farming is the result of a complementary relationship between the production characteristics of farm and non-farm employment opportunities - applies most closely.

The part time farming groups which passes a certain degree of permanency include:

First, the group previously referred to who combine low income agricultural employment with low income non-farm employment on a relatively permanent basis.

Second, there are many farmers who apparently combine high income non-farm employment with operation of high production farms. Such situations, especially where the operator provides only the managerial guidance for the farm operation, or where the non-farm employment is characterized by other flexible time requirements are likely to be relatively stable.

A third fairly stable group of part time farmers are the agricultural hobbyists. These families enjoy the recreational and social aspects of farm life. But they have no desire or intention to become full time farmers. As hobbyists who take their hobbies seriously they demand more than their share of services from extension personnel. And their children help to swell the ranks of the FFA, FHA, & 4-H clubs.

There is also a fourth group of fairly stable part time farmers who are not identified by census data on the position of farm operations. These are the sons and daughters of commercial farm families who are employed in non-farm jobs but who establish residence on the home farm and commute to work. This group moves in and out of the farm labor force depending upon variations in industrial employment.

The fact that each of the four hypotheses which we examined above has at least some degree of validity means that no single approach can satisfy the needs of all part time farming groups.

This means that it is necessary to set some order of priority with respect to the extent to which we develop programs designed to service the part time farming groups.

First, there should be little disagreement that those families who are attempting to use non-farm employment to accumulate sufficient capital to effect a transition into full time farming deserve our attention. It is important that we identify the enterprise and input combinations which permit the most rapid movement toward this goal. It is important also that the long range plans of the transitional farmer are focused in such a manner that a transition is made to a full time commercial farm and not to a full time low-income farm. Attempts to help families arrive at a more realistic appraisal of what it takes to become a commercial farmer will, of course, cause many families to shift their objective from one of making a transfer into full time farming to making a transfer out of agriculture.

Second, there should be little disagreement that the part time farmer who is making the transition out of agriculture also deserves our attention. Too frequently the transition is made in such a manner that it results in serious depletion of capital assets and substantial income loss to the family making the transition.

Agreement that the farmer who is in the process of making transition out of agriculture deserves our attention does not get us very far. It does not tell us very much about what we can do to efficiently serve this group of part time farmers.

This is the group to whom our hypothesis that part time farming results from an association between low-income agriculture and low-income non-farm employment applies most directly. By and large this group can be served more effectively by programs emphasizing expansion in the general level of local economic development -- programs similar to those being carried out in many of the rural development pilot counties --, and by general education in the area of social and institutional change, than by any programs designed to channel technical agricultural information to this group of farm people.

Third, before developing extension activities designed to service the agricultural hobbyist a careful appraisal should be given to alternative program possibilities.

I am convinced that a major share of our current extension activity must be reappraised during the coming decade. It is not any longer novel to point out that, at the county level, the extension service is playing a less important role than in the past in serving the technical needs of commercial agriculture. Thus, larger commercial farmers are increasingly purchasing their technical advice from specialized service agencies. And where some degree of integration exists, technical extension becomes a function of the integrator.

This leaves extension at the county level, with four main alternatives;

- a. It can refuse to recognize the changes that are in process and let the position of the county agent degenerate to that of youth leadership and chairman of rural social activities.
- b. It can reorient its activity to provide technical advice and services to the lower income and part-time farmers.
- c. It can emphasize educational programs designed to improve the farmers ability to more effectively integrate the technical and economic information obtained from commercial service agencies, the extension service, and other sources.
- d. It can reorient its program in the direction of general adult education in the areas of social and economic change.

Actually, I expect to see a combination of these four activities emerge. I would expect, however, that the strongest and most effective programs in relation to the needs of both part time and full time farmers, would put increasing emphasis on the last alternatives listed above.

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